Ubuntu is a Bantu term meaning "I am what I am because of who we all are." Thus, it is far more than a word. Ubuntu is a philosophy of life which focuses on allegiances, relationships and responsibilities within community. The insights, stories and experiences shared in this article by four retired female chaplains are examples of how Ubuntu manifests itself within professional chaplaincy. The "real life events" recounted by these women give voice to the reality that transformation is a mutual experience. As professional chaplains, these authors are who and what they are because of faith commitment and the collegial educational process which led them to the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC). Also, let us not forget the other half of the equation: today APC is what it is in part because of the courage of female chaplains who faced early challenges of sexism, inequity and prejudice. Their persistence and that of their contemporary sisters continues to move the profession of chaplaincy forward and to support and encourage all women—and men—who follow in their footsteps.

George R. Robie BCC (retired), Coordinator

Weaving a Tapestry
Margaret A. Muncie BCC

STORIES ARE THE BREAD AND BUTTER OF OUR WORK as professional chaplains. In addition to all those that are shared with us by those to whom we minister, the stories of our own personal and professional experience etched on our hearts and minds become the things we carry to sustain us on life’s journey. This accumulated wisdom informs our ministry and becomes a gift to share with the generations of colleagues who will walk paths similar to the ones each of us has trod.

The tapestry of our work, this creation of meaning and value that we who now are “retired” offer, is still in the making. Each day, threads of our experiences—our stories of joys, pains, triumphs and failures—become the fibers that we continue to weave into the fabric of our lives. In this year’s installment of the Retired Chaplains’ Writing Project, three women join me in weaving the threads of their own stories into this creation of shared wisdom. They recall specific points in their journeys and lessons learned along the way, sharing how these experiences have led them to continued meaningful, challenging and rewarding work today.

What is remarkable about these stories? Women were not accorded the status of Fellow in the College of Chaplains, APC’s predecessor organization, until the 1970s—less than forty years ago.

I remember my first clinical pastoral education (CPE) experience. Having survived my junior year as the first and only woman to matriculate in the class of 1974 at The General Theological Seminary in New York City, I bravely decided to see the country and chose USC Medical Center in southern California. On a sunny summer morning in 1972, I entered the CPE classroom—again, the lone female. We introduced ourselves, and I vividly recall the response of my supervisor: “Well this will be a learning for both of us. I have never supervised a woman!” It turned out to be a good
experience of learning for each of us and started me on a rich and rewarding professional career in chaplaincy.

Even when I walked across the stage at the annual meeting in 1984 to receive my certificate number 1394 as Fellow in the College, I was joined by very few of women. We still were a distinct minority in professional chaplaincy. Over the years, I have served in acute, long-term care and hospice settings. Now I utilize my skills as part-time executive director for a not-for-profit pastoral counseling service. What a joy to say farewell to a pager!

Like me, the women chaplains whose stories appear on the following pages carry the riches of their unique pastoral experiences into the new territory of retired chaplaincy. Their journeys, both professional and personal, are varied, each of us has witnessed APC expand its diversity to become more inclusive across the gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. This diversity broadens and deepens the scope of pastoral care in ways that were unimaginable forty years ago.

Far from being a minority, women are now leaders in our profession. The College elected Elaine Hickman Lehr BCC as its first woman president in 1993. Mary S. Whetstone BCC (2006-2008) and Susan K. Wintz BCC (2008-2010) are past-presidents of APC. Valerie R. Storms BCC is the current president-elect. Most importantly, each of us—whether long tenured or newly certified—carries the hope that the professionalism and integrity of this noble profession of chaplaincy will continue to grow and to be a source of blessing, comfort and strength to all whom we serve.

The Making of One Chaplain

Kay Miller BCC

MY PATH TO CHAPLAINCY has been a bit unusual. For starters my family lived in China for three years when I was a child. As we moved around the world, I also attended schools in Hong Kong, England and France, including a university year. Chaplaincy Effect: I developed a deep-seated multicultural orientation and acceptance of those who may be different from me along with the conviction that I am not to judge others. That’s God’s job!

