Being a Chaplain: Call, Conversation, and Charity

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Introduction[1]

To be a chaplain is to be a clergyperson who is officially attached to a social institution that usually is not the church. Some chaplains serve in the Army, some the Navy; some work in the prison system; others work in a counseling center; and others work in a medical institution, an educational setting, or even the corporate or business world. As a person participating in the formation of the next generation of clergy, I pray that some of the students in my class will receive the call to become a chaplain, for chaplaincy is a core ministry of the church of Christ.

Chaplains, however, often find themselves alienated from the settings they serve. By definition, chaplains find themselves in a position of not belonging, a resident alien, and a guest in someone else's home. Often, before chaplains can create space for others to grow (emotionally, relationally, and spiritually), they have to create space for their ministries and for themselves. Rarely will the institutions in which chaplains serve create space for them in ways that answer to no other agenda but the establishing of God's reign on earth. Thus, working constantly towards belonging and resisting to remain on the outside is something chaplains need to keep in the forefront of their conversations, their thoughts, their actions, and their prayers.

Ironically, this truth about the isolation chaplains often experience in the contexts they serve is also true of their relationship with their brothers and sisters in the church of Christ. There too, chaplains frequently find themselves on the outside, experiencing the painful awareness that they do not belong and often are not invited to belong. Whether the feeling of not belonging is intrapsychic (as I will shortly argue) or due to the effects of church politics, chaplains moving on the periphery of church life affects the church of Jesus Christ adversely.

This essay invites its readers into an inner dialogue with their own call to the ministry, even as it beckons them to envision engaging the church in new and creative ways. I argue that chaplains are important to the church of Christ for at least three reasons. First, the church will not be able to understand the full meaning of what it means to be called to the ministry of Word and sacrament without engaging chaplains in this regard. Second, I argue that chaplains can teach the church the very important art of having a conversation. The Protestant faith's identity of proclamation is so secure that Protestant churches often do not recognize that they lack the basic skill of conversing, especially about difficult topics. Lastly, I argue that the church of Christ needs chaplains to teach it the true meaning of charity, which I see as the essence of incarnational ministry. Without chaplains, the church might never discover the true meaning of what it means to be Christ's compassionate hands and feet here on earth. I want to be as bold as to say that, without chaplains, the church might not discover the true meaning of loving our neighbors with the unconditional love of Christ.

First, then, the church needs chaplains to understand the meaning of calling or vocation.

The Call to Enter the Ministry

Ever since Moses heard the call from God summoning him to be the person to lead God's people out of Egypt (Exodus 3), receiving the call from God to enter the ministry has been an exhilarating and often tumultuously discomforting experience. To God's call, Moses at first responded with disbelief and from a deep sense of insecurity. Moses, with countless numbers of persons in the history of Israel and the Church of Jesus Christ, can witness that the call from God is both a safe shelter to find solace in and a dangerous path exposing one's vulnerabilities as one is invited into a bigger reality.

Writing on the call to the ministry, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr distinguished between four kinds of call that need to remain in dynamic tension with one another. The first call is the *call to be a Christian,* which comes to all believers. This is the call of faithful discipleship of Jesus Christ. The second call Niebuhr identified is *the secret call,* "that inner persuasion or experience whereby a person feels himself [or herself] directly summoned or invited by God to take up the work of ministry."[2] People speak of this deeply private call in terms of "wrestling with the call," "running from the call," "fighting the call," and ultimately, "surrendering to the call." One thinks of biblical figures such as Moses, Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6), Peter (John 21:15), Paul (Acts 9), and others. The third call is the *providential call,* referring to that ministry that best supports one's gifts, graces, and temperament. The providential call implies that not all who receive the secret call will be effective as ministers of Word and sacrament, whether as a pastor of a congregation or as a pastor in specialized ministry. The fourth call Niebuhr identified is the *ecclesiastical call*. This call is the summons and invitation of a gospel community to engage in the work of ministry. It has a communal character, where a body of believers affirms a person who received the call to enter the ministry.

Etymologically, calling comes from the Latin word *vocare*. Hence the close relationship between the words calling and vocation. *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows two primary meanings for the word calling. First, "the summoning or inviting into a spiritual office or to the pastorate of a church," and second, "to call up a memory of the past," as in evoking a memory.[3] This double meaning of call "weirds life," as Calvin—from Calvin and Hobbes fame—would argue.[4] Calling implies not only a visionary look to the future, but also a careful look into one's past. It requires of one to call on one's self, even as one is called by God and called by a faith community. Calling requires discernment or "sober judgment," to use the apostle Paul's charge to the Romans (Rom. 12:3).

