



Reverend George Doebler

Ordained Lutheran pastor, former Chief of Chaplains for the Tennessee Department of Health, and founder of and current special advisor to the Department of Pastoral Care at the UT Medical Center.

REVEREND GEORGE DOEBLER moved to Knoxville in 1972 to become director of the chaplain program at Lakeshore Mental Health Institute (formerly the Eastern State Psychiatric Hospital). Four decades later, he has touched the lives of thousands of Knoxvilleans. Angelique Medow met Reverend Doebler at his office at the UT Medical Center to discuss his long—and continued vibrant—career.

Angelique Medow: You are a chaplain and you are known for having a great sense of humor. How do you do it?

Reverend George Doebler: This is a very serious place. Both staff and patients go through some horrible situations. We used to race hospital beds down the hallway ramps in the middle of the night for fun! You know, it is harder to play than be serious. Playfulness is deep.

AM: When it comes to religion, you have said that you do not “put your stuff on other people.” Why is that important?

RGD: It is important to help people use their own resources that work for them.

AM: You choose Lutheranism. Why?

RGD: I was born into it.

AM: You’ve worked in the mental health arena for most of your life. Is Knoxville pro-active and successful in dealing with mental health issues?

RGD: Not since the deinstitutionalization of mental health in 1963. People who are delusional and bipolar come to the hospital with physical injuries. We treat their physical injuries, but since

deinstitutionalization we cannot treat their mental illness. Mental illness must be referred, so we refer them to psychiatric care—but they do not go. So they go without mental health care. I would like to see health care for the whole person, both physical and the mental, in one facility.

AM: Homelessness and mental illness tend to go hand-in-hand. How do you think Knoxville has been dealing with the homeless issue? Are enough resources available?

RGD: The homeless issue and the criminal issue are mental health issues, and I think we miss that. Eighty percent of homeless people are mentally ill, and the largest expense for prisons is the administration of drugs for mental illness. No, there are not enough resources, but Knoxville is making progress. The Pastoral Care program I started in 1988 helps curb some immediate needs, such as providing food, drugs, and transportation to people in need, but more funding is required to really bridge the gap and make things work. Others in town are also doing great work. Andy Black, president and CEO at Helen Ross McNabb,

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is doing an incredible job. Leadership Knoxville also does a good job in bringing key people together. What bugs me the most is that hospitals are competitive and not working together. Funding becomes political rather than focused on health—but Joe Landsman, the President and CEO at UT Medical Center, has made great strides.

AM: You’ve worked in the mental health field for most of your life. What is the key to good mental health?

RGD: Love is the key to mental health. Isolation is the opposite of love. How do we love and still trust? How do we trust in a time of so many offenses? Well, when we use others, we look to others to use us. If we don’t use others, we don’t expect to get used.

AM: You have said that it is important for people to have faith and believe that there is “something more.” What do you mean—and why?

RGD: Faith isn’t knowing. Faith is jumping. People who don’t jump are stuck.

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