

IHMs IN ACTION



"God leads you down roads and you don't always know the destination," says Sister Virginia (Marie Amata) Celmer, IHM, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist in San Antonio, Texas.

Sister Ginny's road began when she was teaching at Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Ill.

"The co-principals, IHM Sisters Joyce Durosko and Patricia Kidder, brought in a psychologist to train some of the faculty as paraprofessional psychotherapists to work with students," Sister Ginny recalls. "I was honored to be selected."

After a year of renewal and four years as chaplain at Mercy Center for Health Care Services in Aurora, Ill., Sister Ginny began her doctoral work at Texas Tech University

earning her doctorate in 1986 and ministering as a licensed psychologist in private practice since 1989. Her mission statement says, in part, "Within each of us is an inclination...to be happy, whole, holy...How we choose to respond to it is the product of our free will and becomes our individual responsibility..."

As part of that responsibility, her patients sign a service contract before treatment begins, outlining their mutual rights and responsibilities.

The contract also introduces her assistant, a 2-year-old poodle named Grace. Sister Ginny recognizes that not everyone finds a therapy dog's presence helpful and, if a patient prefers, Grace is given time off from her job during that patient's appointment.

"I started using a therapy dog with people who had been abused as soon as I was in private practice," she says. "Trained therapy dogs respond to a person's energy, almost giving them permission to feel their feelings. They help bring people back to themselves."

"The three dogs I've worked with, Chauncey, Anna and now Grace, have been incredibly intuitive," Sister Ginny continues. "They know just what patients need, whether it's affection, comfort or, in some cases, distance. For many patients, dogs represent a safe source of love with no agenda. 'Dog' isn't 'God' spelled backwards for nothing!"

In addition to being a licensed psychologist, Sister Ginny is also Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor (LCDC), a Certified Sex Addiction Therapist (CSAT), a Certified Multiple Addiction Therapist (CMAT) and a Certified Group Psychotherapist (CGP).

She specializes in a number of areas, including depression; anxiety; addictive/compulsive behaviors and recovery issues. She works with many adults who have experienced physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In fact, because of her work with people dealing with PTSD, she has received several requests to join the military to work with veterans and their families.

"My challenge in this ministry is to recognize the 'therapeutic moment' with each individual," Sister Ginny notes. "When I can see past what's going on but the person isn't ready to see it yet, I pray to know the right time to speak so as to do the most good.

"My goal is to work myself out of a job. Seeing people claim their own freedom and live out of that freedom is so rewarding." "Being trusted and invited into the innermost life of another human being is indeed being on holy ground and sharing "holy work."

"God speaks to us in the language of our own understanding," she says. "The better we understand ourselves, the more clearly we hear God."

Sister Ginny is currently working on a webpage that will not only represent her professionally but also will provide informational articles monthly for those who visit the website. Her website address is www.VirginiaCelmerPhD.com.