Discernment of call is a well-established Christian tradition. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), a contemporary to Augustine, expressed much concern regarding the men who entered the ministry. He used the unflattering metaphor of a disease to describe some ministers:

> We are no longer able to counsel those who are under our guidance, because we ourselves are possessed with the same fever as they. We, who are appointed by God to heal others, need the physician ourselves. What further hope of recovery is there left, when even the very physicians need the healing hand of others? . . . On the Priesthood: Tell me, where do you think all the disorders in the churches originate? I think their origin is in the careless and random way in which the prelates are chosen and appointed. [5]

Chrysostom's view were later echoed by the church father John Climacus (c. 570-649), who wrote in his book, *To the Shepherd,* that some shepherds are wolves amongst the sheep, "agitating" and "destroying" souls.[6] His assessment was that these pastors engaged in such destructive acts because their own souls were agitated and destroyed. The Reformed tradition followed this dialectic view of self and of call. John Calvin's famous dictum that knowledge of God and knowledge of self follows the thoughts of Chrysostom and Climacus. "Nearly all the true and sound wisdom we possess . . . ," wrote Calvin in the opening lines of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."[7] He continues: "For who in the world would not gladly remain as he is . . . as long as he does not know himself, that is, while content with his own gifts, and either ignorant or unmindful of his own misery?"[8] The self-knowledge that Calvin sought—making knowledge of God possible—stretches much further than the categories of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, as can be seen in Calvin's interest in education. The way he structured the primary schools in Geneva suggests that he saw a person holistically, requiring physical exercise from his students and forbidding excessive physical punishment from school principals.

The Reformed tradition has always made discernment between the personal and the ecclesiastical natures of the call to ministry an important task. The Presbyterian theologian, Seward Hiltner (1909-1984), wrote in his classic work, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (1958):

> We say that no [person] can have all the qualities in the needed degree. No shepherd can be perfectly understanding, accepting, wise, tender and loving. But recognition of one's own biases, ambiguities, and inadequacies can go a long way toward making one available to others in need. The shepherd need not be perfect. But the shepherd does need a certain kind of attitude toward [his or her] imperfection and inadequacy.[9]

In the mind of Hiltner, there are pastors who are not "available to others in need." It is ironic that pastors, many of whom are "always" available, might not be as available as they thought. Recognizing one's biases, ambiguities, and inadequacies is an important step as one wants to become available to others. But recognition is only the first step in keeping biases, ambiguities, and inadequacies from impinging on a minister's ministry. Cognitive knowledge is not the same as the emotional knowledge needed before one can be available for another person. A contemporary theologian who calls on ministers and prospective ministers to gain emotional knowledge about themselves is the African American pastoral theologian, Edward Wimberly.

In his book, *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers* (1997), Wimberly finds that one is called to enter the ministry by God *and* by one's family! What at first sounds blasphemous ends up being congruent with how Christians through the ages have discerned the call people receive from God to enter the ministry. Wimberly, an ordained pastor trained as a family therapist and pastoral counselor, states that in his work with pastors around their call to the ministry a dynamic tension surfaces. "Questions emerge from them," he writes, "whether their call to ministry has clearly come from God or from their families of origin."[10] These pastors, in calling upon themselves, soon realize that their families gave them skills that seemingly prepared them for the ministry, but that leads them into being unfulfilled and not effective in their ministries. Soon, the pastors realize that the "gifts" they received from their families became their Achilles' heel.

I agree with Wimberly that chaplains receive their call to the ministry from God *and* from their families. Congruent with the nature of paradoxical statements, the tension in this statement cannot be resolved. If someone would say that she is called to the ministry only by God and not also through the relationships that formed her, it is a dangerous statement. And if someone would say that he called himself to the ministry, it would be ludicrous and reflecting of utmost narcissism.

To give a concrete example of how families of origin call their sons and daughters to the ministry, Wimberly identifies powerful personal and family dynamics, which he calls myths. Myths are those "beliefs and convictions that people have about themselves, their relationships with others, their roles in life, and their ministry."[11] These myths, imbedded in the stories of our lives, play an important role in the lives of people who receive Niebuhr's secret call. The following myths, which can be understood as ways that one learned how to be in relationship with others (including with God), are especially common to chaplains:[12]

- *The myth of rejection*: The belief that one is unwelcome and unwanted in life.
- *The myth of powerlessness*: The belief that one has no real power or agency to affect one's own life, the lives of others, or the world.
- *The myth of the loner and of sole responsibility*: The myth that it happens best when one does it oneself often functions as a defense against one's fear of emotional intimacy.
- *The myth of the good girl*: This myth tells women to be good and gracious at all times, thereby disowning especially their agency and anger.
- *The myth of invulnerability*: This myth does not allow one to show one's vulnerability.
- *The myth of self-sacrifice and unlovability*: The belief that if one sacrifices oneself, one will be loved.
- *The myth of the savior or the family mediator*: One's role in life is to bring peace and tranquility to strained relationships.
- *The myth of premature adult responsibility*: One lives with the memory of having been a parentified child, taking on age-inappropriate emotional responsibility.

