Retired Chaplains’ Writing Project

Vincent Van Gogh said, "I dream my painting, and then I paint my dream." This installment of the Retired Chaplains’ Writing Project presents reflections by three former presidents, representing the College of Chaplains and the Association of Mental Health Clergy, organizations which merged in 1998 to form the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC). These men have spent their careers dreaming dreams. Then they have gone ahead and symbolically picked up their brushes and turned those dreams into beautiful murals. These expansive panoramas portray the profession of chaplaincy on the move, constantly evolving. No still life here. The insights of these retired leaders encourage us to explore anew the meaning of our roots and from whence comes our authority.

They challenge us to consider the importance of meaningful change—rather than change for its own sake—and to celebrate the multitude of gifts that come to us as a result of collegiality, diversity and inclusiveness. The reflections of these retirees compel us to explore what will be required of individual chaplains and APC as it enlarges its tent and extends its tracks into uncharted territory. We may become fearful and worry that our assets are, as Clark Aist said, "little more than a handful of meal and a cruet of oil." We may wonder if we are sufficient or have sufficient resources to get the job done. At such times, let us remember that the “treasured seed” found deep within the heart of APC and its chaplains was placed there and is sustained now and into the future by a power far greater than ourselves.

George R. Robie BCC (retired), Coordinator

The Integrity of Authority and Identity

Jerry J. Griffin BCC

As I think retrospectively of the years of my seminary and graduate education, clinical pastoral education and early professional career, I realize that I only thought that I comprehended and understood the power and integrity of pastoral, personal and professional authority and identity. During the final decade of my career, the nature of the depth and breadth of the influence and effect of these vital professional qualities emerged. I realized that authority and identity are much more than requirements for graduation, ordination and certification.

A metaphoric image of train and railroad portray the essentials of the empowering qualities of professional chaplaincy care. The track on which the responsibility and effectiveness of our ministry ride represents the foundational nature of authority and identity. The engines that drive the vehicle of our profession are the standards and competencies. Both entities provide the integrity to uphold and sustain excellence.

As I reflected across the span of my career, I discovered that early on, I did not fully grasp or represent the embodiment of the power and integrity of who I am and who/what gives me the authority to minister in clinical settings. Nevertheless, the formational, academic and theological knowledge bases were in place. In the ensuing years, the practical, experiential and empirical opportunities precipitated the integration of the metaphoric engines and the track. The awareness of this phenomenon extended the “rail system” into realms that one can only imagine. I propose that this emergence in later years propelled the effectiveness of my chaplaincy care far beyond the academic zone.

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I have identified some significant contributors to the expansion and enhancement of the power and integrity of authority and identity of my professional stance and abilities. These influences are the very essence of chaplaincy care.

One contributor is the awareness that my ministry is not mine alone to claim. By giving honor and credit to the many mutual encounters with people, events, learning opportunities and experiences, I am obliged to welcome a “great cloud of witnesses” into the community in which I minister. Each time I participate in a professional opportunity, I am keenly aware that I am not there alone. This ministry has far more depth and power than one individual can provide.

Another contributor centers on the intentional effort to constantly question and apprise the reality of “I” that comes with me into any moment of concern and care. Who I am and to what degree I influence any given moment of pastoral intervention is critical to the integration of self and profession. I propose that it is not safe to rest on my laurels, so to speak, about the potential influence I enact upon the “others” I encounter. The need to check myself brings me to address the degree to which my practice and competency are in line with my authority and identity. In keeping with the train metaphor, I need to ascertain that the engines driving my ministry are connected with the rails of my foundation.

A final contributor collaborates with the preceding ones. Along the way in my career, I began to realize that the determination of the direction or location of my ministry was not always consistent with my own agenda or intentions. I have referred to this as being in the wrong place at the right time. Many opportunities for significant ministry occurred when I literally walked into the wrong room or down the wrong corridor. What occurred in what I thought was the wrong place became the right place at the right time! For me, this is giving recognition and will to the power of the Ultimate Authority in my ministry. The humble reality of these encounters honors the integrity of true identity and authority.