My time in China was spent in the midst of civil war as the Communists took over the country. I witnessed dozens of people killed by firing squads sweeping their machine guns back and forth. There was no regular trash collection, and I became obsessed with the body of an infant in a nearby trash can. Despite my mother’s warning, “Shh, the baby is sleeping. Don’t awaken her,” I kept running to check on the baby, watching her body decay and succumb to the insects. Recurrent nightmares connected to this incident continued for nearly fifty years. Life was not a safe place. People could not be trusted to protect children. Chaplaincy Effect: In the midst of this horror, I turned to church for refuge.

As an adult, I spent twenty-three years as a computer programmer at IBM, in positions ranging from contract work with NASA on the Apollo moon-landing project to business support programming. Chaplaincy Effect: I recognized that people are more interesting to me than machines and that my desire is to work directly with people. I became especially interested in mind-body-spirit interconnections.

When my son and only child died in an automobile accident at the age of seventeen, my world seemed to come to an end. My grief was so “white hot” that I dropped out of life, wandering the
country with his dog for nearly two years. Finally, my faith provided me both strength and direction, but even though I had been assured that God would make something good out of this tragedy, I was determined that I would never allow anything good to come out of the loss of my son. **Chaplaincy Effect:** I have a deep connection with those who have experienced devastating loss and at the same time a realization that God really can cause good to rise from ashes even if one is determined to block him.

How did this life experience coalesce around chaplaincy? I was two years away from becoming a doctor when my son died, and initially my debate was whether to return to medical school or to consider hospital chaplaincy. I began by serving as a volunteer hospital chaplain a few hours a week. When that grew to sixty, I decided that I could handle the responsibility!

However, even as I felt drawn to chaplaincy, I was reluctant to enter seminary, afraid that my own broad, nonjudgmental beliefs might be overcome by the view that the narrow Christian path was the only "right" connection with God. I am a devout Episcopalian and draw my strength and comfort from within that belief system. Still, I am not convinced that this is the perfect place for anyone else, and I fully support each person's individual spiritual journey.

My decision to return to medical school instead was short lived. A serious car wreck tore at my brain and put me in a wheelchair. After years of rehab, I was able to read again and thus to handle graduate school. This time I chose seminary and incorporated five units of clinical pastoral education (CPE). I not only was more confident in the strength of my own spirituality, I also was eager to delve into the mind-body-spirit connection from the spiritual care perspective.

Though at first the requirements seemed onerous and tedious, my respect for the professionalism espoused by APC and the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) blossomed. I have grown to understand the wisdom of each part of the process. APC provided much support and direction, and it was a mighty happy day when I went across the stage to receive board certification.

Professionalism within the field is key! Whenever I observe a well-meaning, but untrained “chaplain” in his/her narrow attempts at spiritual care—which often amounts to proselytizing—I ask myself whether this is spiritual abuse rather than spiritual care.

Four years ago, fate took over again, and this time I listened when I felt called to a new venue: chaplain at the Mason County Detention Center, which previously had no professional spiritual care for its inmates. One by one, they come to a private conference room. Their motivation varies. Some just want to get out of their cells and/or to vent their frustration. Some simply want prayer or wish to use the time for Bible study. Some have profound spiritual issues that they want to work on and may seek to confess and to discover forgiveness. Many profoundly miss their families and especially their children. They often experience grief around changed relationships.

While many elements of my early life contributed to my chaplaincy, I also have had much help from above in guiding me along this twisted path. I continue to discover the spiritual aspects imbedded within my sometimes tragic history and to learn how to incorporate those gems into my spiritual identity. Each encounter is fresh, and I am grateful as I continue to grow. 🌿
LAST WEEK, I SPOKE TO A CPE GROUP at the Portland (Oregon) VA Medical Center about becoming board certified chaplains in APC. As I sat next to my former supervisor, the Reverend Dr. Horace Duke BCC ACPE, I was humbled and amazed about how far I had come since he introduced me to APC at the 1998 conference—the year that the organization was birthed from the College of Chaplains and the Association of Mental Health Chaplains.