It seems that the vision of being in the ministry is accompanied by the illusion that the painful and grandiose memories pastors carry will be healed or honored. There is an unspoken and often unconscious complementary connection between the myths and ministry. Ministry is a place where one is accepted because of one's role, or where one is expected to be the one who can make a difference in the context one serves. Painful is the awareness that the wounds chaplains have received in their families of origin and the defenses they developed to protect them against the wounds follow them into ministry. There, they are often re-wounded, leaving them to be either walking wounded or wounded healers, pending on how well they have called upon themselves. To quote Wimberly: "[The metaphor of the walking wounded] characterizes those of us who deny our vulnerability and woundedness and who, consequently, walk around as wounded people seeking to help others. Instead of achieving good enough empathy, we become dangerous to ourselves and those we seek to care for."[13] Walking wounded are "soul destroyers," as John Climacus would have identified this group of clergy.

> *Who will be the "physicians" Chrysostom was seeking to nurture wholeness and health not only in the church, but also in the lives of ministers? Who will nurture the agitated and destroyed souls of clergy so that they do not become predators and perpetrators of sorts? Who will assist current and future ministers to integrate knowledge of God and knowledge of self? Who will empower and nurture the next generation of pastors as they discover their biases, ambiguities, and inadequacies? Who will assist future and current clergy to discern those family myths that come disguised in the voice of God? Who will help the church discern the relationship between the secret call, the providential call, and the ecclesiastical call of a person? To put it in other words, who will help the church discern who is fit for the ministry?*

I find it alarming, but not surprising, that I have not met a single pastor or seminarian that doubted his or her fitness for the ministry. Surely, not everyone receiving the secret call is fit to become a minister of Word and sacrament! Some might be fit for the ministry only after they have done significant personal, spiritual, and relational work. Others' secret call will never be validated by the faith community.

In the body of Christ, chaplains are a selected group who can assist the church with these questions. Chaplains can assist those who are called to the ministry to call on themselves. If the church believes that a purely theological answer to the problem of vocation (*Did God call you to the ministry?*) is all that is needed, the church greatly underestimates the complexity of God's calling of men and women to the ministry. Moreover, if the church resigns its responsibility around vocation to the secular world, surely it will lead to failure. Humanistic psychology will not be able to integrate the two paradoxical aspects, the divine and the deeply personal. To use a phrase educator Parker Palmer uses, chaplains can assist the church and pastors in discovering "vocational integrity," a discovery that often leads into the depths of one's despair.[14]

Those called by God to lead Christ's church and those who educate the next generation of clergy need chaplains to assist them to "think with sober judgment" about future ministers, or they run the risk of being "careless and random" as they prepare and ordain the next generation of clergy for the church of Christ. Likewise, chaplains can play an important role in assuring that the current generation of clergy can experience longevity of call and continue to grow in their ministries, and not leave the ministry through burnout or flame-up.

Even as I argue that the church of Christ needs chaplains to understand the complexity of being called by God, I have to state that chaplains have to call upon themselves first. What memories, now kept as frozen moments in the depths of their souls, do chaplains need to evoke as they seek to understand their call to enter the ministry? Chaplains need an integrated understanding of their own call before they can assist others to grow in a similar understanding. Chaplains too need to strive for "vocational integrity," the end result of a difficult and often painful process of discernment and introspection.

In this first section, then, I argued that chaplains need to assist the church in discovering the rich and multifaceted meaning of call. Second, I argue that chaplains can serve the church of Christ by teaching the church the art of having a conversation.

Conversation

Recently, I was involved in a conversation with a group of pastors and church leaders who wanted to talk about homosexuality. They were concerned about an issue that significantly increases the anxiety in most, if not all, mainline denominations. The viewpoints among those who were present varied widely. Some came across as threatened and others seem to have given little prior attention to a complex subject we know relatively little about. As I listened to the arguments, I was struck by our inability to have a conversation about the issue at hand. Rather, personal opinions and theological interpretations were proclaimed. The presenters offered arguments that had to be countered, points of view that were challenged, and engaged opponents that had to be silenced. The rhetoric was disembodied, as if persons whose sexual identity is homosexual do not exist and as if their own deeply rooted views of homosexuality did not influence their proclamations. The essence of having a conversation—listening to each other—was absent. What took place was not a conversation at all, despite the title of "an open conversation," as the event was announced.

What I witnessed reminded me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who found in his *Life Together* a close relationship between being the body of Christ and the art of listening. He wrote the following about Christian community:

> The first service that one owes to others consists in listening to them. . . . Christians, and especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forgot that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, for these Christians are talking where they should be listening.[15]

The art of having a conversation is central to the body of Christ as a gospel community and requires effective listening techniques. To have a conversation in such a manner as to honor the thoughts and feelings of others does not come easily to the church. As the church speaks across, and not into, the flow of people's thoughts and speech, the church becomes a poor listener and a bad conversationalist. Conversations take place not only with others, but the church needs to converse within itself too. At times it is almost as if the church lives in denial, that tenacious defense that keeps the church from talking about what is truly significant in the life of the church. The denial of not having significant conversations about critical issues such as clergy shortages, dying congregations, ethics in the church, church in conflict, and more, comes at a great cost to Christ's church.

