

The Meaning of Mission

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Editor

Virtually every modern healthcare organization in the United States devotes considerable time and energy to crafting a “Mission and Vision Statement.” Development of these value-based declarations of purpose helps the leaders of these organizations to succinctly state what they stand for and what they aspire to become. There are even irreverent websites that poke fun at the entire enterprise through the use of specialized software that allows one to generate a “customized” mission statement simply by filling in the blanks.

For those organizations that take it seriously, a carefully articulated mission and vision can drive the entire enterprise by assuring that each individual understands his/her role and how it contributes to the overall organizational goals. I have had the privilege of learning the true meaning of mission in healthcare through my decade of service on the Board of Trustees of Catholic Healthcare Partners (CHP), one of the country’s largest not-for-profit healthcare systems, headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio. In this article, I will outline the scope of the CHP Mission and then reflect upon how my experience as a member of their board influenced my point of view.

The CHP system consists of more than 100 organizations, including “acute care hospitals, long-term care facilities, housing sites for the elderly, home health agencies, hospice programs, wellness centers, and more.”¹ They are divided into nine regions, each of which provides a comprehensive range of services that meet the healthcare needs of people in Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and nearby states. CHP is the largest employer in Ohio, and the tenth largest integrated delivery system in the United States. Its thirty-three core hospitals with thousands of physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and others provide services to millions of patients.

CHP’s mission is to “extend the healing ministry of Jesus by improving the health of our communities with emphasis on people who are poor and underserved.” CHP expresses its core values of compassion, excellence, human dignity, justice, sacredness of life, and service through the activities of its nearly 35,000 associates in each of its organizational components. All of these activities eventually report up to the Corporate Board through the home office in Cincinnati.

The CHP Corporate Board is diverse; membership is not limited to those of the Catholic faith. Its members collectively represent the five religious orders who came together to form the system and various outside experts.

As a board member, my particular responsibility was to serve as Chair of the Board Quality and Safety Committee. The committee was the focal point for setting the quality and safety agenda, integrating that agenda with the organization's overall strategic plan, and promoting public accountability for all services rendered throughout CHP. Aspects of CHP's mission were directly expressed through the committee's work. While I am very proud of our accomplishments and remain grateful to the staff in Cincinnati who supported our work, the true meaning of "mission" became clear to me through other aspects of my involvement with CHP.

The five religious orders who came together to form CHP include the Grey Nuns, two different communities of Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, and the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. Over the past five years, the CHP Board has visited each of the Mother Houses of the religious sponsors in an effort to seek out the spiritual center and to create, in the board, a deeper meaning of service to the poor and underserved.

These pilgrimages to each of the Mother Houses included visits to a convent in rural Pennsylvania and an overseas trip to Dublin, Ireland to the national historic site devoted to Sister Catherine McAuley, the founding Sister of Mercy. The board's spiritual journey culminated with our September 2008 retreat to the Vatican, the seat of the Catholic Church. The Board's journey to Rome included opportunities for shared prayer, reflection and education.

According to Michael D. Connelly, the President and CEO of CHP, the retreat was "intended to promote a deeper understanding of your personal call to the vocation of healthcare ministry, provide an understanding of the Catholic imagination and theological world view and their implications for Catholic health ministry, and strengthen relationships between board members as part of the community of leaders in health ministry." We were going to Rome, in part, to delve deeper into the meaning of mission and our individual role in living that mission.

We were given a series of readings to complete prior to the embarking on our spiritual retreat. Among the materials was *All the Pope's Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks*,² by John Allen, Jr. Allen, a prize-winning correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and CNN analyst on Vatican affairs, addressed our group following our visits to various Vatican offices.

The Board visited several different dicasteries (the various departments and offices that assist the Pope in the government of the Church) during the spiritual retreat. These visits provided us all with a better appreciation for the scope and breadth of Catholic healthcare worldwide. America's 70 million Catholics compose only six percent of the global Catholic community. The dicasteries are responsible for everything from protecting the doctrine of the faith to convening global health conferences on AIDS prevention, malaria eradication, and dozens of other healthcare topics. Each dicastery had a unique personality, determined in large part by the leadership and the particular organizational culture. These dicasteries report more or less independently to the Pope and, as such, sometimes operate in relative isolation from one another.

On a more personal level, the spiritual retreat to Rome brought the meaning of mission more clearly into focus. Health care is an integral part of the Church and serving the sick is seen as an opportunity to become closer to God. My understanding of this mission deepened as I observed the behaviors of my Board colleagues and the Sisters who represented the five religious orders. In addition to their religious training, most of the Sisters are highly trained experts with graduate degrees in pharmacy, nursing, hospital administration, theology, and jurisprudence. The Sisters truly embody this mission on both a spiritual and practical level. The way in which they serve is so selflessly palpable, it has given me a deeper understanding and appreciation of the mission of CHP, which clearly has no religious boundaries.

When I look back upon my years of service with Catholic Healthcare Partners, several themes emerge. Certainly, the hard work of the Inaugural Board Quality and Safety Committee is among my proudest professional accomplishments. The collegial way in which the Board embraced its fiduciary responsibility for promoting public accountability for the work of CHP stands out as a key career achievement. The committee felt empowered via the support we received, personally and professionally, from Mike Connelly. He challenged us to go beyond the typical governance report for Quality and Safety and link our goals to the overarching strategic vision of the entire organization. Mike Connelly helped me to further understand the meaning of mission from a perspective different – from that of a Sister.

In our cynical modern world with all of its attendant greed, financial crises, and calls for higher levels of reimbursement, my service to CHP will remain as a cornerstone of my own personal mission. My professional work in health services research and consulting in healthcare governance³ was enriched via my experience with CHP. The meaning of mission in healthcare is much clearer to me. I hope that I will be able to bring this deeper understanding of the true role of healthcare governance to my new

responsibilities as a board member for Main Line Health right here in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. CHP has given me a great gift, one I want to use wisely. As always, I am interested in your views and you can reach me at my email address, which is david.nash@jefferson.edu.

You can learn more about CHP by visiting their website: www.health-partners.org.
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References

1. Catholic Healthcare Partners. Partnerships for Health. 2005. <http://www.health-partners.org/>. Accessed November 18, 2008.
2. Allen JL. *All the Pope's Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks*. Doubleday, NY 2004.
3. Nash DB, Oetgen W, Pracilio V (eds.) *Governance for Health Care Providers: The Call to Leadership*. The Productivity Press, Chicago, IL, 2008