

St. Agnes doctor carries healing legacy of religious sisters



Faces of Faith
during the Civil War.

When Dr. J. William “Bill” Cook recently became the president of the St. Agnes Medical Group, he understood that he was tasked with leading a ministry that began more than 150 years ago. The medical group can trace its roots back to the work of the Daughters of Charity

GET TO KNOW

Dr. William Cook

What is your home parish?

St. Mark, Catonsville

Who had the most influence on the development of your faith?

“My parents. That’s probably how it ought to be. I think I was very much influenced by them.”

Who is your favorite saint and why?

“St. Luke was a doctor and my wife gave me a St. Luke medal. I’ve always been partial to him.”

What makes you proud to be Catholic?

“The Catholic health system is really an extension of the church. The successes of the sisters and of the Catholic health system, I’m very proud of that. When people get sick and show up at St. Agnes, they are going to get taken care of.”

“You’re talking about women who gave up their whole life to take care of sick and poor people,” Cook said. “To take on that legacy is very humbling.”

The number of sisters that work in St. Agnes Medical Group is not what it once was, but their teaching of seeing Christ in the faces of all they serve is something Cook carries close to his heart in his own daily tasks. Certainly, as a physician, but now as a leader of the physicians for the medical group.

Cook said it’s important for him to remember that in every meeting, every person there has his or her own story that he can empathize with. That attitude makes him a better problem solver, he said.

A primary care physician with St. Agnes for 25 years, Cook assumed his latest role in the group in August. As president of organization’s physician network, he leads 48 primary care, pediatric and OB/GYN physicians in the medical group spread through Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Howard County, while still seeing patients in his Catonsville office four mornings and one afternoon per week.

His afternoons are now packed with meetings, he said. And while he’s familiar with many of the key players in the health system, having previously served as chairman of the board of directors for St. Agnes Medical Group, it’s been a busy transition as he tries to keep physicians in the hospital and practices across the health group on the same page, he said.

Cook is a lifelong resident of Catonsville, now practicing medicine and running meetings “just a few football fields” from where he grew up. He is also a lifelong Catholic. He fondly remembers growing up in St. Mark in Catonsville – the parish he was baptized in and once served on the board for. Just recently, his first granddaughter was baptized in the parish.

He credits Father Christopher Whatley, the pastor at St. Mark’s, and the parish for his ongoing spiritual nourishment.

“The spiritual nurturing you get in a parish like that and from a pastor like that is hugely important to spiritual health,” he said.

Cook’s desire to practice medicine was born back in his high school days at Mount

St. Joseph's, as he said he had plenty of role models in the medical community that showed him the power of helping people. He wanted a career where he could help people in a direct and personal way, he said.

And, working for a Catholic health system has been icing on the cake.

"You actually bring your faith to work, as opposed to other places where it's, 'leave it in the car when you get here,'" Cook said.

Even before taking on this newest leadership role, Cook has always seen his work at St. Agnes as a ministry. This service has earned him a spot in the Healing Hands Society (inducted in 2016) and he was honored with the Seton Founders Award in 2015. He said he is simply carrying on the legacy of the sisters who have worked so hard to care for the poor and vulnerable for the last century and a half.

"I think (my faith) is one of the things I fall back on," he said. "I've spent more of my life being a Catholic than being a doctor."

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