

Statement on Ministry

Rev. Dr. Douglas L. Griffin

“Even though my son joined a different religion from what we raised him, so long as his heart is in the right place, that’s what’s important. Because after all, we’re all on the same path.” The words rang in my ears as if awakening me from sleep! The speaker was a female hospital patient. I was a college student. I had just been hired as a student chaplain in a local hospital. I had set out to visit the sick in order to “witness to them.” That is, I thought it did matter what path you were on. I thought there was a right way and a wrong way. I thought that being certain you were on the right path was the way to find faith in illness and peace in pain. So, I thought that my job was to find the right religious words to speak to patients in their distress. But here’s the twist: I didn’t witness to her. Instead, I became a witness to her deep faith. In her story I witnessed someone facing her own illness with grace and gratitude and her son’s pilgrimage with affirmation and affection. As eager as I initially was to say something helpful, I now felt profoundly silenced. She didn’t need a message from me. In that moment she seemed whole. And in that sense it was a “holy moment.” Did I agree with her? All of a sudden, I didn’t know. But, all I could say was, “Yes.”

Years later, after completing my seminary and clinical chaplaincy education, I returned to that hospital, this time as a staff chaplain. One day I entered the room of a patient facing life-threatening surgery. I introduced myself, to which he said, “Well, I’m probably not your man because I’m not religious. I’m a secular humanist.” I responded that I merely wondered if he had anyone to be with or talk to as he faced surgery. He invited me to sit and stay with him and proceeded to share an eloquent testimony of his own mortality, faith, and hopes. Once again, I knew that I was witnessing a holy moment in this man’s drama. I don’t think I said much. But I must have affirmed what he said because he retorted, “You’re a minister? You’re not supposed to agree with me because I’m an atheist!” Whatever it was that I said in response, we both laughed and he gave me a hearty handshake as I left. He survived surgery. We visited together while he recovered. He was discharged. I never saw him again.

These stories illustrate the cornerstone and formation of my understanding of Christian ministry. First, I learned from many experiences similar to these that an ordinary place like someone's bedside could become holy ground. Holy moments happen in everyday places during the press and grind of our everyday living. And when holy moments do happen those everyday places become holy ground. Holy moments happen as we witness with others the dramas of their lives. The dramas occur in all those experiences that interrupt our routine and challenge us to weigh what really matters in our lives. Birth, death, marriage, illness, new job, sending kids off to college, economic boom or setback, all are dramas that present opportunities to be keenly alert to God's activity in our midst. Ministry happens when we, in reverence and affection, witness with someone else one of their life's dramas.

I also learned that as a minister I don't control the holy ground! I can't make holy moments happen. I can't decide when holy moments should happen. But, I can enter with humility and reverence into the space of another and, together, witness what does happen. Ministry finds its heart in these dramas of being human. Where else but here can we embody so dramatically the heart of our Christian confession: "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot...?"

Because I don't control the holy ground, I also can't restrict who can encounter holy moments. I have witnessed holy moments when I have been with people from a wide-ranging diversity of beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences. God's coming to us hasn't been restricted to whom I considered to be right or righteous. As Jesus continually welcomed the outcast and "sinners," so are all still welcome at Christ's table. This is the good news of Christian ministry!

Finally, I learned that this ministry of extravagant welcome carries an obligation to walk humbly with one another. I don't have to agree with someone to welcome them as my guest or to enter their space as their guest. Conversely, I cannot possibly have all the answers nor grasp the complete picture of God. Indeed, if I become entrenched in my own convictions, allowing barriers to keep others out, I will miss all kinds of opportunities to witness God's new and different deeds. The dramas of being human are shared events. As shared, they are communion. And in reverent communion with one another we encounter God's still speaking to us, still

coming to us. Any one of us is a minister who welcomes someone warmly, walks with another humbly, and in so doing witnesses reverently the drama of another's life.

The challenge of ordained ministry is to be a catalyst and leader in the church's ministry of welcome. The same spirit that characterizes the heart of ministry to individuals should characterize the ordained minister's relationship to the local church. As an organization it has its own unique identity and history. It has its own honored routines and not-so honored quirks. Nevertheless, the minister's challenge is to welcome the church's life and to enter it with humility in order to witness with the church the holy moments in its life. Conversely, the church's challenge is to welcome the minister in a similar spirit of humility: this minister is different from all who have gone before!

The same reverence and respect for the dramas of being human that characterize ministry for individuals should characterize the minister's leadership of the church. Minister and local church don't have to agree on all points of faith, program, mission, and theology to witness together that they are the body of the risen Christ. As we covenant together to welcome all to our table and to walk humbly with one another, we embody together the fullness of what it means to be Christian.