Old Testament theologian, Kathleen O'Connor, in her book, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, becomes a witness to her own family that she describes as a family of denial. She writes:

> My expressive, loving family practiced denial. It forbade anger, ignored sorrow, and created a culture of silence about hard things. From generation to generation, we practiced denial: we looked on the bright side, walked on the sunny side, and remembered that tomorrow is another day. Like many assimilating immigrant groups, deaths went ungrieved, anger lurked but could not speak, and broken dreams were barely noticed. Some of us lost great chunks of ourselves along the way.[16]

"Some of us lost great chunks of ourselves along the way. . . ." What a statement of truth-telling and a sad witness to family life. I have yet to meet the person who has not lost a chunk of soul. Conversation, the sharing of stories, is pivotal in reclaiming lost parts. Conversation, then, is not superficial talk about this or that. It is definitely not "killing time" and it is not chitchat. Rather, for chaplains, conversation can be defined as the art of empowering others to talk about what is truly significant in their lives, while including God as a conversation partner. Conversation not only implies and creates intimacy and vulnerability, but it initiates the potential for change and growth.

Chaplains can facilitate conversation and break the silence around many "hard things" in churches and in the lives of families and individuals. I think of giving anger a voice, of grieving losses, of exposing many kinds of family violence, of exposing and addressing trauma. I can add speaking about sexuality, which makes the church extremely anxious, or power relations, which can act in a soul-making manner. In conversation the church can speak out against and resist sexism and racism or other oppressions. Chaplains can assist people in reclaiming the chunks of themselves that got lost along the way when the invisible line between parental discipline and physical abuse were crossed; or when the desire of one person spilled over into a two-body relationship, robbing the other of his or her personhood. Some chaplains empower those in prison and on the fringes of our society to reclaim their personhood and membership in society. Other chaplains can help rebuild the interpersonal bridge that was severed through the painful internalization of shaming experiences. Chaplains can facilitate healing and wholeness through the life-giving act of having a conversation.

To be such a facilitator, chaplains need to discern the “chunks of [themselves] that got lost along the way.” Chaplains need to listen to themselves. What experiences in their childhoods and lives have called chaplains to a ministry that always leaves them being and feeling on the outside? Are they replaying the position and experience they had in their families of origin or among their church family members? Moreover, in the replaying of such a familiar position, are they re-wounding themselves in ways they have been wounded before? Surely feeling on the outside is not a feeling and position chaplains discovered only after they entered the ministry.

Following O’Connor, I can say that my loving Dutch Reformed family labeled me as the “independent one,” while my older sister was labeled “the dependent one.” This split was born in part in my father’s family that only knew sons, leaving them without any “knowledge” of how to raise a girl child. My “sense of independence” often left me feeling unprotected and insecure, especially during transitional periods of my life, such as when I went to school for the first time or when my family moved from one town to another. I even “invented” rheumatoid arthritis and severe asthma attacks to gain my parents’ attention but did not receive the holding environment I needed. It is no wonder that I was called by God to be a pastor and a chaplain to people. My family called me to that ministry of isolation many years before I heard God’s call. Now I find myself halfway around the world, far removed from the country and family that gave me life and my faith, forming my own family.

If chaplains cannot overcome the denial of the pervasiveness and significance of trauma in their own lives, they will not be able to lead the church in conversation beyond the church’s position of denial. A culture of silence about past and present pain and trauma is a common occurrence often among seminarians and theologians. Those who cannot overcome their denial will see and treat people as objects and not as subjects. Though well intentioned, they will burn out in ministry or flame-up in scandal as any sense of solidarity, mutuality, and belonging are thwarted. Others will believe that the proclamation of some truth will be sufficient to facilitate healing and change. Like Docetists of old, they will avoid anything mundane such as the embodied self, which has emotions and finds its identity in numerous relationships. Some pastors will remain in such denial that they will see their community as "perfect," without any trauma or significant losses.

Being a chaplain is a refusal to accept such denial. Chaplains practice truth-telling through the art of having a conversation. They invite people not only in times of crisis, trauma, and disorientation, but also in times of joy, gratitude, and orientation to find the connection among their stories, the God-story, and the Word who became flesh. Being a chaplain implies that one brings the skills needed for conversation back to the church. One such skill is the ability to listen to another person. Without the capacity to listen well to another person, the art of having a conversation is not possible. People need to feel heard before a conversation can flow, or else the conversation will break down. Feeling heard, however, is nearly impossible in a world where there are no "natural listeners."

