More and more laypeople find their calling as hospital chaplains. The Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary helps prepare them for this ministry.

Peggy Kelley and her Sunday school class circled up in the grass under the California sun. This normally giggly squad of 6-year-olds had turned unusually serious that week.

It was late September 2001. “Those kids were totally different from the Tuesday before,” recalls Kelley, an aspiring actress at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. “We talked for hours about their huge theological questions. That’s when I knew I could be present with the suffering.”

The tragic events of that September propelled Kelley into hospital chaplaincy.

A Bloomington, Minnesota, native and oblate of the Sisters of Saint Benedict, Kelley found her way back to central Minnesota just shy of her 40th birthday. She enrolled in Saint John’s University School of Theology and Seminary to pursue a Master of Divinity, a requirement for hospital chaplains.

“To sit with these brilliant professors and monks, and have them want my opinion on something was intimidating at first,” Kelley explains. She says the support of the Saint Ben’s sisters as well as encouragement from School of Theology professors helped her through the difficult transition back to the classroom.

“In chaplaincy I see the theology, God’s grace and spiritual crises right in my face,” she says. “Then when I was at the School of Theology, I was studying it and digging into its history. It makes the first century relevant when I’m in the room with a patient.”

Now Kelley spends her days as the lead Christian chaplain at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, California, where every shift brings something new. Each morning, Kelley receives a list of patients to visit. She may be responding to a trauma, offering a baby blessing or debriefing with a nurse. Sometimes she spends hours simply sitting with families of sick or dying loved ones. Her ministry as chaplain is built on listening and prayer.

“When you are a chaplain you often hold a lot of secrets,” Kelley describes. “Faith can be very private for many people, and you are asked to enter into this sacred place with them, to witness it, safely hold it and move through this sacred space with them.”

One of Kelley’s specialties is pediatric ministry. She regularly walks with children whose parents are dying. The youngsters are much more aware of grief than one might think.

“When a child knows something in their ‘holy belly,’ in their gut, and they feel it spiritually, they know God,” she says. “To help them process the experience, I have them draw pictures for the parent who is dying or write a thank-you letter to God about the parent. We also do a lot

“Face-to-Face with

Peggy Kelley earned her Master of Divinity at the Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary in 2010 and is now a hospital chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

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of ritual blessings with water so the child can realize what's happening and have their moment to be present with mommy or daddy.”

Ministering at one of the world’s top cardiac hospitals also means that Kelley witnesses some of the most vulnerable moments in people’s lives.

“I have been with many people who are waiting for a heart transplant and living with a total artificial heart,” she says. “I have also been with the families who have made the most difficult and selfless decision to take a loved one off life support so they can donate a heart. As a chaplain, I get to be a witness to these amazing delicate moments of humanity. Praying for a new heart and praying with the family of the one who is giving theirs so another may live…it’s such a profound privilege to walk with people on their journeys.”

A Christian chaplain working at a Jewish hospital, Kelley draws from her ecumenical experiences at Saint John’s for her diverse ministry today.

“Cedars-Sinai was such an incredible fit because the Jewish community there is actually very similar to the Saint John’s community, in the sense that their focus is on questioning, digging in and listening to other people, talking it out and respecting each other’s opinions,” Kelly explains.

It wasn’t long ago that most hospital chaplains were ordained ministers. Now, more lay ministers are embracing this challenging and fulfilling ministry. Kelley’s main advice for students embarking on the journey towards chaplaincy? “Wear comfortable shoes!”

Jessie Bazan is a Master of Divinity candidate at Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary.