



**A PROSPECTIVE  
RESIDENT ASKS,**  
“Since I am not a  
member of your  
faith, will I be  
uncomfortable  
living here?”

**A BOARD  
MEMBER QUERIES,**  
“What are you doing  
to preserve the  
faith identity of our  
organization?”

**A HOUSEKEEPER  
WORRIES,**  
“Will this facility  
try to convert me  
to its religion?”

**A NURSE  
APPLICANT  
WONDERS,**  
“Can my work life  
and my faith life  
come together if  
I work here?”



# WELCOMING ALL, HONORING THEIR BELIEFS

## Sharing the ‘Deep Story’ of God’s Presence

BY JULIE TROCCHIO, M.S., RN

**F**aith-based providers of services for the aging are engaged in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, we want to continue the religious tradition and identity of our founders and sponsors. On the other hand, we want to be welcoming to persons of all faiths in our increasingly diverse organizations and communities.

We are responsible for honoring the faith traditions of our organizations and, at the same time, for respecting the diverse faiths or secular perspectives represented among our staff members and those we serve, our residents and clients. Regardless of our own affiliations, we must find ways for appropriately honoring the community of faith that serves as the “moral owner” of the organization, integrating that intent in our mission, values, service and culture.

Although an organization’s faith tradition may be clear — Catholic, Jewish, Adventist, Mennonite, Lutheran, for example — it is sure to employ individuals and serve consumers who represent a wide variety of faiths or worldviews. What’s

more, we all interact with other groups that hold many different perspectives.

The point is, our organizations serve in a very diverse and pluralistic world.

### REVEALING GOD’S GRACE

Our organizations work at integrating the commitment to their faiths with the demand for effectiveness. Sometimes this is called the tension between mission and margin. However, a more complex challenge may be integrating our core values into everyday practices as we work with diverse populations.

Put another way, faith-based providers of homes and services for the aged have a call to

### “IT IS WRITTEN IN THEIR WORDS”

**T**o create this story, Julie Trocchio, CHA’s senior director, community benefit and continuing care ministries, drew on material from four presenters at an American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging conference earlier this year. “I volunteered to put their thoughts together in an article,” Trocchio said. “It is written in their words.”

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**An elderly woman was nearing death and had not really eaten for days. When a visitor came, a nursing assistant asked, “Can I get you some tea or ginger ale?” The dying woman wished she could have some 7Up. “When my mother had company, she would serve 7Up and Social Tea cookies,” she said. Unfortunately, the nursing home did not have 7Up. The next day, the visitor returned and the nursing assistant brought in a tray of 7Up and Social Teas, which she had purchased herself. “Oh, I feel like I am in my mother’s home,” said the dying woman, smiling for the first time in a long time.**

SR. PATRICIA TALONE, RSM

“honor thy father and thy mother.” However, we also have calls to honor the faith traditions of our organizations and to honor the faith perspectives of our employees and of those we serve.

Faith traditions express themselves in concrete ways. The Catholic faith is sacramental, an outward sign of God’s presence. In some faiths, it is the word that expresses God’s love and presence. In others, it might be a touch or gesture, something that acknowledges God’s presence in the world and in each other.

We all share in what theologians call the “deep story” of God’s loving presence and commitment to each of God’s creatures. That sense is within each of us, easily recognizable, but it often eludes language and expression. When we recognize it, we are struck deeply by the realization of the glory in our humanity and a sense of God’s presence.

It is poignant that many of our residents and clients in long-term care may not be able to express their realization of God’s presence, and it is

particularly important that our daily care remind them — and ourselves — that they share in the same deep story we do.

Our faith commitments, beliefs and practices and our stated values come to concrete expression in the things that we do every day for our residents:

- Feeding the patient who is having difficulty swallowing
- Bathing and dressing the resident
- Putting cream on the skin of a frail, elderly person
- Washing the hair, or shaving a resident
- Covering the knees of a patient in a hospital gown
- Taking a moment to sit and listen to a resident share his or her story

Each of these actions can be interpreted as carrying out the Gospel message: *“I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you comforted me.”* (Matthew 25:36). They are moments when God’s life and grace breaks through the everyday activities to reveal the power of God’s presence.

All of our organizations have statements of mission and values. Most of these speak in some way about respect for those we serve and recognition of their dignity, especially in the face of sickness, weakness and diminution. Each person within our organizations — security guard, nutritionist, certified nursing assistant, physical or occupational therapist, nurse, physician, administrator — is engaged in carrying out the values and mission of the organization in the work they do. In doing so,

**Queenie, a Baptist, was referred to the Hebrew Home for post-hospital physical therapy. When she called to set up her first appointment, she said cheerily into the phone, “Hello, Jesus loves you.” Just as cheerily, the Hebrew Home receptionist responded, “We love you too.”**

BONNIE GAUTHIER



they become part of each resident's sacred story. Our employees need to know that they are a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. The work that they do has significance far beyond what they imagine.

### HONORING DIVERSITY

In addition to honoring our own faith traditions, we can honor others, in everyday, practical ways that are held by people within our organizations. We need to be intentional and deliberate about it to make sure it happens. Here are some ways that faith-based, long-term care organizations can support diverse beliefs and traditions:

- Senior management and administrators can model and encourage an environment that embraces diversity. For example, they can set up diversity teams; arrange for awards for those who live diversity and be proactive in accommodating individuals' religious/spiritual needs.

- Pastoral care directors and chaplains can foster respect for and honor diversity. They can arrange for services and religious rituals for faiths represented in the organization, reach out to families and other important people in residents' lives and make connections to the larger faith communities outside the walls of the organization.

- The board of trustees can support the various faith communities within the organization. They can foster attendance and participation in faith services, and they can encourage use of the facility as a site for family and community worship, observances and rituals.

- Staff members can be encouraged to keep connected to their spiritual life. It sends a strong message of respect when organizations accommodate schedules so staff can adhere to faith observances in their communities. It is also a mark of respect to encourage staff to participate in the rituals and celebrations of their traditions while in the facility.

### BALANCING THE PIECES

As faith-based organizations, we can balance living out the distinctive perspectives of our sponsors' faith communities with honoring the individual faith or secular perspectives of those we serve and our staff members. This may be a particular challenge for boards who feel responsible for continuing the mission, values and traditions of the faith organization. Therefore, we need to help them understand both the balancing act and how to manage it.

**A former staff member came back to visit his employer at a Lutheran nursing home. "I really liked working here, but I regret that you never told me your Jesus story," he said. "I realize now that it was a big part of who you were as caregivers, but I never really understood. Even though I am not Christian, I would have liked to know. It would have made me think how my faith was related to what I was doing."**

JILL A. SCHUMANN

It isn't simple. Possible complicating factors: the uniqueness and nature of our faith traditions, the relationships we have with our congregations and the proportion of people among staff and those we serve who share our faith. However, these challenges and differences make faith-based organizations interesting and distinctive. We enrich our organizations as we wrestle with these complex intersections.

Fearing they may cause offense over matters of faith and diversity, many organizations err on the side of caution. Paradoxically, by claiming organizational values and traditions clearly, we allow and encourage others on staff — and those we serve — to do the same. We should recognize that the faith of our organizations can motivate us to be hospitable and perhaps invitational rather than imperialistic. Consider the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous, which attracts persons to its philosophy but does not seek to promote it.

When we tell staff members and residents our story and the traditions of our faith, we encourage them to share their stories and traditions and to see their faith in the everyday care and services they provide. At the same time, the faith perspectives they bring with them to their work help us live out our mission and values.

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