In his book, *The Lost Art of Listening*, Michael Nichols states that key reasons for a person's lack of ability to listen are the listener's inability to suspend his own agenda, a failure to contain preconceived notions and expectations, and an unconscious defensive emotional reactivity.[17] Listening requires a suspension of memory, desire, and judgment, and, for a few moments at least, existing for the other person. It is to make a conscious effort to hear; to attend closely, so as to hear; and to pay close attention. A good listener is a witness, taking the other person seriously. Listening *follows* an individual deeper into his or her own person, rather than *leading* the person somewhere or offering idle reassurances. Listening remains a difficult, if not an impossible task if a chaplain continues to listen with the ears her family of origin gave her. What if the chunk that got lost along the way included one's ears? Conversation and listening, even though both anticipate a two-body process, require that the listener listens to herself first.

Who within the church can teach the body of Christ the lost art of having a conversation about "hard things"? Can a gospel community be the body of Christ if the community cannot have a conversation and if they cannot listen to each other? Chaplains are trained to foster an understanding attitude. They can risk not knowing the other person's thoughts or feelings, waiting patiently for others to reveal themselves. Chaplains can teach the body of Christ basic skills that promote listening, such as paying attention, appreciating what is said, and affirming what is heard. Likewise, learning how to ask questions of clarification and elaboration, and not asking factual questions, can facilitate a conversation.[18] The church can learn how to use accurate empathy, concrete and genuine communication, confrontation, appropriate self-disclosure, and immediacy to reach across the divide that separates people who learned early in life to protect themselves against the dangers other people represent. Chaplains can help the church rediscover Howard Clinebell's famous categories of pastoral responses that should be used often: supportive, understanding, and interpretive statements. Other responses should be used selectively: probing, evaluative, and advising statements. And some statements should be avoided: controlling, impatient, and moralistic statements.[19] Chaplains can help the church unlearn attitudes and behaviors that make any conversation impossible: In his book *Giving Counsel: A Minister's Guidebook*, Donald Capps names the disrespect of a patronizing attitude, the disrespect of manipulation and of impatience, or the disrespect of being too lax. In addition, Capps writes:

> For persons who are seminary trained, one of the most difficult challenges that providing counsel for another person poses is that of learning−or relearning−to talk in concrete ways. Seminary education often encourages the use of abstractions—"humanity, church, sin, mission, Godself, involvement, commitment, faith." These are important words, but not very descriptive.[20]

As the church learns about conversation and listening, the church can receive the fruits of a chaplain's "bilingualism," for most chaplains speak many languages besides theology. Some chaplains can speak theology and psychology or psychodynamics, others can speak theology and justice, some can speak theology and addictions, and others can speak theology and military. Others still can use theological and corporate language. All chaplains, however, can speak incarnation and compassion. Regardless, the church needs the bilingual conversation skills chaplains were trained to have, for conversation is rarely, if ever, done only in theology.

Chaplain Cynthia, a Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor and hospital chaplain, was in conversation with a group of pastors who asked her to assist them in rediscovering their call. As part of the process, the pastors told their life stories. One, Pastor Christine, a "PK" (or pastor's kid), described a traumatic event as a young child where she was repeatedly sexually molested by a family friend invited into her home by her pastor-father. Pastor Christine described how she saw herself leaving her body during those moments of abuse. She felt calm and collected, looking down on her own person as the family friend would fondle and abuse her. She did not experience any pain or fear. Her pastor-father and mother denied that it could have occurred, and because it did not happen, she did not receive any counseling or care. As Pastor Christine told the group about how anxious she is in her ministry, she suddenly looked tired. She said that she has not trusted many with this painful part of her life.

Pastor Christine's colleagues in ministry responded to her narrative of harm by stating that it was God's grace that she was peaceful at that time. Her tired and absent look, however, did not communicate inner peace and the sense of gratitude God's grace calls forth. Rather, Pastor Christine described dissociation (also called neurotic denial), that immature defense that allows a person to dissociate consciousness from the real self. Dissociation evades depression and anxiety by distraction. Regarding this defense, psychiatrist George Vaillant writes: "[It] can transform a roller coaster ride from terror to joy; it can allow the victim of indescribable torture to leave the reality of [her] tormented body and view the process as a spectator."[21] Like all defense mechanisms, dissociation is given to us in God's wisdom to defend our souls against destruction in times of severe trauma. Dissociation, however, does not protect that soul from being deeply wounded.

Chaplain Cynthia responded to Pastor Christine saying it must have been very difficult for her to share her painful story and that she can see how tired her body is. She thanked Pastor Christine for placing her trust in the group and asked her whether she could share where she finds herself emotionally after exposing her story of sexual molestation. The group was silent. Pastor Christine looked confused. She asked Chaplain Cynthia if she could repeat the question, which Chaplain Cynthia did. Pastor Christine could not answer the question and became silent. Her colleagues asked her if she was "all right." One responded in helpless anger: "I cannot believe your parents did nothing." Pastor Christine just looked at them and started crying. The trauma of nearly forty years ago revisited her in the group. Chaplain Cynthia's bilingualism, which she learned in her training to be a chaplain and continues to learn in supervision, helped her listen to Pastor Christine in ways the other pastors could not. Chaplain Cynthia's training helped her contain her own prejudices, thoughts, and desires, creating space for Pastor Christine's painful confusion to be honored.