These reflections in retirement have provided deep satisfaction and appreciation for the influence of the previous forty-nine years since I entered seminary and throughout my professional career. I offer them as a stimulus for others to capture moments of opportunity and to continually evaluate and enhance who we are and in whom or what we anchor our authority. Ultimately, the integrity of professional chaplaincy care is greatly enhanced and confirmed.

Issues, Concerns and Goals of Chaplain Leadership 1982 – 83

Ron Ropp BCC

My Term as President of the College of Chaplains

spanned 1982-83, and over the years, service in a variety of capacities—
council member and chair, secretary, president-elect and past president—
kept me active both in the College and its sponsoring organization, the
American Protestant Hospital Association (APHA).

While we faced many issues during the eighties, underlying it all was a
growing movement toward separation from APHA, which had given birth to
the College. As some of the finest administrators in the country had
encouraged and supported our development, and we were represented on
APHA boards and councils, this move to separate created considerable stress
for all concerned.

Many of our members served in systems outside APHA, and even more were
from religious groups outside of the Protestant denominations. Strongest
among those were many Roman Catholic Sisters who were recognized as
peers in the College. This and other factors lead to a surge in opening
leadership roles to women in the College. During my tenure, I appointed women to the councils as well as to the executive committee for the first time.

I was fortunate to be surrounded by outstanding peers and administrative persons, too numerous to mention, but warmly remembered. The Protestant Health Assembly also provided the College with a strong tie to many other health professions and denominational leaders; however, that changed when the College became a separate professional organization.

Although I can’t begin to remember all the issues dealt with or actions taken, some of the goals I pursued remain concerns for me. As I reread my 1983 President’s address to the College, “Roots, Ruts and Routes,” the following stand out:

• Meeting the tremendous challenge of achieving meaningful change that is not merely caught up in the hysteria of changes within society and health systems.

• Addressing the image and role of chaplaincy in society and health care through meaningful Joint Commission (then JCAHO) standards and the role of religion in healing.

• Developing stronger ties to denominational endorsing groups, which support specialized ministries and provide ties to local congregations.

• Encouraging churches to see their potential as centers of health and healing supported by professionals in the health care system.

• Continuing to research the effectiveness of pastoral care in health and healing and the importance of standards for chaplaincy.

• Continuing to work with all faith groups and other health professionals dedicated to creating systems for wholistic care for all persons.

I have had the privilege of serving in other roles with the College and APC, including a number of years on the History Committee, which has given me an even greater appreciation of who we are and where we have been. With God’s grace and the commitment of so many outstanding members the possibilities for the future are unlimited.

Thoughts from the Seventies

Clark S. Aist BCC

When I assumed the presidency of the Association of Mental Health Clergy (AMHC) in 1978, having already served two years as president-elect, the second half of the 1970s was rapidly producing a cacophony of vexing challenges. The promise of the community mental health movement of an earlier decade was giving way to the often dehumanizing practice of “deinstitutionalizing” persons with severe mental disorders. On another front, psychoanalytically oriented interpersonal psychiatry, which had long served as a compatible hermeneutic for ministries of pastoral care and counseling, was fast losing ground to what seemed the cold, mechanistic approaches of biological psychiatry. Indeed a new diagnostic manual reflecting these changes was already in process.1

It was also a time of hope and opportunity. Having “come of age” as a national interfaith certifying body in 1969, AMHC was becoming active in a host of interorganizational collaborations ranging from research to joint publications. With the establishment of the position of executive director in
1976 and the appointment of George Doebler as its first incumbent, a wave of young, dynamic chaplains were bringing new vision and innovation to the association’s work.

Since its founding in 1948, a distinguishing mark of the AMHC has been its close affiliation with the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Annual meetings were held concurrently with those of the APA. This not only promoted interaction and dialogue among psychiatrists and chaplains, it also provided access to papers, workshops and continuing education opportunities of unparalleled richness. Early on, a liaison to the APA had been established to advance collaborative efforts with the psychiatric community. The continuing question was how to accomplish this?

How indeed could a small organization of mental health chaplains with meager finances gain the leverage to elevate the profile of spiritual care among the rank and file of American psychiatrists? How could we enlist APA’s support in strengthening our position on such issues as Joint Commission (then JCAHO) standards for pastoral services? Given the sheer immensity of the APA and its endowments, our assets seemed little more than a “handful of meal and a cruet of oil” or “five loaves and two fish.”

