





Catholic Health: Healers and Bridge Builders in a Divided Society

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“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” — Matthew 5:9

The Catholic health ministry has long used its healing presence in communities to help build peace in society. Today, that presence and ministry are as critical as ever. It requires Catholic health providers and all those who support or work within the ministry to understand the unique role and opportunities that exist to help heal the political divisions in society, just as the ministry heals the physical needs of our communities.

Today, the divisions within our society feel more extreme and angrier, with the current political landscape marked by deep-seated divisions that transcend mere disagreement. This reality is reflected not only in the ever-growing militant or reactionary takes on social media or the evening news, but also in our parishes, local school boards and even in the day-to-day realities of running a health care system with patients and providers who reflect the growing divisions in our society.

According to a Pew Research Center report, the partisan divide in the United States has reached historic levels, with fundamental values and beliefs increasingly polarized along party lines. This polarization threatens not only democratic processes but also societal cohesion. In the run-up to the 2020 election and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic response, Pew Research found that 77% of Americans saw the nation as more divided than ever.¹ Additionally,

both Republicans and Democrats increasingly view people with opposing political views highly unfavorably (62% for Republicans and 54% for Democrats), perceiving them as less moral, lazy, dishonest and close-minded.² This is further exacerbated by the reality that 54% of Americans view their political identity as central to who they are, surpassing religious identification for many, and only 4% of marriages take place between Democrat and Republican partners.³

However, while the divisiveness in our society is growing, Catholic health care is not new to serving as a source of healing among societal divisions. Much of Catholic health care can trace its roots to moments throughout our nation’s history when individuals and organizations were called to be sources of healing and bridge-building in communities.

During the Civil War, our nation’s greatest moment of division, more than 700 religious

sisters tended to wounded soldiers of both the Union and Confederate Armies.⁴ This led a Union soldier to write, “I am not of your church, and have always been taught to believe it to be nothing but evil; however, actions speak louder than words, and I am free to admit, that if Christianity does exist on the earth, it has some of its closest followers among the Ladies of your Order.”⁵

Similarly, Catholic hospitals, like St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York City, stepped in to care for HIV/AIDS patients when society remained frozen by fear and political divisions.⁶ Even today, Catholic hospitals continue to be caught between cultural, religious and political forces that criticize them for being insufficiently or too sufficiently committed to their efforts to protect life while simultaneously providing care to all those in need.⁷

This call to be bridge builders to promote peace is not only in our history but is also a direct call from Pope Francis’ message in early 2024 to the world’s diplomats accredited to the Holy See: “Peace is primarily a gift of God, for it is he who has left us his peace (cf. John 14:27). Yet it is also a responsibility incumbent upon all of us.”⁸ This requires recognizing that promoting peace by building bridges is not something that is merely bestowed upon society but rather is something those of us in Catholic health care must work on each and every day to address the social and economic divisions that give rise to the increasing distrust and hate in our society.⁹

These realities ask us to reflect on how Catholic health care can reduce divisions and create bridges of understanding in our communities. By looking at our faith and the history of Catholic health care in our country, we will find that during our nation’s most divided and difficult times, we can serve a fundamental role in bridging divides and healing our society.

PRINCIPLES TO ADDRESS DIVISION, BUILD BRIDGES

1. Commitment to Service

Service lies at the heart of the Catholic health ministry and Catholic social teaching, reflecting Jesus’ call to love one another and care for the

marginalized. At the heart of this teaching and work, Catholic health care is dedicated to upholding life and human dignity, promoting social justice and offering compassionate care to all individuals, regardless of background or belief. The Catholic health ministry, through its daily work in hospitals, clinics and community outreach programs, not only provides essential health care services, but also extends a compassionate hand to those in need.

This service is not merely an institutional role

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or a matter of an employee/employer relationship but extends to every person working in the Catholic health ministry, whose different yet shared responsibility gives real life to the ministry’s goal of providing Jesus’ healing love. Therefore, Catholic hospitals — through free or subsidized care, community health programs for underserved populations, engagement in outreach activities and the daily dedication of all those in service to the Catholic health ministry — provide large and small contributions to help break down barriers of distrust and create opportunities for genuine human connection. This commitment to service transcends divisions and fosters a sense of unity and shared humanity among patients and caregivers alike.

Service is not only the day-to-day reality of health care providers but also plays a key role in breaking down divisions and building bridges in communities. One way this work can be directed is through community outreach efforts by Catholic health care providers. Studies from Points of Light and the Corporation for National and Community Service have found that volunteerism in politically neutral settings promotes greater social cohesion and trust, reduces political divisions and promotes greater understanding between people.¹⁰ Therefore, the continued efforts of Catholic



THREE PRACTICAL WAYS TO BUILD BRIDGES

In today's politically charged climate, the role of Catholic health ministries in bridging divides and advocating for justice and compassion is more crucial than ever. Here are practical ways the Catholic health ministry can put these principles into action in its own facilities and communities.

1. Use your convening power.

By harnessing your staff's expertise, community relationships, community health needs assessment and your role as an anchor institution, a Catholic organization can serve as neutral ground for bringing together patients, community members, and political and religious leaders to address a common challenge or need. Through dialogues, conferences, community outreach efforts, or by inviting your bishop or elected leaders to visit your facility, you can build trust and relationships while providing opportunities for people of different backgrounds and political beliefs to work together on a common cause across ideological divides. With the continued breakdown in trust of religious and governmental institutions, health care settings remain one of the few places where people of all backgrounds can come together.

