

Followers of healer still believe in miracles

By Lisa Black
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

The faith healer's handshake is warm and moist, perhaps from hours of hovering over the afflicted, blessing them and pressing fingertips and crucifix against the head, shoulders and necks of the faithful.

Danny Gallagher, an Irish healer with dark eyes, a soft voice and an unruly mop of black hair, gently explains that his prayers sometimes work, and sometimes do not. That at 8 years of age, he was called, as a seventh son of a seventh son, to help people across the world—something that he would begin acting upon later from the back of his ice-cream truck.

Today, at 43, he is visiting Chicago and, in suit coat and tie, is granting blessings to a steady stream of faithful in the back rooms of two Irish taverns. Before heading to New York, he will be at the Goal Post, 5259 W. 95th St. in Oak Lawn, from 2 to 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Although skeptics warn of dangers associated with faith healers, such as freshly blessed patients tossing out their prescriptions and shunning medical treatment, they also concede the public's growing interest in magic, mystery and the unknown.

"People want to be entertained," said Robert W. McCoy, who operates the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices in Minneapolis.

At the Abbey Pub on the North Side this week, those who arrived with depression, tumors and other painful ailments were greeted by Gallagher's youthful blond assistant, Johanne O'Neill, who introduced the newcomers to Gallagher. Nearby, a television blared "Oh, Danny Boy" between video testimonials from those who say Gallagher cured their blindness or cancer. News clippings shouting the Catholic faith healer's success from his private clinics in Ireland and Britain were strewn across the tables.

Gallagher recalled his first healing at age 17, when he glanced at a paralyzed girl and found that their eyes met "like two torches."

He takes only voluntary contributions, he said, and has prayed over physicians, priests and skeptics such as Chicago resident



Tribune photo by Val Mazzenga

Faith healer Danny Gallagher blesses Ann Meenaghan of Chicago as his assistant, Johanne O'Neill, looks on at the Abbey Pub on the North Side. Gallagher says he performed his first healing at age 17.

City watch Faith

Sheryn Casey, 45, a self-described "Jewish girl from the North Side" with severe back pain.

"I don't know how he does it, what the magic is or how he does it," Casey said, pronouncing herself pain-free.

Gallagher's 30-second blessings must be repeated at least three times, he said. He's not sure why, but thinks it has to do with the Holy Trinity. Those who are healed, he said, usually report feeling better within six weeks.

Thomas Gibbons, who moved to Chicago from Ireland, decided that he had nothing to lose by turning to Gallagher. Gibbons, who has a slow-growing tumor on the left side of his head, hopes to avoid surgery that could result in deafness.

A day after his third blessing, Gibbons said: "There's no differ-

ence. But I don't feel worse. I am very comfortable. We'll just wait and see now."

Sociologists and other researchers say that healing through prayer was entrenched in various cultures long before medical treatments were accepted as an effective science.

But some, such as Kenneth Seeskin, philosophy professor at Northwestern University, view faith healing as a dangerous concoction of religion and magic.

"It gives people the impression that somehow they can control divine forces or magical forces or somehow manipulate the word of God by saying the right words or seeing the right person," Seeskin said.

According to Irish folklore, the seventh son of a seventh son has an instinctive knowledge of magic and herbs and can stop hemorrhages. But Romanian folklore presents a more sinister fate for seventh sons—he'll turn into a vampire.