

CHALLENGES AS BLACK CHAPLAINS

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I think that it is probably fair to say that black chaplains, male and female, probably face many of the same challenges as chaplains from other racial and cultural backgrounds. However, it has been well documented that, because we have darker skin or complexions, Black Americans also face an increased likelihood of experiencing racial discrimination and/or institutional racism at some point during their lifetime (if not at various times throughout). In addressing this *elephant in the room* that has likely been a very painful experience for many (including this writer), it is also interesting to note that no occupation is excluded – including clergy persons or chaplains.

Challenges common to all chaplains (as well as many others who are not chaplains) tend to be issues such as the struggle of balancing, work, family/relationships, worship (spiritual fitness), exercise (physical fitness), and making time for *self-care* (getting enough sleep, taking necessary breaks during the workday, eating a balanced diet, taking vacations), which includes keeping up with your own medical and dental appointments etc.

Additionally, outside the workplace in our respective religious communities, chaplains may be called upon to provide assistance and/or support in addressing certain veteran concerns or issues which may include the stigma of mental health and climbing veteran suicide rate (currently estimated to be 22 a day). In this, the challenge might also be in how to best juggling your schedule to make time to actively participate in the VA's (somewhat new) *Community Clergy Training Program (CCTP)* and the challenge of working to make this program available to your local church, temple, synagogue, or other place of worship.

Through the *Mental Health Integration of Chaplain Services (MHICS)* training course (which I completed in 2016), I have become more aware of the challenge of better understanding the importance of being able to document what it is that we do as chaplains, or what happens from a scientific perspective, when we provide various types of spiritual care and counseling to a veteran. Research itself can be challenging and hard work, but can lead to scientific data known as *Evidence-Based Outcomes* that not only validate the importance of the spiritual dimension in holistic healthcare but also highlights the impact of what cannot be seen (spiritual realm) but can often be observed through changes in affect and provided through non-verbal body language and/or verbal remarks from veterans. In this, that challenge is not to become chaplain scientists, but simply to use this tool to allow research to inform or provide scientific data that can often help provide better understanding of what is unseen and largely not fully understood.

This is the challenge of becoming *Research Informed* as chaplains. Why do it? Spiritual Care research can lead to our being able to provide Continuous Improvement of existing spiritual care and counseling methods that promote Spiritual Resiliency and *Human Flourishing* that may help struggling veterans and active duty personnel to get unstuck and moving forward in their goals of therapy. This may also lead to a greater sense of holistic well-being and increased overall satisfaction with the quality of healthcare received. Additionally, through spiritual care application of *Evidence-Based* approaches used by other healthcare disciplines, developing *Research Literacy*, and becoming more *Research Informed* in our interdisciplinary role, chaplains would likely build stronger bridges of understanding and trust between the other healthcare disciplines. This greater understanding and growing rapport could also lead to the challenge of chaplains taking a more vital role in better addressing the many spiritual aspects of the *Dimensional Problem* of known as *Moral Injury*.

Lastly, as a retired Navy Chaplain, former Hospice Chaplain, and current Mental Health Chaplain, I have met several chaplains who have positively influenced the manner in which I lovingly approach my work as a chaplain. One that challenged me and touched my heart was Chaplain Thomas H. McPhatter, D.D., CAPT, CHC, USN (Ret.). In January 1993, Chaplain McPhatter published a book that summarized his lifelong journey of struggles and challenges titled, *Caught In The Middle, A Dichotomy Of An African American Man (They Called Him Troublemaker) - A Historical Autobiography of Leadership*. Chaplain McPhatter (affectionately known to those who knew him best as *Mac*), concludes his 452-page book which chapter forty-six, *Eye on the Prize*, in which he stated that he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and that his "career as a citizen soldier" was now over.

In concluding his book, Chaplain McPhatter renders his final exhortation (or challenge) by saying "To you who remain, continue the war for justice and peace. Never shirk or dodge a challenge, for the joy is more in the battle than in the victory. In the battle, you never feel alone, but loneliness sometimes accompanies victory, for God does not need victories. He is Victory."