

Relationship by Example

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Most of our federal Chaplains live and work in the military, the home of a much vaunted structure of authority and responsibility called the “chain of command.” The soldier or sailor or airman is responsible to the non-commissioned officer, who is responsible to his or her officer, who is responsible to his commander, who is responsible to her commander, on up the line to the Commander in Chief.

That works very well for most of the military, but the Chaplain is responsible not only to his or her unit commander, but to another hierarchy based on responsibility to the chaplain at the next level of organization, on up through the installation chaplain to the Chief of Chaplains for each branch of service. At least for Episcopalian Chaplains, that is *further* complicated by reporting to the Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries, and ultimate responsibility, as a function of their ordination vows, to the bishop of their diocese. For those that work in hospitals and prisons, this is only made even *more* complex by the less clear-cut lines of authority in the first place. Such a complex system of interlocking, and all too often competing authority and responsibility can be source of frustration and discouragement, and on occasion, also a temptation to manipulate one hierarchy against another.

Forged as it has been in the fires of peril and battle and trauma, this multiple chain of command, responsibility and authority is perhaps the only system that can withstand those extreme pressures. The problem is that such a chain by design values rule over relationship, decree over devotion, law over love. What’s more, though it might be presumptuous to get preachy with a House of preachers’ preachers, but I think the real problem goes back to the Garden, where we traded the intimacy of relationship with our Creator for a bite of the knowledge of good and evil, a bite into right to *decide* what is good and to *decide* what is evil. And so we embraced the chains of rule and regulation instead of living in love. And so the world hasn’t been the same since Chapter 3 of Creation. And so the world is what it is, the broken place in which we live and move and have our ministry.

Of course, our ministry, even the ministry of Chaplains (or perhaps, *especially* Chaplains), is all about the fact that the Creator did not leave it that way. God himself became human and pointed out that the law is only a dim substitute for the love that sang the world into being. The very essence of Being became one of us to show how perfect freedom and perfect submission are bound up in each other. Love itself came wrapped in swaddling clothes, and walked the earth, and taught the Kingdom, and carried children, and fed the hungry, and healed the sick and the lame and the sightless, and took the accumulated failure of the law and nailed it to the Cross.

The Priests of the Church who have offered their lives for service as Chaplains are often surrounded by some of the most obvious examples of the world’s brokenness. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that in spite of their fervent desire to do otherwise, these dedicated professionals fall back on the chains of structure and authority, regardless how antithetical those structures may be to the Gospel light of love.

The question asks that I “illustrate with at least one example” from my “professional experience.” Like all of us, I have hundreds of examples to illustrate the value of choosing to build relationships over sticking to rules and rights. (In the interest of full disclosure, of course, I also have hundreds of examples to illustrate the folly of following the contrary path.) The most significant example from my ministry is the story that is still being written in my life and in the life of the parish I serve.

When I was called to Trinity Church, Columbus, it was at a particularly contentious time in the life of the Parish. In the wake of General Convention 2003, the previous rector had encouraged the Parish to think about the possibility of leaving the Episcopal Church and following one of the recent splinters. The rhetoric that he used appealed to what was “right.” The rhetoric that the opposition used appealed to what was “right.” And in the middle were a lot of people wondering why none of the conversation was about their relationship with Christ and with each other.

My task has been to reach out to all those who stayed and to as many of the disaffected as will let me to tell them again and again that I love them and that the Church loves them, and that we are called

together in spite of and because of our differences to be the love and the light of Christ to the world around us. Though Trinity is once again a vibrant part of our community and an active part of the life of the Diocese of Atlanta, you will have to ask my Bishop and others how successful that has looked from the outside. I can only tell you that from the inside, my choice for relationship over regulation, love over law has borne fruit in my own heart and in the way our Parishioners respond to one another – even in times of stress.

To bring that gift to the thousands of Episcopalians in federal service will first be the patient work of establishing relationships with the nearly 150 Chaplains in the system. In a world where even a battlefield is only a Skype away, technology will help but cannot take the place of face to face interaction. The relationship between the Bishop Suffragan and the Chaplain must, however, be subordinate to the relationship between the Chaplain and her or his own bishop. By nurturing relationships with the House of Bishops, the Bishop Suffragan has the opportunity to become the line of communication when the ministry of Chaplains in federal service extends across jurisdictions. Likewise, the Bishop for Federal Ministries is suffragan to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and communication between the two is of ultimate importance, regardless of geographic or temporal complications.

Finally, like any other bishop of the Church, the Bishop Suffragan serves as a personal example to those he or she is called to serve. Over the years, I have had the privilege of bringing the Good News of Christ's peace and joy to friends and colleagues, lay and ordained, in worship, in pastoral care, and even in business meetings. Though it is not always the easiest, the most expedient, or least costly choice, I try to live my life, professionally and personally, remembering that my worth comes from Christ's love for me and that joy is just a natural consequence. My theme has always been that of the song most of us learned as two-year-olds, "Jesus loves me." As I am fond of telling my Parish, I love being a Christian, I dearly love being a Priest, and I love being *their* Priest. If the Holy Spirit calls me to this new opportunity, it is that example of relationship that I will bring to the Chaplains and the Episcopalians in our nation's federal service.