2. Be resolutely nonpartisan.

Adhering to nonpartisanship is not only a legal requirement for nonprofits during elections but also a powerful tool for advancing needs and issues without regard to the left/right dichotomy that breeds divisions. By maintaining neutrality in political affiliations but not neutrality on people's

needs, Catholic health ministries can uphold their mission and preserve their credibility as a source of greater unity.

3. Get involved.

CHA provides a wide variety of policy briefs, backgrounders and other advocacy materials to help audiences understand the issues impacting Catholic health care in the U.S.¹ These materials will help you build knowledge and relationships to take action on policy issues that impact your community. CHA also offers an easy-to-use e-advocacy system for getting involved in policies that impact the collective Catholic health care ministry.² By getting involved, you can amplify your voice for those in need and demonstrate that policies that improve human dignity and health are a stronger bridge for unity than partisan politics.

NOTES

1. "Advocacy Overview," Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/advocacy/advocacy-overview>.

2. "Contact Congress," Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/advocacy/contact-congress#/>.

health care providers to bring the ministry's work beyond hospital walls and into the community will not only promote greater community health, but can also be a foundational stone for building bridges in our society.

2. Embracing Synodality: Walking Together

The concept of synodality, rooted in the Greek word for "walking together," emphasizes the communal discernment and dialogue essential for addressing divisions. Pope Francis has made synodality a central element of his vision of a church that listens, promotes participation and co-responsibility, and provides a mission-focused means for discerning and building consensus

among people.

At the heart of this effort is the willingness to listen rather than "tell," providing an opportunity for people to voice their deepest thoughts and concerns. We see this model of listening throughout Scripture, where Jesus frequently uses questions to teach, provoke thought and engage in meaningful dialogue.

For instance, we see this in the story of the Good Samaritan, when the lawyer asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus provides a parable of the Good Samaritan and ends the story by asking the lawyer, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" (Luke 10:29-37) By doing so, Jesus does not tell the

lawyer to go and show mercy and love to those most in need in society, but rather invites the listener to discern the answer and take responsibility for the action to be lived out.

In the caregiving setting, listening, discussing and discerning the proper course of action is fundamental to providing care. However, Catholic health care providers, often as central anchor institutions in their communities, can go beyond this by using their role in society and their trust among communities to serve as a model for convening and discerning broader community responses to challenges. Catholic hospitals have already started this work through their efforts to implement their community health needs assessments and can further build upon these efforts by bringing more people and institutions into the conversation, solving problems, and building greater trust and understanding to reduce divisions in our communities.

3. Fostering Integral Development

Integral human development is a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching. It emphasizes the need to place the human person at the center of society to promote the holistic growth of individuals in all dimensions — physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Catholic hospitals contribute to this development by supporting education, advocating for social justice and nurturing spiritual growth. Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, promotes the importance of a holistic response to avoid minimizing the fullness of needs and challenges, and instead provides a framework for understanding that individual

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patient, community and global needs are “all interconnected.”

The Catholic health ministry, by providing patients with social workers, counselors, chaplains and caregivers, gives reality to this calling by recognizing that a patient is more than their physical ailment or needs. Patients have social, spiritual and other needs that directly relate to the physical but also require care and concern

for complete healing. Similarly, by committing to addressing systemic challenges in our society — through advocacy or fulfilling promises to address environmental impact and making right relationships with those who have been marginalized — we can take concrete steps to promote social justice for those who rely on our ministry to be a voice for those most in need.

4. Upholding Truth

Finally, the work of being a bridge builder in a divided society requires that Catholic hospitals be willing and able to speak uncomfortable truths when people are marginalized or lack the basic needs to live in accordance with their God-given dignity.

In a world rife with misinformation and ideological echo chambers, the courage to speak the truth is paramount. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), emphasized that defending the truth and articulating it with humility and conviction are “indispensable forms of charity,” which is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine.¹¹ This “fidelity to the truth” is at the service of humanity to guarantee human freedom and the possibility of a society that is physically, socially, economically, culturally and spiritually healthy (integral human development).¹² As one of the largest social ministries of the Church, the Catholic health ministry gives life to this teaching by working each day to ensure that charity and truth are at the heart of our work, promoting healthy people, families and communities.

These statements are reminders that in an age of deep division and misinformation, and at times even hate and violence, Catholic health care, at all levels of its work, can help heal communities, promote trust and reduce divisions by continuing to speak the truth about the needs of those whom society has forgotten or whose voices have been silenced in the name of political expediency.

The willingness to speak difficult truths is not new to Catholic health care. Whether it was standing boldly to promote access to health care through the Affordable Care Act, adopting CHA’s We Are Called pledge to confront rac-



ism and achieve health equity, or leading as a beacon of truth to provide accurate information and care during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic health ministry continues to demonstrate its commitment to speaking truths with tangible outcomes that address human needs when a divided society preferred disunity and disinformation. While speaking these truths is difficult at times, in the long arc of human history, it is at these moments that the Catholic health ministry can heal divisions by being bold enough to address the real underlying causes of disunity and distrust.

EMBRACING THE CALL TO PEACEMAKING

The Catholic health care ministry has a long legacy of being a source of healing and unity during our nation's most challenging times. Through service, synodal dialogue, integral development and truth, the Catholic health ministry can once again provide a unique voice for significantly addressing the societal and political divisions in our nation. In so doing, we can yet again demonstrate that healing people doesn't end at the hospital door but extends to our call as peace builders in society.

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NOTES

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3. Wendy Wang, "Marriages between Democrats and Republicans Are Extremely Rare," Institute for Family Studies, November 3, 2020, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/marriages-between-democrats-and-republicans-are-extremely-rare>.
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11. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 1.
12. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 9.

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