ALBANY — When Debbie Bailey, 54, of Kingston, went to Albany Medical Center Hospital on Thanksgiving Day, she was in so much pain, she was unable to sleep.

“I asked to see a chaplain and we talked for awhile, and then she started singing,” said Bailey. “I never heard a voice like that. It was so peaceful. After she sang, it was the first time I got a peaceful night’s sleep in several nights.”

Bailey, who is being treated for a spinal tumor, talked with Claudia Landau, interfaith chaplain in the Pastoral Care Department at Albany Medical Center.

“People look at me and say, ‘How can you do that work? It’s so hard,’ ” said Landau. “But it’s very rewarding. You really do see good things come out of difficult situations.”

Perhaps because of the economic crisis, pastoral care workers say their services are being asked for more than ever before.

Harlan Ratmeyer, manager of pastoral care at Albany Medical Center, said people find that spirituality helps them maintain health and cope with illnesses, trauma, losses and life transitions by integrating body, mind and spirit.

“The use of chaplains has gone up enormously,” said Ratmeyer. “It used to be we just walked around different hospital units. Now nurses, residents and physicians are asking for our services for their patients. They tell us they are glad we’re here.”

Landau said it used to be that chaplains were mainly called to minister to dying people and their families.

“More and more the culture has changed,” said Landau. “Now hardly a day goes by that I don’t enter a unit, and a nurse or a doctor sees me and says, ‘Oh, can you go visit this patient, she’s feeling lonely.’ Or, ‘Can you go talk to this family, their family member just got a new diagnosis, and they’re having a hard time with it.’ So we are actually being sought out to deal with the broader spiritual needs of people that have to do with coping with illness and making sense of why this has happened.”

Ratmeyer said he will often introduce himself to patients in the emergency room who tell him they don’t need a chaplain because they are not religious.

“Within an hour, they are pouring their heart out to me,” said Ratmeyer. “They’re going through a major crisis, and they need someone to talk to.”

Landau said today’s hospital chaplains are less about religion and more about spirituality.

“We tend to think of religion in terms of organized religion with structures and rituals,” she said. “Spirituality is more of trying to understand your place in the world and the meaning and purpose for your life.”

Ratmeyer said he often tells his students the role of the chaplain is to be a companion to those who are on a difficult journey.
“If you think about guides in the Himalayas — the people who help the climbers get up the mountain — in some way that image fits the pain of people on this difficult part of their journey.”

If people are comfortable with prayer, Landau said, the pastoral care workers will pray with them.

“If they don’t want to pray, but they want us to talk to them, or they want to listen to music or hang a dream catcher over their bed, we will help them with that,” said Landau. “We are there to get to know each patient and help give them hope so they can have the best chances of healing and recovery.”

When people are gravely ill or dying, they often become aware of the mind, body and spirit connection, said Ratmeyer.

While not all patients are cured of their illness, many receive healing, Landau added.

“Chaplains can help reshape people who are ill to go on living with hope and optimism,” she said.

When people are facing death, chaplains can help people make the most out of the time they have left.

“There are often some amazing transformations that occur,” said Landau. “People have conversations with their families they never took time to have. They sort out their relationship with God, whatever that means to them. It’s a privilege to be with people during that time and be a companion and resource to both the patient and the family.”

Ratmeyer and Landau said the staff avoids burnout by giving each other support.

“You can’t come back from spending a night with a family who has lost a child and just flip a switch,” said Ratmeyer. “We do a lot of talking and crying, but we also do a lot of laughing, too.”

Because of managed care, patients in hospitals are sicker than they used to be. Therefore, doctors and nurses have less time to spend with patients.

“Where medical staff were able to have conversations with patients and families before, now, because of time pressure, they just can’t,” said Landau. “So they depend more on us. We try to help people believe that there is always hope.”

Dr. Sophia Socaris, director of the surgical intensive care unit, said when individuals are sick, they need to devote all of their energy to healing and wellness.

“If they have a sense of calm and are at peace with themselves and their spirituality, that will allow them to devote their energy to healing,” said Socaris. “If they are in conflict and anxious about what is going to happen to them, that takes valuable energy away from the healing process.”

Socaris said she has seen that her patients who are anxious or distressed do not do as well as her patients who are calmer and at peace.

“If they have support from family and chaplains who are calm and comfortable, it seems to help them get better faster,” she said.
Bailey said whenever she goes for medical tests she prays and sings to keep her spirits high.

“The chaplains and staff here are wonderful,” she said. “But I don’t know what I’d do without a relationship with God. That’s what keeps me going.”