A central aspect of being a chaplain is the ability to sustain a conversation, to be a good listener. Some conversations are turning-point conversations leading to decisions of some sorts. Other conversations have shared self-disclosure leading to deeper intimacy of all involved. Conversations can expose and nurture growing edges of a person or conversations can have a rehearsal quality, where a person practices and remembers a future conversation.[22] Regardless of what kind of conversation one wants to have, however, one has to have a conversation with oneself first, possibly even reclaiming the chunk(s) of oneself that was lost along the way. Then, by the grace of God, the big house of denial, the church, might have a conversation as it listens to its members, thereby becoming a compassionate presence to the world.

Charity

Rowan Williams, in his *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement,* argues that Western society has lost core "imaginative patterns" that determined specific self-understanding.[23] Williams identifies modernism and post-modernism as having eroded Western society's capacity to remember childhood, to talk about community, and to nurture the soul. Williams calls the capacities that were lost, "lost icons." He believes that communal bereavement of these losses is needed before any reclamation can occur. Williams argues that communal grieving can be done in primarily two ways. First, a Messianic figure is beckoned to bring apocalyptic (and often violent) transformation. The second kind of communal grieving is grieving that focuses on the concrete here-and-now, where a sense of community allows *the community to take a careful look at itself*. Grieving becomes a witness to the loss and pain experienced and in hopeful expectation, a new reality is anticipated.[24] In *Lost Icons*, Williams devotes a chapter to charity as he writes to reclaim childhood, community, and the soul.

The dictionary defines *charity* as Christian love; a word represented by *caritas* in the Vulgate and *agape* in New Testament Greek. Charity refers to God's love for humanity and a person's love of God and neighbor.[25] In Christlike conduct, charity is a disposition to evaluate leniently and hopefully the character, aims, and destinies of others, and to make allowance for their apparent faults and shortcomings. Charity implies large-heartedness and practical beneficences to one's neighbors, especially to the poor. Charity, however, has a dark side, as the proverb *cold as charity* indicates.

In the past, charity use to mean love in two directions: from God and towards others. The original understandings of charity have been lost as charity now refers to the benefaction of the needy. It is a hierarchical relationship between those who have and those who have not. The church now finds itself in a time where charity implies the material world appearing in a world of scarcity. Paradoxically, charity might actually encourage us to thrive in a materialistic, consumerist, and competitive culture in which some are winners and others are losers. The Christlike bond between people and with God that the word used to indicate has been lost or is in severe danger of becoming a "lost icon." Still, Williams argues that the church needs to reclaim charity to have any meaning in life, for charity, like conversation, helps us recognize the other. Without such recognition, and the recognition of things a person can *only* value and enjoy *with* other people, the church cannot thrive. Williams states that the church is in need of a social miracle that brings a new kind of imagination, one that can imagine relations other than those of master and slave, advantaged and disadvantaged.[26] It is the imagination Paul called the Galatians to have when he stated that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

It is ironic that the Historical Jesus movement, a movement that often denies Jesus as the Christ, writes most compellingly about the compassionate nature of Jesus. In his book, *Meeting Jesus for the First Time*, Marcus Borg identifies compassion, which he defines as the ability *to feel with* and the result of charity, as the essence of Jesus' teaching and ethics.[27] It is summarized by Jesus' words in Luke 6:36: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." Borg refers to the Hebrew and the Aramaic words for compassion, which are associated with the loins, and more specifically, the womb.[28] Charity and compassion thus defines not only the very nature of Christlike behavior, but identifies God as "womb-like" or like a womb. This reference to the womb should not be confused with Nicodemus's invitation to be born anew (John 3) even as it holds that connotation as well. The womb or inner space of Jesus refers to the compassionate and concrete "taking in" of the other in a life-giving manner through nourishing and caring acts.[29] The womb embraces and encompasses, allowing the existence of the other.

To complete the *imitatio Dei* and be compassionate as God is compassionate is to be like a womb to others.[30] Compassionate acts include, among others, being with and eating with people; embracing and listening to those who are touched in a loving way and who never are heard; welcoming people into a loving community; affirming people; and more. These acts transcend the mere speaking of words or soothing of a conscience. Charity becomes a way of being. *Imitatio Dei*, when understood in these terms, leads to a reclaiming of the word *charity*. Risking that the word *charity* might become disembodied, a practical manifestation of being charitable is important. Hospitality, the allowing of others to enter into one's inner space or personal presence, is an act of charity.