One Sunday afternoon alone in my office, I found myself reflecting on these questions and the resources the AMHC actually had. By chance, my attention was drawn to Myron C. Madden’s concept “the power to bless.” Could this fundamental pastoral resource be exercised by an organization, I wondered? A stream of rapid associations followed that amounted to something of an epiphany. We already were doing this—each year presenting one of our chaplains with the Anton T. Boisen Award, an honor that conferred an organizational “blessing” of considerable prestige on an individual who had made distinguished contributions to mental health ministry. Over the years, as the list of recipients of recognized distinction grew, the award accumulated added respect and significance. Indeed the Annual Boisen Award Banquet, together with a major address, had become the highlight of the AMHC annual meeting. What if we were to confer such a blessing upon a psychiatric leader who had made distinctive contributions to exploring the interface between religion and psychiatry—someone of the stature of, say an Erik Erikson or Karl Menninger? The idea was born.

A proposal for an annual award and lectureship in “religion and psychiatry” was discussed at the fall 1976 meeting of the AMHC executive committee and was approved in principle. Coincidentally, in a parallel development, APA was actively considering the restoration of its lapsed Religion and Psychiatry Committee. Dr. Angelo D’Agostino, a prominent Washington, DC, psychiatrist and Jesuit priest as well as close friend and colleague, was asked to lead this effort. In March 1977, leaders of AMHC met with APA’s medical director and Dr. D’Agostino to outline the functions and tasks of this committee. During this meeting, we offered our still nascent idea of an annual award and lecture in religion and psychiatry as a joint effort that could take place alongside other distinguished lectureships at APA annual meetings. It would anchor the committee to a substantive, ongoing task and provide a point of liaison between our two organizations. The offer was warmly embraced without hesitation.

Two years later, an annual award and lectureship co-sponsored by APA and AMHC was formally approved by both organizations as a key function of the APA’s Committee on Religion and Psychiatry with full voice and vote by the committee’s AMHC liaison.

Extensive discussions ensued about how to name the award. Ultimately, Oskar Pfister, Reformed Swiss pastor, lay analyst and close associate of Sigmund Freud, emerged as the unanimous choice. The spirit, energy and integrity of Pfister’s vibrant 30-year correspondence with Sigmund Freud, which had been published in *Psychoanalysis and Faith*, seemed to epitomize the quality of discourse and exploration that the committee envisioned for the award and its associated lecture.

In 1983, the Oskar Pfister Award and lecture was inaugurated with Jerome Frank, eminent clinical and research psychiatrist at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, as its first recipient. Today the Oskar Pfister Award is deeply embedded in the historical DNA of both associations. Its
twenty-seven recipients to date are among the foremost investigators of the interface between spirituality and the human psyche.

What insights for our present time and for the future might we glean from these threads of history from a long ago presidency? Many readers, I am sure, will have keener observations than mine, but I would suggest three:

1. The most powerful assets we possess as an organization of professional chaplains are to be found in the resources embedded—perhaps hidden—in our spiritual and religious identities. Hence we always have something rather than nothing.

2. One of our most useful functions in liaisons with other health care agencies may be to illumine the dimensions of spiritual depth implicit in their individual discipline identities.

3. A treasured seed, surrendered to the rigorous discipline of planting, can bear fruit beyond imagination.

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3. George Doebler, executive director; Emanuel Lifschutz, president; and Clark S. Aist, president-elect; represented AMHC.


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Ron Ropp eloquently stated that the influx of Roman Catholic Sisters into the College of Chaplains, where they were accepted as peers, was one factor that led to a surge in female membership and a subsequent increase in the number of women in leadership roles in the College.

These pioneering women came from many denominational and faith backgrounds and helped shape chaplaincy as we know it today. The Retired Chaplains’ Writing Project invites retired female chaplains to share their reflections and memories about what it was like to become a chaplain during a time when many denominations were just beginning to ordain women and most of the chaplains were men.

This collaborative effort will comprise the next installment of the writing project, slated for publication in Chaplaincy Today 27.2 (Autumn/Winter 2011). To add your voice, contact George Robie BCC (retired) grrobie@neb.rr.com. Further details and writer’s guidelines will be provided.