

Offering faith-based primary care to underserved patients

By TOM ADAMS

Some 25 years ago, family practitioner William Morehouse M.D. founded His Branches Inc., a non-profit, non-denominational Christian organization that provides faith-based primary care to the underserved.

The organization contracts with doctors, providing space and administrative services for which the doctors are billed. Patients are billed directly in their doctor's name, with coverage by all major insurance carriers, including Medicaid and Medicare. For the uninsured, there is a sliding-fee scale based on income.

His Branches has collaborative relationships with other institutions, including Roberts Wesleyan College's two extension programs: the Institute for Social Entrepreneurship, which focuses on economic development and the role of social investment for economic impact in the community; and the Center for Christian Social Ministry, which enables college and seminary students to interact with local businesses and ministries to transform the community.

The Genesee Valley Sickle Cell Disease Association is another partner.

Morehouse has a primary-care practice on Arnett Boulevard in Rochester, seeing 2,500 patients each year. He and his family have lived on Wellington Avenue in the 19th Ward for a quarter-century, providing a stabilizing influence for a community in transition for many years, says Scott Sittig, His Branches executive director.

"You can get paid more if you locate in

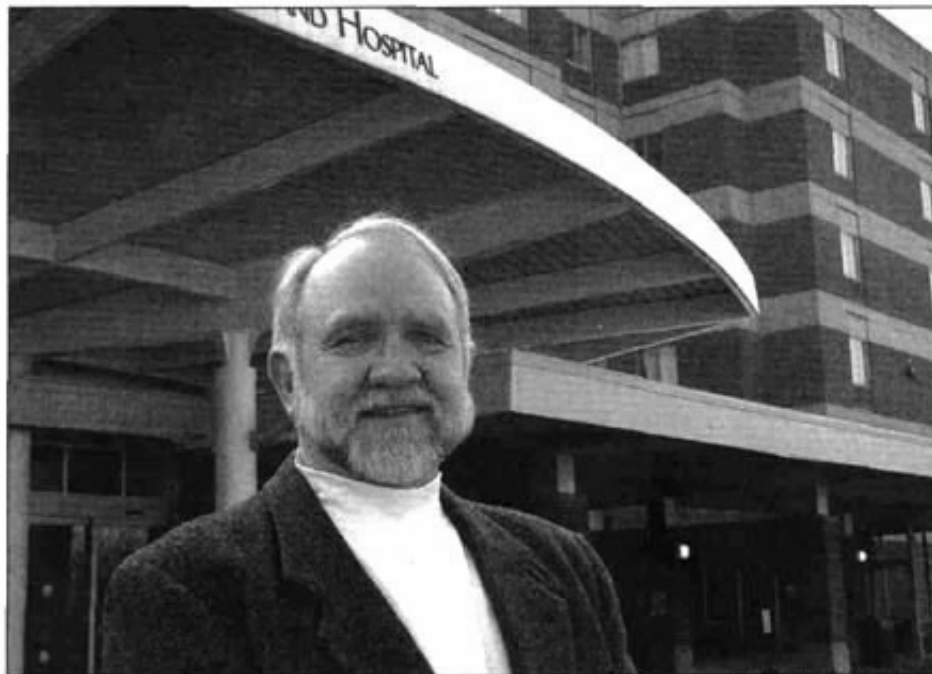


Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

"People without a job or in a broken relationship or in a poor housing condition are more likely to be sick," says William Morehouse M.D., founder of His Branches, a non-denominational Christian organization that provides faith-based primary care to the underserved.

a more suburban location," Sittig wrote in a letter supporting Morehouse's nomination, "(but he) has stayed in the neighborhood and has worked hard to transform the area."

Morehouse's practice was inspired by a philosophy of biopsychosocial medicine pioneered by the University of Rochester as part of its family medicine program.

"Family medicine was a new specialty based on the idea that people are more than biological creatures," Morehouse says. "It was based not only on disease, but what was happening in a person's life. People without a job or in a broken rela-

tionship or in a poor housing condition are more likely to be sick."

His Branches involves a spiritual element as well, Sittig says.

"He has done many things in his current location while sacrificing a more lucrative career and a less stressful experience were he to be somewhere else," Sittig notes.

Morehouse has seen two known drug houses near his practice burned or torn down and transformed into parking areas and green space after he purchased the vacant land. He also has helped to reclaim and renovate previous eyesores into at-

tractive space, Sittig says.

A native of Akron, Ohio, Morehouse came to Rochester in 1970, joining UR's family medicine program at Highland Hospital. He worked at Westside Health Services at the Third Ward Health Center for two years in the early 1970s. After a year's sabbatical, he joined Eastman Kodak Co.'s occupational medicine department in 1975.

Morehouse began his private practice in 1977.

His Branches medical services, originally offered under the independent sponsorship of the Chapel Guidance Center Inc., have been incorporated into the organization as Grace Family Medicine.

"Dr. Morehouse is a man of character and compassion who serves the city wholeheartedly," observes Natalie Gordon, office manager at Grace Family Medicine. "He always has a warm smile and a joke to soothe the hurting heart."

His Branches has two full-time doctors, a full-time nurse and five full-time equivalents on its administrative staff.

The doctors, who have private practices, volunteer their time to His Branches. The nurse and the five full-time equivalents are reimbursed by the doctors with a portion of their payments from patients.

Morehouse also serves as faculty adviser for UR's Medical Center Christian Fellowship.

"It is my association with him over the last year that has opened my eyes to see what a pioneer, innovator and energetic man he really is," Sittig notes. "His heart is to see people be made whole, families to be restored, communities to be revitalized, and for God's Kingdom to manifest itself on earth through practical and tangible acts of service." □

tadams@rbj.net / 585-546-8303