In her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality in the Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl revisits the discipline of welcoming strangers, the discipline of hospitality, as a core Christian tradition. This tradition too was lost along the way as other industries claimed it.[31] Pohl argues that somehow hospitality has the connotation of being a guest to family and friends, to familiar people. Contemporary understandings of hospitality do not bring forth images of strangers or the disenfranchised. The "hospitality industry"—hotels, resorts, and restaurants—surely do not cater for those who do not carry a Diner's Club or an American Express card. Hospitality, once seen as "the good" within a community, has become a "lost icon." Yet again, the Son of Man is searching for a cup of cold water and a place to lay his head, but to no avail (Matt. 24:31-46). Our Lord remains a stranger and nobody welcomes him.

Pohl refers to John Chrysostom, quoted earlier on call, who stated that Christian hospitality should be face-to-face, gracious, unassuming, nearly indiscriminate, and always enthusiastic.[32] She also refers to Luther and Calvin in this regard. Luther believed that when one portrays hospitality to a stranger, that "God himself is in our home, is being fed, is lying down and resting." [33] Likewise, Calvin wrote comprehensively about charity and hospitality to strangers:

> Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say: "He is a stranger"; but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you, by virtue of that he forbids you to despise your own flesh (Isa. 58:7).[34] Say, "He is contemptible and worthless"; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. . . . Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions.[35]

Calvin's thoughts on charity are filled with an awareness of the needy and with a sense of dignity. They are governed by his conviction that all beings, including the "Moor or barbarian," were marked with the image of God. Thus, even as hospitality always included family, friends, and influential contacts, the distinctly Christian contribution is the emphasis on the poor and the needy, the ones who could not return the favor. The kingdom of God cannot manifest itself without hospitality.

Similar to learning the art of having a conversation, Pohl believes that "hospitality is a skill and a gift, . . . a practice which flourishes as multiple skills are developed, as particular commitments and values are nurtured, and as certain settings are cultivated."[36] She states that abstract theological reflections on charity, hospitality and welcoming the "other" are common in today's churches.[37] Hospitable *attitudes* do not offer the same blessing and challenges as hospitality, which can be defined as strangers welcoming strangers into a new community because God invited them into God's household. If we use the spoken word to facilitate the awareness of charity, churches might rarely go beyond hospitable attitudes. Maybe the subversive nature of hospitality, for hospitality is a form of resistance, is too much for the church to allow members to learn. Hospitality is dangerous, for who will be invited into the fold next? How will the presence of strangers change the church? The soul (or is that the unconscious?) of the church does not easily recognize the "other" in its midst, not to speak of the person outside the fold.

The need for hospitality is found in every setting in which the church has a presence. As a professor of pastoral care and someone who can readily identify being a chaplain, I have had conversations with a group of female seminary students who believe that the language used within our building is paternalistic and reflective of strong feelings against women in ministry. They described how the majority of chapel services only speak of God as male, how some of their male peers become aggressive in defending male-only leadership for the church, and how some churches in the Reformed Church in America refuse to acknowledge their call from God to enter the ministry. The hurt these rejections cause and the isolation it brings to their lives were apparent. As I listened to them, I had to contain my anger at a community who prides itself on being hospitable, yet I am a witness to a group of people who would speak to the unwelcoming nature of our community. (My mind drifted to how my community engages its emeritus professors.) Hospitality can be elusive, even in Christian communities.

"The most potent setting for hospitality," Pohl writes, "is in the overlap of private and public space."[38] Chaplains already operate in this space and are therefore a group within the church that can teach the church what Christlike and thus womblike behavior looks like. Chaplains can help the church live into its mission to be hospitable. They can give the church a new imagination whereby they can see the needs of others. Like the tree of life that gives shelter to the birds of heaven, the church has to be a shelter to the peoples of the earth. By definition, chaplains already practice this tradition, and this might be part of the church's general rejection of chaplaincy or specialized ministries. Chaplains remind the church of its disobedience to God's call to be a blessing to the world and the church does not want to be reminded of this. Chaplains are comfortable in the presence of strangers, but strangers make the church anxious, even if the strangers are church youth who experience life in ways foreign to the church. It is ironic that chaplains, often left out by their brothers and sisters in Christ, can teach the church how to *take in* others.

Who else but those already living on the periphery of the faith community and intimate with feelings of rejection can reach out in hospitality to people living on the fringes of society? Hospitality always takes place at the margins. Chaplains can teach the church to be "large-hearted," to have a large inner space, to have a peaceful disposition of leniency and of hope, to be charitable. Chaplains know about inclusivity and being with a person. A chaplain told me about offering hope to a dying Jewish soldier who never knew Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior but did meet a chaplain who was there in God's name as he neared his death. Some brothers and sisters in Christ were offended by this chaplain's ministry to the soldier, for the soldier was not evangelized by the chaplain and died without naming Christ as his Lord and Savior. Chaplains can help the church reclaim the very meaning of incarnational ministry, that ministry of being Christ's hands, feet, and ears. As stated, chaplains have experienced the cost of incarnational ministries that defy boundaries and culturally generated distinctions. It is a question, however, whether the church is ready to pay a similar cost. Hospitality is not cheap, but the rewards are enormous.

