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In this clinic, faith binds physicians and patients

Physicians at AALFA Family Clinic in White Bear Lake embrace a "Christian prolife" philosophy. That means more than shunning abortion and birth control, patients say. It means warm, personal care.

Pamela Miller, Star Tribune

First, there's the clinic's name: AALFA, the brainchild of a doctor's child, an acronym for "All Ages Love Firsthand Attention."

It's not the only clue that the White Bear Lake family clinic is one of a kind. Others are apparent in its busy waiting room. The front-desk staff greets patients by their first names. Religious magazines and books are on the side tables. A portrait of Mother Teresa's sad, sweet face watches over the room.

In the lab area, cards and photos from patients eclipse the bulletin boards. Paintings of Mary and Jesus, needlework Bible verses and Hmong story panels -- all gifts from patients -- brighten the halls and exam rooms.

The AALFA Family Clinic's uniqueness goes well beyond its name and decor. It offers services that most family-practice clinics offer, with one major difference: As a self-described "Christian prolife clinic" that serves primarily Roman Catholics and evangelical Christians, it does not refer patients for abortions or prescribe birth-control pills or other forms of contraception, said Dr. Mary Paquette, one of AALFA's three physicians.

As of Sunday, *Roe vs. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, will have been the law of the land for 33 years. But AALFA, believed to be the only clinic of its kind in Minnesota, adheres to what its doctors and patients view as higher principles.

Paquette, her husband, Dr. Matthew Paquette, and Dr. Paul Spencer, along with a physician's assistant, a nurse practitioner, two nurses and many of their patients, believe that life begins at conception. "We are called to care for each patient with love, care and respect from conception to old age," Mary Paquette said.

AALFA's philosophy and highly personal care have won it a large following -- 5,000 active-account patients over the past two years, said office manager Nancy Grace. Patients come from throughout Minnesota and other states.

Patients interviewed on a recent morning expressed admiration for the clinic and its approach to care.

"This is such a safe, comfortable place," said Kathleen Woodbury, 47, of White Bear Lake. "Other places, you go in, there's a quick exam and a prescription, and not much listening. Here they give you all the time you need, really get to know you. Plus, there's a piece of medicine where I think you do need help from the Lord, and that's acknowledged here."

The clinic was founded by Dr. Stan Johnson, who has since retired from full-time practice. Mary Paquette, a family-practice physician with an emphasis on women's health, joined the practice in 2000, leaving Allina's Cottage Grove clinic "because rapid growth was causing it to lose the personal touch," she said. Matthew Paquette, who specializes in internal medicine and had practiced at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, followed in 2001. When one Paquette is on duty, the other is at home in Mendota Heights caring for their four daughters, ages 2 to 6.

Family planning, sans the Pill

Many of Mary Paquette's patients are women who have struggled with fertility issues, recurrent miscarriages or hormonal problems or who do not want to be treated with birth-control pills. "They run up against a wall and get frustrated, and so they come here, where we work with other options," she said.

Paquette said she uses hormonal methods that work with a woman's cycle rather than shut it down. She learned them at the Pope Paul VI Institute for Human Reproduction, affiliated with Creighton University in Omaha. In general, the system teaches women to closely monitor and work with their menstrual cycle to help avoid or achieve pregnancy.

Paquette, like many Catholics, opposes use of the Pill because, simply put, hormonal contraceptives prevent a five- to nine-day-old zygote from implanting in a woman's uterus 7 to 11 percent of the time, she said. "Philosophically, you can say what you want, but biologically, it's a new life form, and hormonal contraceptives in this case are the equivalent of an abortion," she said.

A quiet crusader

Paquette, who with her family belongs to St. Joseph's Catholic Church in West St. Paul, is a quiet, gentle woman who does not volunteer information about her faith unless asked. She is not a proselytizer, proclaimer or protester. Her philosophy extends well beyond opposing abortion and birth control to providing volunteer services, including free health care, to many pregnant women and young mothers who find themselves with no home or money. The clinic also offers care and immunizations for children.

"If a woman has had an abortion or believes she needs one, it is not my place to judge or scold," Paquette said. "It is probably not her choice to be in that position. Women don't get pregnant so they can have an abortion. But sometimes they believe abortion is their only option until we tell them otherwise."

She often speaks to teens about sexuality through an Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis program called "All in God's Plan."

"We talk about abstinence, yes, but also tell them that sexuality is a gift," she said. "Most of all, we try to tell them that their decisions and actions have consequences, and to impress upon them that the reality is they can get pregnant or [get] a sexually transmitted disease" even if they're using birth control.

"I always end by saying, 'My biggest concern is for you as a human person,' and to warn them that a series of sexual relationships can damage their ability to make connections over time."

Paquette said she strives to put her faith to work "in everything I do. It should be reflected in my practice, in the way I care for patients."

Still, she said, "rarely would I cross the line to talk about it with a patient unless they asked me about it. And generally I don't pray with patients, not because I'm opposed to it, but because as a practical matter, I don't have the time.

"A lot of my patients are people of prayer, though, and if I sense prayer will help them, I will encourage them, just as I would encourage healthy practices around diet, exercise, sleep, meditation, whatever they do to help themselves."

Sharing sorrow and joy

When Elizabeth York, 27, moved from Chicago to Minneapolis in 2002, she wanted to find a doctor who would treat her fertility problems while respecting her Catholic faith and her views on family planning. She called the archdiocese, which recommended the AALFA clinic.

Last August, York delivered a stillborn daughter in whom a severe birth defect had been diagnosed. Other doctors, she said, had recommended abortion, but Mary Paquette honored her wish not to abort the fetus and attended her through a childbirth that was both heartbreaking and holy.

Two months after the stillbirth, York said, she conceived naturally. That pregnancy is going well, and the baby is due in July.

"This place has helped me through hard times and now good times," she said. "I am very grateful."

Going against the tide

Through her work, Mary Paquette seeks less to overturn Roe vs. Wade than to make it irrelevant by addressing the factors that lead women to seek abortions. Still, she said, she believes that abortion's legality and widespread acceptance are grim commentaries on American culture.

"I think it is devastating that a society as rich as ours has no other solution to unwanted children other than 3,000 to 5,000 abortions a day," she said. "Look at how much we as a culture spend on our pets, and yet children, both unborn and born, fall by the wayside."

She also believes that "prolife politicians are not doing enough" to help women and children in need and to ease the financial and emotional stresses that lead women to seek abortions.

"Right now, I don't feel like there's a political party that has got it quite straight," she said. "My form of political action is more direct and personal -- with the people I care for.

"I believe that in the years to come, abortion will be looked back on the same way we look back on child sacrifice now," she said. "We can do better."

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