

**F**or me, one of the great joys of working in Catholic health care for the past 20 years is the slow but deliberate progress we have made in understanding the meaning of *mission*. One thing I've learned is that mission and a mission statement, though related, are distinctly different. The differences between them hint at the differences between mission and ministry.

The mission statement, like ministry, expresses what it is that we *do*. We "care for those who are poor or vulnerable"; we "provide comfort to those who suffer"; we "improve the health of our communities"; we "steward resources." All of these phrases call us to action; they represent ministry at its best. Ministry is found in the "doing."

#### MISSION IS WHO WE ARE

Mission, on the other hand, goes much deeper. It expresses who we *are*. The more we are in touch with who we are, the better the results from what we *do*. Mission is about "being". It points to our essence, to why we exist as Catholic health care—to be the healing presence of our God to one another. One has to refer only to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians to verify this. "You *are* the Body of Christ, each of you with a part to play in the whole" (1 Cor 12:27).

For those of us who work in Catholic health care, remembering that we are God's healing presence to one another is what makes us uniquely different from others who engage in health care. Mission gives us the answer to the questions *why* we care for those who are poor, *why* we provide comfort to those who suffer, *why* we improve the health of our communities, and *why* we steward our resources.

All one has to do is listen to the stories of our sponsors. There is no question that the women religious who created our organizations saw a need and found ways to meet the need; but their purpose was much deeper than that. Filling the need was how they were able to bring God to the people. It was their own willingness to be God's healing presence that brought about healing, and even the occasional cure.

#### MAKING THE INTANGIBLE MORE REAL

For those of us who are entrusted with this sacred

## What's in a Word?

*A Prism Makes a Good Metaphor for Our Understanding of "Mission"*

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legacy, it is our responsibility to learn and be formed. We walk on the shoulders of great women and men. We cannot and must not let them down.

For many of us, the attraction to Catholic health care is something we find difficult to express—it is both compelling and intangible. One could say that our enriched understanding of mission is a meager but critical way of making the intangible more real. Mission is the real purpose for Catholic health care. Simply put, it is who we are that compels us to do what we do.

Our employees experience God's presence in the way we treat them. Our patients and residents experience God's healing presence in our attention to their needs. The communities we serve experience God's healing presence when we look for ways to improve the health status of those communities, and so on and so on.

Such an enriched understanding calls for a new image of mission. There are models that show mission as the center of a circle or as the base of a triangle. Each model is an attempt to better explain mission. Let me offer a model of my own.

### MISSION IS LIKE A PRISM

Have you ever watched light pass through a prism? One single ray disperses into the colors of the rainbow. Those of us who are not science majors stand in awe before such a sight. However, the scientific world has an explanation. As Isaac Newton discovered, more than 300 years ago, when a beam of white light is refracted by a glass prism, it is dispersed into beams of different colors.

For me, the prism has become *the* image for mission. Everything about a prism—from its beauty to its ability to transform light—describes the role of mission in Catholic health care. No

matter where one places the prism, the light passing through has a different reflection. Each facet represents a different aspect of our ministry. When mission plays a critical role in our work, we know—no matter what particular work we do—that the work has been made sacred and changed to reflect the mission experience.

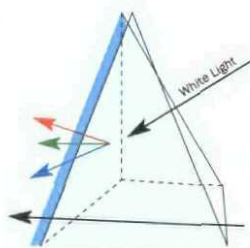
As the individual pieces of our ministry are touched by mission, they are changed as the beam of white light is changed into the colors of the rainbow. Each time we use mission as the reason for why we do things, what we do results in our being more faithful, more true to who we say we are.

The prism image helps us understand that mission is essential to the future of Catholic health care. Mission is not just one of the elements for discussion. It is why we have the discussion in the first place.

Financial, clinical, or administrative decisions; the planning process; physician issues; layoffs or growth spurts—all these, when “passed through” the mission prism, are bound to result in better, more informed decisions, and made sacred because they have been “touched” by mission. The beauty of the prism is that it reflects beyond itself. The role of mission is much the same.

The decisions we make will not be the same as those of our founders, nor should they be. The critical thing is that we recognize our responsibility as bearers of this precious legacy. Because mission is our motivation, our mission statements “reflect” what we are called to do.

Each time we bring something new “to the table,” something that can be identified as a way to be God's healing presence, we, along with our sponsors, can be sure that the legacy is in good hands. ■



## SUMMARY

An organization's mission and mission statement are distinctly different, though intimately related. A mission statement expresses what we do. Our mission expresses who we are. Although a mission statement's concept is usually easy to understand, the intangible idea of mission is often difficult to grasp.

Many images have been used to illustrate an organiza-

tion's mission; however, one image stands out above the rest: the prism. No matter where one places the prism, the light passing through has a different reflection. Each facet represents a different aspect of our ministry. When mission plays a critical role in our work, we know—no matter what particular work we do—that the work has been made sacred and changed to reflect the mission experience.

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