Chaplain Duke asked me to serve at the registration desk and to acquaint chaplain colleagues from across the country with the Portland area. What a great time we all had! The weather—rare for May—was absolutely perfect. Everyone was excited about the new Association of Professional Chaplains. We had a potlatch salmon dinner, followed by the old time music of the Oregon Trail Band. The plenary speakers were top notch, and the workshops really added to my knowledge of chaplaincy. When it was all over, I missed the camaraderie and stimulation of colleagues, who were on a mission to improve the standards and continuing education for professional chaplains.

A year later, I summoned the courage to begin the certification process. I was working full time and caring for my husband, a former hospice chaplain who had taken disability retirement two years earlier. When I finally had all the forms filled out, papers written and last endorsement letter in hand, it was deadline day. We raced to the 24-hour post office at the airport to send all forty-six pages by overnight mail!

I have to admit that I was really nervous as I waited until the fall for my certification interview. A friend on the east coast met three committees before passing, and as I knew what a great chaplain he was, I worried that my own gifts and skills wouldn’t be adequate. Happily, my experience was fantastic. Committee members asked pertinent questions about my chaplaincy work; we laughed together, and I felt tears trickling down my cheeks a couple of times.

As I gathered with other BCCs at the 2000 conference in Charlotte, NC, I felt very much at home. My friend, the Reverend Paula Curtis-Burns BCC, said to me, “Now you really have arrived. This is the most important step in your career!” At the time, I wasn’t too sure what she meant. Now I know that belonging to APC has been a launching point both personally and professionally. With the support of the administration at Legacy Meridian Park Medical Center, I began by serving as the State Advocate (2001-02), followed by State Education Chair (2002-06).

In 2004, with the help of the state rep, the Reverend Merv Friberg BCC, I launched Chaplains’ Chatter to publicize continuing education events, local chaplains’ news, meetings, jobs and job transitions. I wrote an editorial for each issue addressing something in my own life that spoke to things we all faced in chaplaincy. Published online three times a year, the Chatter eventually grew to a listserv connecting over 200 chaplains or friends of chaplaincy in the greater Oregon/southwest Washington area: working chaplains, CPE students, retired and nonworking chaplains, local clergy, members of National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) and Hospital Chaplains of America (HCA) and chaplaincy volunteers. One of my special joys was running into chaplains at annual conferences and realizing that we knew of each other through the Chatter. It was so good to put names and faces together! I continued writing the Chatter through my terms as State Rep for Oregon North (2006-2010).

As I grew professionally, so did APC, especially in the area of communications. On September 11, 2001, and throughout the following days, I relied on the work and comfort of my fellow board members.
With Eyes Wide Open
Sharon F. Peters BCC

THERE IS AN EXPERIENCE IN MY PROFESSIONAL CAREER that I often have recalled. I was sleeping at the hospital as on-call chaplain when my beeper woke me around 3 a.m. I dressed, gathered my badge and Bible and headed to a code blue. En route, I realized that in my rush, I had forgotten to put in my contact lenses. I convinced myself that I would be able to cope without them. The patient died, and for the rest of the night I accompanied relatives into the room to say their goodbyes to the deceased with my poor, uncorrected vision.

Three months later, a nurse called for pastoral support for a patient whose doctor had shared with her that she had an inoperable malignant brain tumor. When I entered the patient’s room, I was jolted by her screams of rejection. “No, no, anyone but you. I never want to see you again. Ever!” I retreated in shock since I had no memory of having seen her before. Another chaplain met with her and later explained her reaction.

She had been the roommate of the patient who had died the night I responded to the code blue without my contacts. Distressed by witnessing
the failed resuscitation efforts, she had motioned repeatedly for me to come to her bedside, and I had acted like I didn’t see her. How could any chaplain be so uncaring!

The reality was that I hadn’t seen her, but her accusations hit me hard. Though I did not have the opportunity to reconcile with this woman before she died, I was able to grapple with my remorse, feelings of failure and need of self-forgiveness in conversation with my peers and CPE supervisor. Though I never spoke again about this incident, I have been guided by it as I supervised others. In the performance of our duties, in the fulfilling of our callings, at times we all make mistakes, and we fail to meet the needs of others. There is pain when we discover this, but there also is grace. If we are to experience true professional growth throughout our careers, such “I was blind but now I see” moments need to occur. With a smile now, I realize this was not the only time of my only seeing dimly what was happening.

