

CHA: An Intentional Community

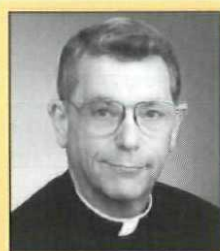
BY REV. MICHAEL D. PLACE, STD

In my last column I reflected on the need for us to develop an explicit shared vision of the future of the Catholic health ministry. I also proposed some ideas that could serve as a catalyst for a conversation about such a vision within CHA and among others who participate in the ministry. I stressed that this vision should utilize existing resources such as the 1988 report by the Commission on Catholic Health Care Ministry, "Catholic Health Ministry: A New Vision for a New Century," and result from an inclusive process of discussion so that it truly could be said to be *our* vision.

In this column I would like to build on those thoughts and think for a while about CHA. More specifically, How is it that we should understand ourselves? Or, to borrow from the world of psychology, what is our self-concept?

I began this process of reflection when I was asked by members of the search committee to consider being a candidate for president of CHA. I needed an internal framework to guide my answers to interview questions. The tentative thoughts I developed at that time came to mind when your executive committee asked me to prepare a presentation for the February board retreat on my goals as CEO for the next years. These, in a sense, were to be the goals of the office of president as it serves CHA, as distinguished from the goals for the association, which are expressed in CHA's Strategic Plan. The plan, as amended and developed by the board, continues to guide the association's work.

Once again I felt I needed a framework, a living sense of



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CHA, that was able to incarnate the healing mission of Jesus and the Church to serve and to transform. This framework would be able to actualize the vision of the ministry with its core elements and vehicles that I mentioned in my last column (see **Box**; also see *HP*, March-April, p. 9). And it was clear to me, as it is to your board, that the image of CHA as an association, while helpful in understanding some of CHA's activities, is not an adequate framework for comprehending the richness and diversity that is CHA.

But how is it that we can think about CHA? It seems to me that to answer that question, we have to turn to our heritage as a people of faith. CHA exists to serve a living, vital, essential ministry of the Church. And who are we as Church? We are a communion, a people drawn together in the name of the Lord by the power of the Spirit. Ours is a oneness that draws together without eliminating diversity. We are a coming together that is more than the sum of its parts. We are a community of faith that, as the ancient creeds

remind us, is also holy, Catholic, and apostolic.

This communion, this community, is not focused inward. Rather, it is constituted by the Spirit to be in mission: to be carrying forward Christ's threefold mission of proclamation, sanctification, and transforming service. We work with the Spirit to realize the coming of God's reign.

Though Church is a mystery whose nature can never be fully or adequately expressed by any words or categories, fundamentally it is a communion in mission. A communion in mission that has been constituted in a certain manner and is accountable to the living tradition it



serves. A communion in mission that in a very real sense can be said to be sacramental: This human gathering in time is the outward sign that makes present in a tangible way God's healing and transforming love.

If these words—"communion," "mission," "sacrament"—speak to us about Church, what do they say about CHA? I think they tell us why we really are more than an association. If CHA serves a ministry of the Church, then in a certain sense it must be like Church. Or to say it a bit differently, the analogue for CHA's self-understanding comes not from the business of healthcare but from the ministry of healing.

If my premise is correct, then I believe a concept which some in religious life have found helpful (though not without some difficulty) might serve as an image for our self-understanding: *intentional community*.

Let's try it on for size: CHA as an intentional community. "Community" in that it is a place we come to be who we are: a people carrying forward the ministry of the Lord Jesus. And in coming together, we become more than who we are individually. "Intentional" in that, unlike Church itself, or the formal commissioning that is ministry, we are not formally called as CHA, but intentionally choose to come together for the sake of the ministry.

And what would be some of the results if we chose to think this way? What might we experience if we lived as an intentional community? We would be gathered in community to serve the ministry of Christ. In serving that ministry, we would be able to do more together. We would be animated by the Spirit to bring about change. The combining of our strengths and wisdom would allow us to act more effectively on behalf of the common good and move toward the realization of the kingdom of God on earth.

I suggest that the image of intentional community constituted by those who carry on Jesus' healing ministry would offer CHA the opportunity to become a very special place. As I think about that potential, I would envision CHA as a common table around which stakeholders in the ministry can network; experience solidarity; and think collectively about issues of theology, mission, and ethics. CHA can be a "safe harbor"—a place where members can dream about how business and mission can intersect in ways that benefit our communities. In a time of rapid change, CHA can be a catalyst for change characterized by integrity. CHA can facilitate members' common understanding of their identity.

As I mentioned, I shared these thoughts with

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TOWARD A VISION FOR THE MINISTRY

COMMON ELEMENTS

- Market decisions informed by ministry values
- Care focused on the whole person
- Expanded care for the poor
- Services responsive to people and communities
- Local delivery shaped by values-based strategies
- Legislation shaped by advocacy

CORE VEHICLES

- Adapted forms of sponsorship
- Committed and informed leaders
- Effective partnerships
 - within Catholic healthcare
 - with other ministries
 - with physicians
 - with other organizations
- Integrated care continuum
- Advocacy

your board and also presented them at regional meetings with system chief executives and system sponsors. In each instance the presentation elicited a lively and, by and large, supportive discussion. In the end, however, the proposal is intended to stimulate thought and conversation.

I invite you to join in that conversation. If CHA is more than an association, what is it? Please let me know your thoughts. □

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CHA'S ROLE AS AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

- Bedrock for identity in communion with sponsors and other leaders
- Common table for stakeholders; network for communication and collaboration
- Collective "think tank" on mission, theology, and ethics
- A "safe harbor" for dreaming about the intersection of mission and business
 - Catalyst for change with integrity
 - Environment in which various layers of leadership experience a sense of solidarity in a ministry greater than their institutional systems
 - Collective voice for social transformation and advocacy