

Prophetic Ministry: A Distinctive Dimension of Professional Chaplaincy

Theodore M. Smith

One could say Esther, the remarkable Jewish heroine of postexilic times, led a prophetic life. Attaining the strategic position of queen in the court of Ahasuerus, king of Persia, was remarkable itself. Yet what really distinguished Esther wasn't her beauty but her willingness to "confrontationally seek improvement in large groups (her Jewish people) and systems (the Jews' place within the Persian kingdom)."¹

In the drama, Esther boldly asserts herself. First she approaches the king—unsummoned—a truly life-risking break in royal protocol. Then she confronts the king about the pogrom fostered by Haman, shrewdly orchestrating two dinners for the king and the evil prime minister. In the second dinner, she courageously declares her Jewish identity and then confronts Haman as a "foe and enemy" of her Jewish people. Clearly, her prophetic witness was for "just such a time." How about us in professional chaplaincy?

Years ago, as a young, idealistic ACPE educator (supervisor), I had the privileged opportunity to learn from a seasoned chaplain supervisor at a faith-based hospital. My colleague, an assertive person by temperament, had a strong pastoral identity and a clear sense of his role in the institution.

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He also had strong ties to the leadership of his judicatory, which had a legal relationship to the hospital. After thirty-five years, I still have a clear memory of his assertiveness (confrontation?) with a senior hospital executive. The hospital system was experiencing financial challenges, and this executive was discussing with my colleague the probability of reducing the staffing levels, including the only chaplain, at one of the system's suburban facilities. My colleague's account of the conversation, which I believe is credible, included his statement that the only scenario of the chaplain's departure would be the administrator and the chaplain walking out together as the last two hospital employees, locking the door behind them as the hospital closed. Consequently (I think that's the correct conjunction), there was always a chaplain on staff at that hospital during my colleague's tenure.

My colleague felt confident in speaking firmly to hospital executives in large part because he had a power base outside the hospital. Through the years he proactively nurtured and molded the Chaplain's Committee, a hospital Board of Director's subcommittee, into a strong advocacy group for the hospital's Department of Pastoral Care. During his long, effective tenure, he provided assertive leadership—and I would say prophetic ministry. By his own quick acknowledgment, his "outside" power base was essential to his engaged ministry.

A few years later, I was on staff as a CPE director at a different faith-based hospital. The governance structure of the hospital was different; there was no board subcommittee devoted to spiritual care. There was, however, one powerful and decisive element: the episcopal leadership of the judicatory served as the hospital's permanent chairperson of the hospital's Board of Directors. The department director was a younger colleague of the episcopal leader, and that made a positive difference in his leadership within the hospital.

One concrete example of that positive difference occurred many years ago. I had returned from an ACPE national conference where I had learned of a new development in several hospitals: observing Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday with a celebration event. Our hospital did not have such an event, so when I returned I discussed the possibility with my director. He liked the idea, and our first King Celebration took place the next January. I took a leadership role for the event and invited a dynamic African American pastor from the community to speak. The celebration was truly an event: the

chapel was packed, spirited songs emanated from the newly formed employee choir, and the pastor spoke with energy and eloquence.

What a success! Or, I thought it was until my director told me the hospital CEO had confronted him after the service, saying he would decide who spoke at future King Celebrations. My colleague's response was quick and decisive; he replied that was accountable to his episcopal leader and was in charge of the chapel and its activities, including selecting speakers. True to his vow, all subsequent invitations to chapel-related events continued to be offered through the Department of Pastoral Care.

These are simply a couple of examples of chaplain colleagues whose style of ministry was assertive and occasionally engaged hospital leadership in a style that might be called prophetic. By that I mean they had a willingness to occasionally challenge hospital leaders without becoming adversarial. Neither chaplain colleague occupied an executive position in the hospital structure, but each had an outside power base, along with an assertive personality, and occasionally took genuine risks.

