

We Love to Tell the Story

A Cardiologist Change of Heart

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“It was the Platt Street marquee.” This was my response to the question at the new member meeting: What brought you to HPUMC? Unlike many that day who cited a neighbor’s invitation or an internet search, I was drawn in by the title of one of Jim Harnish’s sermon entitled “The Stone Heart.” As a cardiologist, I was intrigued. It got me in the door. I’ve returned almost every Sunday since that day in 1995.

Jim’s sermon that day was about life, the return to good health after a serious cardiac diagnosis. My first real involvement, on the other hand, was about death. Following a sermon about stewardship, a fine pamphlet on end-of-life planning was distributed for the congregation to review and complete. Details of estate planning, funeral service plans, and bequests could be specified. It was a complete document with one serious deficiency: no discussion of the medical complexities surrounding end-of-life. I suggested and later drafted language for parishioners to address such issues as palliative care and hospice.

This was the beginning of my journey in end-of-life care. At Duke Divinity School event I learned that “death is a spiritual event with medical implications.” In my professional life, dying was a medical event complicated by complex medical challenges. Thinking of dying as a spiritual process made me aware of my need to develop a new language to complement the science of medicine.

Rev. Bernie Lieving, former Army chaplain, knew of my desire to have a more pastoral approach to people with serious or life-threatening illnesses. He sent Rev. William Baugh to meet with me. Bill was the director of pastoral care at Tampa General Hospital. Bill suggested that I enroll in a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Tampa General. After 9 months of education and clinical experience as a chaplain, I was convinced that I needed advanced education in theology to be most effective in caring for both the spiritual and medical realities of end-of-life care.

The pastoral staff at HPUMC strongly supported my plan to enroll in the Master of Divinity program at Duke Divinity School. I received a broad education in church history, scripture, and ethics. Field education for 3 months in South Africa provided further experience in the pastoral care required when the population’s death rate is excessive due to a lethal infectious disease. Being present with the dying was the most powerful “therapeutic” available. This experience would prove to be fundamental as I transitioned from a graduate student back to medicine.

Most of my classmates were destined for ordained ministry. My path was to combine the spiritual with the medical. On return to Tampa and again in the pews at HPUMC, I received additional medical training in palliative care and hospice. I now felt I could deal effectively with the spiritual aspects of end-of-life as well as the medical. I was employed in a local hospice organization but also met with members of the congregation who had similar needs. I was an active member of the Congregational Care Team led by Rev. Sally Campbell-Evans addressing

these complex issues representing the church rather than a medical organization. Both ways of meeting with people with serious health issues were extremely meaningful.

But there was one more experience I had not anticipated. In 2014 an opportunity arose to teach premed students about medical ethics. Although not a class focusing on religion, the cases often touched on a spiritual reality such as gene therapy, extreme prematurity, and brain death. Without a firm background in philosophy, my approach to ethics grew largely from my experiences as a practicing physician. As the course developed, the focus of my teaching centered more and more on virtue ethics. Empathy, compassion, truthfulness, trustworthiness, humility, and integrity were required in all of the complex cases discussed. So, by highlighting these virtues as applied to a physician's decision-making, I was describing a Christ-like way of being.

Hyde Park United Methodist has had a huge impact on my life: professional, spiritual, and personal. I am incredibly grateful for the encouragement and support offered by the pastoral staff as well as many of those in the pews.