

April 2, 2008  
Volume 5 No. 5

## Are Hospitals Our Houses of Worship and Its Staff Our Congregants?

Recently, the television show ER featured a female chaplain who has an intimate relationship with a male physician on staff at the hospital where she serves. This plot has been the subject of a number of discussions on a professional chaplains ListServe hosted by Yahoo.com. Some chaplains on the ListServe have taken a very dim view of the portrayal of the chaplain character as being perceived as immoral and unethical for having a sexual relationship with someone in her workplace, and possibly under her pastoral influence. Others have taken the position that as long as she is not his pastoral care leader, nor in his chain of supervision, the relationship is within professional boundaries. It is a matter of the chaplain's faith group to determine if there has been a violation of any of their rules, norms, or beliefs.

In the course of the very lively ListServe discussion, it dawned on me that some professional chaplains see themselves and their profession as being one in which they are clergy who are "on duty" 24/-- wherever they are, whatever they are doing. Being and doing their "calling" is more than merely a full-time role. I stated on the ListServe that I felt this was wrong for me:

"While I do have a friendly and collegial relationship with many of the staff, I do not have a pastoral relationship with many of the staff. [I would hope that the staff would have a religious and pastoral relationship with their own congregational religious leader(s).] And I do offer a pastoral relationship to our patients. I think I am uncomfortable with the notion that chaplains should have a pastoral relationship with the staff – kind of smacks of an implicit imposition of my spirituality (possibly even a proselytizing mentality) to me."

Specifically, how do clinically-trained chaplains view themselves as professionals within the facility?

My impression from a number of comments on that ListServe is that we are clergy first and foremost and that we should consider the workplace as our parish. [Apologies to the Wesleys!] It seems to me that it is a very inappropriate self-perception. How many physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals consider their workplace colleagues as a part of their charge, calling, or responsibility? If they did, my guess is that peer review committees and human resources departments would – at a minimum – pull them in for a good confrontation. Why, should our profession be any different? Yes, I do have a pastoral relationship with a few of the hospital's staff, but at their initiation – not mine. And even these relationships generally have mutually established boundaries. (Similar to when employees seek physicians whom they know and trust for their professional services.)

So, I ask, "Who sees the hospital as their house of worship? Why?" As a follow-up comes that great classic clinical pastoral education question: "Whose needs are being met?"



*Chaplain David Plummer is manager of chaplaincy services at Sentara CarePlex Hospital (Hampton, VA), and the endorsing executive for The Coalition of Spirit-filled Churches religious endorsing body.*