

Trying to explain my interest in being a chaplain forces me to keep coming back to the explanation that I am interested because I was called. Whatever else can be said about the circuitous path I took to being a chaplain, I believe that it is evidence the reason I ended up where I am at is that God called me. My understanding of what it means to be called to ministry does not mean that a series of accidents or providential events are the only evidence of person being called to a specific ministry. Instead of a voice from the heavens moment a call, my call is more like a collection of interests and aspirations. A collection that the faith communities I have belonged to have seen and affirmed.

What appeals to me about chaplaincy is the chance to be with people during some of the most critical moments and events of their life. And not just be present but to serve as witness for these events. Witnessing is a fundamental act of chaplaincy because by serving as a witness a chaplain gives proof that no person however obscure and no event no matter how minor is outside of God's concern. Often, this witnessing does not affect the patient, but it might affect those caring for the patient. Sometimes the patient is not in a condition to perceive the presence of a chaplain or there are no loved ones needing support. Even in those cases, I found that a chaplain's presence is still wanted and needed and this belief is constantly acknowledged by hospital staff. On more than one occasion a hospital staffer has invited me into a situation simply because they believe God needs to be present.

Since a fundamental principle of chaplaincy is to serve all who belong to God, inevitably that means serving people who do not view God in the same way I do. In this regard I serve as a representative of a large God whose compassion is boundless and not restricted to the confines of a particular denomination or religion. Chaplaincy allows me to encounter people of different faiths, and even people of no faith, and find a way to serve them and to represent God of boundless compassion. When I worked in hospice in Georgia there were more Catholic patients than the priests could reasonably get to when needed. I had developed a good enough relationship with the priest loaned me a prayer book so someone could say the prayers in case the priest could not be present in an emergency.

I mean no disrespect to local church ministry, but I find chaplaincy appealing, in part, because it is a ministry occurring outside of the local church. I have often felt that the totality of my gifts is best suited for work in settings other than the church. Both my experience as a local church minister, and my participation as a member of a local church, have led me to believe that while I have some talents and skills that work well in a local church setting, chaplaincy allows me to use more of my skills.

In chaplaincy I am able to use my skills as a good listener to help people process what is happening to them in the hospital. I also present a quiet and nonthreatening presence to people. This allows me to deal with people who are trying to cope with a high intensity situation and also allows me to function during a time of crisis. Also my gifts and talents related to observation and memory also help me when called upon to minister during a time in crisis. These particular gifts help form a fast connection with people and help keep the human factor that is so important in medical work at the center of focus. Beyond skills that help me as an individual chaplain, I also can work well with others. This skill means that I am able to work easily with other chaplains and with members of the hospital staff.

I also feel drawn to chaplaincy because of the immediacy of the ministry. Often a chaplain is called to provide ministry in the heat of the moment. This can be at the start of life during a birth that requires more than the usual medical intervention or at the end of life. I find that being able to minister in these situations, which are often intense and stressful, feels like a fulfillment of my call. It could be that I'm most living out my call when I bring peace and lower the intensity and help contain people's anxiety. That is certainly what I often end up doing in those situations and I know that my efforts are often perceived as helpful. Perhaps it is because of my generally quiet nature or calm demeanor but I do find that I function well in these situations and often like I am living out the fulfillment of my call.

Working in a hospital setting means working with doctors, nurses, therapists and hospital staff. One important aspect of being a UCC minister is to work collaboratively with people of different sets of

expertise and gifts. Sometimes this includes collaborating with staff on an ethics issue and I served on the hospital's ethics committee for a term of two years. I also find that as a Chaplain I want to encourage staff to use their own spiritual gifts to care for patients. When I speak at the orientation of new hires, I often stress how I view all hospital jobs as the fulfillment of a person's calling. It is my belief that equipping people for their vocation is an integral part of my UCC identity and ministry. I also view doctors and nurses as being involved in an intense struggle with illness and injury. Crucial to being a chaplain is supporting those engaged in very difficult work and being there to support the medical staff forms an important part of my ministerial identity.

One final aspect of chaplaincy that feels appeals to me is the wide variety of work that can be labeled as ministry. Some days chaplaincy involves being with people during the largest crises of their lives but some days chaplaincy can involve more simple tasks like helping somebody load a devotional app onto their phone. The experience of being in a hospital, or having a loved one experience a hospitalization, can cause a person to deepen their faith as they draw on a depth they did not know they possessed. Giving people, and helping people discover, the resources they need in order to deepen their faith might be the most rewarding part of being a chaplain.

I understand chaplaincy to be the ministerial job that seeks to create church where church is needed but circumstances require that church occur in non-traditional settings. When I, as a chaplain, encounter somebody in the hospital we can form a temporary church. In that church God is present through prayer, presence, listening, or simple human connection. Chaplaincy, in my view, does not seek to replace the church but ensures that when church is most needed it is present.

The tasks of chaplaincy, and the responsibilities and identity a person takes on as a United Church of Christ minister seamlessly work together. To be a minister in the United Church of Christ is to be a representative of God's openness to all people. As a chaplain, my work is to care for all people who come into the hospital. Regardless of who that might be, how they might identify, or the beliefs regarding religion and spirituality. UCC ministers are uniquely called to minister to such people and to lead churches that minister to all people. UCC chaplains do the same in places like hospitals.

The hospital I serve is a faith-based hospital and it prides itself on focusing on the poor and underserved people of the community. I feel the UCC's focus on justice adds a depth and understanding of what it means to serve the poor and underserved. In my context, the phrase poor and underserved commonly refers to economic status of the people seeking treatment. Being a UCC minister gives me the background to minister with a more extensive understanding of just who qualifies as poor and underserved. In my hospital that person could also be the Spanish speaker, the immigrant, the mentally ill or a person identifying as LGBT. To be a UCC minister in this setting is to be the type of Chaplain who maintains an expansive understanding of who might be poor and underserved and provide spiritual care to them. The UCC maintains a view that emphasizes the comprehensiveness of God's concern. Even in an organization that strives to care for people often ignored or left behind, I believe my identity as an UCC minister is a sign of how expansive God's care for the marginalized can be.

I would not say that I work in an interfaith setting but I do work in an interdenominational setting. The hospital I serve is a Catholic hospital and like all chaplains I serve the entirety of the hospital population. I do not serve just the protestants or just the people who are members of The United Church of Christ. In this setting I represent the United Church of Christ by demonstrating the ecumenical vision of our denomination. By working with chaplains of different denominational traditions and ministering to people of differing faith traditions I represent the United Church of Christ's belief that we all belong to God.

During the entire time I've been a UCC minister, I've served as a chaplain. It is impossible for me to picture ministry in the UCC and it not include being a chaplain. My identity as a UCC minister cannot be separated from being a chaplain. When I think about how to fulfill and express what it means to be a UCC minister, I think the role that fulfills that best for me is a hospital chaplain.