

## A Progressive Christian Approach to Spiritual Care

### Carrie I. Buckner

When I attended seminary in the early 1990's, the language of spirituality was just beginning to make its way into mainstream Christianity. The eclipse of traditional religion, often marked by the phrase 'spiritual but not religious', has created an unnecessary and unhelpful cleavage between the two. As a progressive Christian, I advocate for greater collaboration between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is part of my religious identity. My religious identity and practices involve a communal dimension, whereas spirituality invokes a personal sense of all that is sacred. In order to avoid unnecessary polarizing between the individual and institutions or between 'bad' religion and 'good' spirituality, I regard myself as spiritual *and* religious. progressive Christians embrace the inclusivity of spirituality as part of their religious identity. Chaplains, spiritual directors, and field educators are religious professionals, engaging in spiritual dialogue with individuals and communities. As a professional chaplain serving in a community hospital, I draw on the language of spirituality while, at the same time, integrating religious language in meaning-making and supporting people coping with difficult life events. In spiritual care, I reclaim the religious language central to my particular Christian perspective—the language of hope, grace, peace, forgiveness, and justice. As I reflect on the 'face' of the divine, I bring to my patient/family visits these religious themes that inform my spiritual care and presence.

I am mindful of the breadth of spiritual and religious perspectives and traditions as I minister in a multi-faith clinical setting, working alongside colleagues of diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. professional chaplains often describe our work as tending to the 'spiritual and emotional' needs of patients, families, and staff, typically in a healthcare setting. In this context, I understand 'spirit' as the sacred dimension of a person—the inherent goodness, humanity, and essence of a person.

"Feelings are the language of the soul" someone once said in my hearing. When we respond to the feelings patients express, we are listening to their soul at a deep level.

While religion often connotes the practices, theology, and human made creeds of my faith tradition, spirituality connects me to the deeper values and experiences of the person of Jesus and his teachings. My spirituality and religious practices reflect the core values of Jesus' teachings (love, inclusivity, grace, justice, and forgiveness). I am also aware that people who are not religious have a rich variety of spiritual practices such as poetry reading, gardening, walking a beach, watching the sun set, and working in soup kitchens. Spirituality is at the heart of my beliefs as a progressive Christian. As I provide care for patients and family members, I am constantly assessing their spiritual and religious needs, as well as their spiritual and religious resources. What specific religious needs do they have? What are their private spiritual practices and what needs might they have to continue these practices while sick or in the hospital? What feelings do they have about themselves, their loved ones, their health, and what is happening to them? Finally, what has given them a sense of ultimate meaning and/or ultimate value in the past? What resources in each of these areas will they need to be able to nurture their own inner spirit during this time of illness?

Recently, a Chaplain Resident who serves on an adolescent mental health unit, shared a pastoral visit with a 17-year-old gay young man in supervision.

The patient was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family and asked the Chaplain “Why are you a Christian?” The Chaplain accurately assessed the adolescent’s question as a deeper longing/searching for a meaningful spiritual connection. The patient trusted the chaplain (who had visited him several times during his hospital stay and led spirituality groups as part of the recovery treatment team) and the Chaplain shared from her heart: “To me, being a Christian is about believing in the power of love. It’s about believing that there’s always room for something new—and it’s about Jesus—that’s the unique thing about Christianity, right? Jesus for me is about a different way of being in the world. He came into a system of oppression. He was about caring for and loving those that society pushed down. Not only caring for them, but joining with them to change the way that society works. That’s why I’m a Christian.” What is important about the student’s response to the question is that having specific beliefs about Jesus enhanced her commitment to attend to a range of spiritual beliefs and practices. As a progressive Christian, I cherish the sacred as part of my religious identity, spiritual practices, and beliefs while at the same time seeking to incorporate wisdom from many spiritual traditions in my work. I seek to remain spiritual *and* religious.

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