

Chaplain David Plummer: The Struggles of an Evangelical Chaplain

Recently I was asked about writing an article on “Being an Evangelical in the World of Interfaith Chaplaincy.” My response was:

I think it is not too difficult being an evangelical in the world of interfaith chaplaincy. It is far more challenging being an evangelical who embraces interfaith chaplaincy to live in genuine community among my non-chaplaincy evangelical colleagues. Their responses to me, and their agendas, can be quite difficult. Indeed, even some of my evangelical chaplain colleagues practice a *pseudo*-ecumenicism, rather than a true commitment to multifaith ministry.

I would like to take this opportunity to explain my response.

I have found that occasionally — no, make that often — when I explain to my non-evangelical colleagues that I am a “clinically-trained, Charismatic chaplain,” they have a hard time understanding or, perhaps, believing that I am using these terms accurately. Sadly, I fully understand their apprehension and outright disbelief. Usually, after a brief discussion of my sincerely held beliefs and commitment to genuine pluralism, they accept me for the colleague in chaplaincy who I am.

This, however, is often not the case with my evangelical colleagues. I regularly hear such questions as, “If you are ministering to an ‘unbeliever’ [often defined by them as anyone who is not evangelical in belief] here in the hospital, what could you possibly have to talk about?” “If you are not telling them about Jesus, what good are you doing?” “Are you just pacifying them on their deathbeds as they slip into an eternity in hell?” Such questions betray to me a lack of understanding and appreciation on their parts of the unconditionally loving and practical ministry of Jesus when he walked the earth. They fail to appreciate Jesus’ ministry and love to all — regardless of who they were spiritually, theologically, or what they had or had not done. They are unaware of that wonderful, theologically-rich exhortation of St. Francis: “Preach the Gospel! If necessary, use words.” Most are even unaware of St. Francis (after all, he was Catholic anyway!).

What disturbs me most, unfortunately, is when my evangelical chaplain friends give lip-service to pluralism. Often they are only *pseudo*-ecumenicists. It bothers me because they know better. They have been taught (and at some point asked for) a signed agreement that they are paid to serve an institution as a religious caregiver to all — not just to their own kind. Yet, in spite of this they consider themselves some sort of spiritual “double agents,” far more interested in proselytizing and evangelization than they are in responding to the agendas and practical needs of the client and the client’s family.

My questions for such evangelical chaplains are, If it’s ok to lie, fabricate, manipulate, and deceive to “lead someone to the Lord,” just who is the Lord that they are serving? Isn’t this the practice of the “psychologically destructive cults?” Do the ends (a planned, manipulated “acceptance” of Jesus) justify the means? [Process tells me that the means is a part of the end.] Some chaplains I know would privately, and enthusiastically say, “Yes!” to that last question. “We are evangelists to the institutional mission fields we serve,” are sentiments I have heard from some of my fellow evangelical chaplains and endorsing executives who are active participants in the pseudo-pluralism ruse. I truly wish that they had the integrity to not sign ethics commitments and other statements that say they are dedicated to pluralism and will not attempt to proselytize. It is these evangelical chaplains with *pseudo*-pluralistic values who give bad reputations to all evangelical chaplains — including those with a strong commitment to personal integrity and professional ethics. No wonder I am occasionally looked upon with skepticism by non-evangelical chaplains and chaplain employers.

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My hope for my interfaith colleagues is they will see me for who I am and who I am not. My hope for my pseudo-ecumenicist evangelical colleagues is that they will realize that dishonesty and a lack of integrity is contrary to the principles of the very G-d whom they wish to please and to whom they seek to bring converts. And, my hope for my evangelical colleagues with integrity intact is that they will continue to be authentic, and train others to be the same.

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