Of course, the church will first have to admit that it too fell into the cultural paradigm that has eroded the very meaning of charity. In many churches, charity has become as faceless as women and children who are victims of family violence; as the homeless who walk city sidewalks and sleep under bridges; as the convicts who have to reenter society; as the homosexual person who acts out in a city restroom; or as the soldier who enters war because politicians could not negotiate peace. In other cases, often in crises, charity becomes an outlet for the church's, or church leaders,' anxiety.

Chaplains too need to ask whether they have fallen prey to a culture that erodes charity. In a recent conversation with a minister in a specialized ministry I was struck by the fact that he referred to his parishioners, whom he counsels at his church's counseling center, as "clients." When I asked him about this, he admitted that he is tired, feels burnt out, and that calling his church members "clients" gave him the distance he needed from them, thereby helping him sustain himself. He had no sustainable inner space to welcome his own parishioners.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued that being a chaplain means taking seriously one's call, mastering the art of having a conversation, and being charitable by *taking in* and touching others through incarnational ministry. I further argued that the body of Christ needs chaplains for these very reasons, for the church will not be able to establish God's reign on earth if it lacks any of these aspects. I deliberately did not explicitly answer any questions as to how chaplains can be significant to the church or how chaplains can empower the church to think anew about call, conversation, and charity. The "how-question" is not unimportant, but asking "how" in any process of transformation and integration is often done prematurely. Rather, the question needs to be delayed until initial work has been done.

A more fruitful question, thus, would be to ask what work chaplains need to do around call, conversation, and charity. Or what makes it difficult for chaplains to do such work.

Of course finding answers to these questions is not easy. However, if chaplains or ministers in specialized ministries can be in conversation with each other and with the church, answers will be discovered. Only after chaplains have thought about themselves in sober judgment and discovered the painful process of growth and integration in being a chaplain, shall they be able to become significant to the church and empower the church to be significant to the world.

Chaplains engage in pastoral ministry, that ministry James Dittes refers to the as "the art of making space for others to grow."[39] It was the objective of this essay to create such a space around the important topics of call, conversation, and charity. These topics require continued discernment, and chaplains can assist the church in this task. Without continued reflection on the call to enter the ministry, on how to remain in conversation, and how to be charitable and inviting to strangers, the church of Jesus Christ will not be able to be the body of Christ in today's world.

ENDNOTES

[1] This paper was read in a modified format at the Chaplain's Conference of the Christian Reformed Church, Calvin College, June 12, 2003.
[2] *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper, 1956), 63-64.
[3] *Oxford English Dictionary* (CD-Rom) 2nd ed., version 2.01 (London: Oxford Univ. Press).
[4] "Verbing weirds life" is a phrase used by cartoonist Bill Watterson's character, Calvin, the friend of Hobbes.
[5] Thomas C. Oden and Don S. Browning, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*. Theology and Pastoral Care Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 12, 103.
[6] Ibid., 12.
[7] Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 35.
[8] Ibid., 37.
[9] Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 34.
[10] Edward P. Wimberly, *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers*, The Jossey-Bass Religion-in-Practice Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 101.
[11] Ibid., 4.
[12] Ibid., 14-33.
[13] Ibid., 9.
[14] Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 43.
[15] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 98.
[16] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 89.
[17] Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 41.
[18] Donald Capps, *Giving Counsel: A Minister's Guidebook* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 23.
[19] Howard J. Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 94-96.
[20] Capps, *Giving Counsel*, 36.
[21] George E. Vaillant, *The Wisdom of the Ego* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 56.
[22] Gaylord Noyce, in Capps, *Giving Counsel*, 74. Capps quote: Gaylord Noyce, *The Art of Pastoral Conversation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).
[23] Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).
[24] Ibid., 127-28.
[25] *Oxford English Dictionary* (CD-Rom) 2nd edit., version 2.01 (London: Oxford Univ. Press).
[26] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 85.
[27] Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 46ff.
[28] Gen. 43:30: "And Joseph made haste; for his womb did yearn upon his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there."
[29] For more on the "inner space," see Erik Erikson's classic essays, "Womanhood and the Inner Space," and, "Once More the Inner Space," in Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 261-94; and Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975), 225-47.
[30] Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, 49.
[31] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
[32] Ibid., 6.

[33] Ibid.

[34] In the context of true fasting and worship: Verse 7: Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

[35] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.7.6.

[36] Pohl, *Making Room,* 9.

[37] Ibid., 14.

[38] Ibid., 12.

[39] James E. Dittes, *Re-Calling Ministry*, ed. Donald Capps (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 9.