When I entered seminary in 1979 with the approval of my presbytery, I was counseled that as a woman, I should be prepared to have a difficult time finding a call to a pastorate upon graduation. I proceeded with eyes open, or so I thought. Juggling marriage, motherhood and a part-time job, I still managed to graduate with honors, to be awarded a fellowship for an urban ministries internship and to become board certified as a chaplain. Clearly, I still was naïve as I expected that these credentials would suffice to ensure a call to hospital chaplaincy or parish ministry. Although forewarned, I was still naïve.

I quickly discovered that chaplain positions required former experience. Parish positions were open but not the minds of most congregations. Although they granted me interviews in order to meet the presbytery’s requirement that a woman be among the top five candidates, it was obvious that these were a charade enacted to comply with affirmative action guidelines. Still, the compromise of my integrity that I felt by participating in this process caught me by surprise.

Ultimately, I accepted the position of executive director at an educational nonprofit with church affiliations in suburban Washington, DC, which served students with emotional disabilities and their families. I was recruited to establish a clinical program with a wholistic philosophy, and my ordaining denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), recognized the position as a call to specialized ministry.

For twenty-three years, I supervised professionals including special educators, speech, occupational, art and movement therapists, vocational counselors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as social work interns and psychologists in training. I drew heavily on my chaplaincy training and experience to forge a multidisciplinary team.

Looking back, I realize that I did not fully appreciate how much my training and experience would influence my vision for this organization. The initial challenge was to break down communication barriers and to build mutual respect and collaboration among staff from different disciplines. How could we come together and talk about common concerns and goals? How could we help each other get past distancing professional jargon, attitudes of superiority based on age, gender or experience? How could we find ways as a team—and not simply individuals—to honor confidentiality, to observe boundaries and to adhere to professional ethics by keeping the welfare of our clients uppermost? Answers to these questions varied from year to year depending on the team, but my commitment to seeking them did not.

Having risen to the position of CEO, I retired in 2007 from what had been an immensely rewarding career and moved with my husband to central Maryland. Today I enjoy working part-time, serving a long-term continuing care retirement center and an acute care hospital. It is good to once again have my Bible and badge in hand and to walk the floors at both institutions visiting patients and residents. It is even better to realize that the gender discrimination I faced as a young woman chaplain has lessened.
Patients are at ease and usually welcoming when I walk into their rooms and introduce myself as chaplain. It is not difficult to initiate pastoral conversations. Only infrequently do I hear comments about the fact that I am a woman and to some an attractive woman. In earlier times, my gender and my appearance frequently elicited surprise, uneasiness or rejection—in worse case scenarios, unwanted sexual comments or advances.

When I responded to an invitation to attend a luncheon at the 2011 APC Annual Conference in Dallas, in recognition of the twenty-fifth anniversary of my certification, a memory of how it used to be surfaced with startling clarity. At the grand banquet during the conference where I was welcomed as a new board certified chaplain, my name was called, and I went forward to receive my certificate. When the other recipients returned to their seats, the presenter asked me to remain on stage. Standing there before the large audience in the ballroom, I heard him say, “Now I want you all to take a good look at what our new crop of chaplains looks like. Wouldn’t you have loved to have been her supervisor?” There was applause and ripples of laughter as I returned to my seat hurt and humiliated on an evening when I should have felt proud and affirmed by my colleagues.

Thankfully, none of the “new crop of chaplains” in Dallas was subjected to such blatant sexism. Our society and our profession no longer tolerate it. Granted, it seems that only belatedly have some male colleagues come to see the pain of not embracing the values of inclusivity, diversity and equality espoused by APC. Nevertheless, I believe that organizations, like individuals, sometimes come to their most blessed times of grace when they realize that they were blind but now they see. I also believe that the future is brighter because men and women now work together as equals to fulfill their vision and calling as caregivers and healers.

My hope for all of us in chaplaincy today is that we will be advocates for wholistic care through multidisciplinary teams at the varied institutions where we serve. May we articulate our competencies and roles in advancing the missions of our respective institutions. May we be listeners and leaders, using our training to help others come to moments of truth telling and self-awareness. May we find calm, confident voices to help our colleagues from other disciplines work together for the benefit of those we serve.