In my thirty-five-year career as a certified educator, I have served at the director level but never as an executive. I've always been a direct report to a spiritual care director or chaplain-related executive. Given that context, I would not characterize my overall ministry as prophetic but as having prophetic moments. Daily effective assertiveness is my goal and is the language that feels more accurate. My current setting for ministry is a Catholic-based hospital, a completely new setting for me as a United Methodist. I serve as the director of mission integration with broad responsibilities: three departments (CPE, Spiritual Care, and Volunteer Services/Auxiliary) and two large programs (Mission and Medical Ethics). I have forty-four direct reports plus scores of hospital volunteers.

Many of us currently have or have had management responsibilities. Typically, these job descriptions involve personnel oversight, including performance evaluations. When there's a significant gap in a colleague's level of productivity and departmental or institutional expectations, corrective action (coordinated with Human Resources guidelines) is often required. These are unpleasant if not painful experiences involving hard, eye-to-eye conversations. They become especially difficult when the corrective action results in the colleague's termination, either voluntary or involuntary. Such results have profound implications for the staff person and in some cases the family members.

Notwithstanding Seifert's helpful analysis, it might be equally valid to expand the context for what constitutes prophetic ministry from "large groups and systems" to the smaller scale of departmental programs and operations. Formal action involving corrective action in order to improve performance in educational, pastoral, or administrative arenas is confrontational by its very nature. Giving critical feedback can threaten a person's self-esteem, both professional and personal, not to mention create a potential change in their career trajectory. However difficult, avoiding such conversations either by minimizing the performance deficit or shrinking from the emotional demands of accountability meetings means *another* performance failure has occurred—this time at the management level.

Over the years, I've had such conversations with staff personnel in all three areas cited above. I find them distinctively unpleasant. As our hospital president remarked, "This is the most difficult part of our job." I couldn't agree more. Fortunately, my training as a CPE educator has better equipped me for such conversations by enabling me to become more skilled in making performance assessments, offering evaluative feedback, and dealing with conflict. Trusting my intuition, particularly in these hard conversations with all their implications, is difficult but necessary. In contrast, I strive to provide a warm, empathic listening presence with patients and families. Moreover, I strive to provide evaluative feedback to CPE participants in a respectful way that lowers their defenses. But leading a corrective action discussion is different and challenging for the reasons cited above. My role is different; it's no longer a chaplain or educator but an administrator with a larger perspective: enhancing the ministry and operation of that person's area of responsibility. To the extent that I'm willing to assertively address that person's performance deficiencies, my ministry has prophetic overtones.

To sum up, I've moved from my earlier idealism as a young chaplain and educator. Originally, I envisioned being like my early mentor, having a similar context for ministry, and developing a similar prophetic stance. That context wasn't ever replicated, and I realized I'm a different person. I've made peace with that reality and with my career in ministry. I've had unique opportunities to build innovative curricula for CPE programs, in part because of fabulous financial resources. In addition, I've discovered a passion for equipping gifted, motivated laypersons from a variety of traditions for caring ministry. I've even had unique opportunities to teach pas-

toral care in South America. Finally, it's been especially gratifying to work with gifted and invested colleagues through the years.

Throughout my tenures at four faith-based hospitals, including two based in a faith different from my own, my pastoral identity has remained solid. Regular worship in my local United Methodist congregation is essential to my faith and my ongoing call to serve. It keeps me grounded in the midst of the stressful, ever-changing challenges of healthcare. I entered this specialized ministry as a chaplain and teacher, but my current daily responsibilities are now far different, with the vast majority being administrative in nature. People depend upon me, so I strive to enhance their particular and important ministries. The impact of my ministry doesn't reach prophetic dimensions on a consistent basis, but in its own way I believe it is for "just such a time as this."

NOTES

- 1 Harvey Seifert, "Prophetic/Pastoral Tension in Ministry," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 963–66. This is how Seifert describes the impact of prophetic ministry.