Since October 2009, Sister Sharon (Mary Austin) Defever, IHM, has ministered as a full-time chaplain at Providence Hospital, a 349-bed medical-surgical facility in Mobile, Ala.

Sister Sharon ministers with three other chaplains from several different faith traditions. Each chaplain is responsible for two floors within the hospital.

“I work on the seventh floor, with the families of sick babies,” Sister Sharon says. “I offer reassurance and comfort however I can.

“I also work on the 12th floor, the hospital’s 47-bed terminal care area. There are three units within the area – cancer, medical-surgical and ‘compassionate care.’

“Compassionate care is similar to hospice. Patients are very seriously ill, but they aren’t always actively dying” she explains. “We play soft, soothing music; have quiet time with subdued lighting; and a family room, where I spend a lot of time listening to people’s concerns and fears. I don’t try to push my faith on anyone, but I do try to be attentive to their needs. Sometimes they need me to pray with them, but often they need to talk and to be comforted.”

Sister Sharon spent more than 12 years ministering with a local hospice before she made the change to the hospital.

“When I was a hospice chaplain, I’d visit five or six patients a day, usually in their homes,” she notes. “There would always be ‘space’ as I traveled between patients. There is definitely a different pace at the hospital.”

In addition to ministering with patients and their families, Sister Sharon also works with hospital staff.

“One of the things the nurses, ancillary staff and I try to do every morning at 7:30 is to gather for prayer,” she says. “It brings us together, helps us focus and prepares us for the day ahead.

“Being the new kid on the block has been a challenge,” she admits. “I’ve had to build trust, which takes time.”
Working in a fast-paced environment with people who are at their most vulnerable can be enervating, but Sister Sharon sees the beauty of her ministry.

“The Lord has me here for a purpose,” she says simply. “It’s not always easy, but people are so good. Knowing these are God’s children and bringing the peaceful spirit of Jesus to them is such a blessing.”