

# SPRIT OF CHAPLAINCY

NATIONAL VA CHAPLAIN CENTER – HAMPTON, VA

## FROM THE DIRECTOR OF VA CHAPLAINCY

### A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

#### Community Involvement

Many Veterans who served in the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan find that they are still engaged in a quiet, desperate search for returning to normal. Post-Traumatic Stress, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, aftershocks of moral injury, suicidal thoughts, and grief continue to haunt their lives and hinder them from establishing a more satisfying life in their community—a life they want and deserve.



Over the next decades, as Veterans deal with the aftershock of their interior war wounds, communities of faith have a responsibility to step forward with ongoing encouragement and support. We are challenged to remain aware, to understand and to reach out with healing and encouragement. Many community clergy have already implemented ongoing programs encouraged by VA chaplains in support of returning Veterans and their families.

During the last ten years, the VA National Chaplain Center (NCC) has led in the effort to create a team of community clergy to reach out to Veterans (*continued on next page....*)

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 2

NOVEMBER 2017

#### In this issue:

Message from the Director	1
The Chaplain and the Community	1
A New Trick for an Old Veteran	4
Forming Healing Partnership	5

It Takes a Village	7
--------------------	---

Beer Run	8
----------	---

By Any Other Name	9
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Upcoming Events	11
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### THE CHAPLAIN AND THE COMMUNITY

VA chaplains have the opportunity to be a link from the VA to the community, to interpret VA's mission and service, and to help the VA understand how the community is an essential partner in serving Veterans. What follows are examples of how I have engaged that vision.

As I write this, I am about to celebrate the Jewish High Holy Days, a time to look back and to look forward. As I look back, I realize that my role as a chaplain has taken me beyond our medical center. In response to Charlottesville, the clergy of Huntington (*continued on page 3*)

*(“A Message From the Director” continued from page 1....)*

in their places of worship and community; to be welcoming, and to create Veteran-friendly congregations. This became extremely vital when research demonstrated that returning Veterans seek help from community clergy, and chaplains more than any other health care professionals when dealing with mental and emotional issues. It is for these reasons that my vision to continue training programs with community clergy remains foremost.

In 2007, the NCC initiated the Veterans Community Outreach Initiative (VCOI) to educate community clergy about the spiritual and emotional needs of our returning Veterans and their families. As part of the VCOI program, the NCC obtained a grant in 2010 from the VA’s Office of Rural Health (ORH) with two goals: 1. to educate rural clergy about the readjustment and healthcare needs of returning Veterans, and 2. to explain how to refer Veterans to the VA for care. Since 2007, VA chaplains nation-wide have conducted nearly 350 training events and provided education to approximately 18,000 clergy through VCOI and our rural clergy training programs. Today our VCOI efforts continue and the Community Clergy Training Program (CCTP) has been recognized by the Office of Rural Health as one of their “Enterprise Wide Initiatives.” Secretary David Shulkin even recognized the CCTP as a “Best Practice” in his recent book entitled Best Care Everywhere.

As a result of these training events, clergy across the nation are learning to: 1) identify readjustment challenges that Veterans and their families face post deployment, 2) understand the signs of suicide among returning warriors, and know appropriate actions and referrals to prevent suicides among Veterans, 3) identify psychological and spiritual effects of war trauma on survivors, 4) consider appropriate pastoral care interventions for the spiritual and theological issues that Veterans and families often encounter, 5) brainstorm ideas for a community clergy partnership between VA chaplains and local clergy, and 6) knowledgeably refer Veterans to the local VHA healthcare providers by being a trusted link for Veterans to the VA.

I had the distinct honor to provide testimony for an important oversight hearing on February 27, 2012. The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans, Subcommittee on Health, reviewed the matter of “Building Bridges between VA and community organizations to support Veterans and families.” The hearing gave me the opportunity to speak about the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Chaplain Service’s outreach efforts with community and faith-based organizations. As the Director of the VA National Chaplain Center and past-President of the Military Chaplains Association of the United States of America, I have engaged community and faith-based leaders, clergy, and religious organizations.

In this issue of the Spirit of Chaplaincy you will find articles that highlight VA chaplains and community clergy as partners to support Veterans, and their families.

I am grateful to our Editorial Committee, and all the VA chaplains who contributed to make this edition possible.

Chaplain Michael L. McCoy, Sr.  
Director  
National Chaplain Center  
Hampton, Virginia

(continued from page 1)

met to discuss how to respond to the “hate of the other” that has caused so many tragic events. As our first response, we invited our community to a candle light ceremony on September 11. Our theme, We Stand Together in Love, was expressed through song, prayer and speeches. To be a part of this event was very moving for me.

Our local American Legion Post invited me to offer a prayer for our armed forces at the village's annual Pearl Harbor observance. I have participated in this service for the past several years, as both a former military chaplain and currently as a VA chaplain.

When the Post Office set aside ground to honor their employees who had served on active duty, they invited me to dedicate the space. Each year as Veterans Day draws near, I am invited back to participate in their ceremony.

Our national cemetery also always invites me to participate in Memorial Day and/or Veterans Day ceremonies. I feel very special and honored to sit next to a gold star mother, watch various Veteran service organizations present the colors; and then to stand up and say "I am a Veteran."

There is an interesting story of how I became involved with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). I had just completed our VA services for Yom Kippur when I returned to my office to see if I had any voice mail. "Hello this is the IRS" the message began. Hadn't I prayed enough or fasted often enough that I might be forgiven for past misdeeds and have a clean slate, I thought to myself. Apparently, I had. The call was an invitation to speak at the Combined Federal Campaign's (CFC) kickoff because of my own involvement with the CFC. At the kickoff, I told them how honored I was to be there. "How many people have the opportunity to ask you for money," I remarked. This was not the only time I have gotten to ask them for money. Each year I have been invited back.

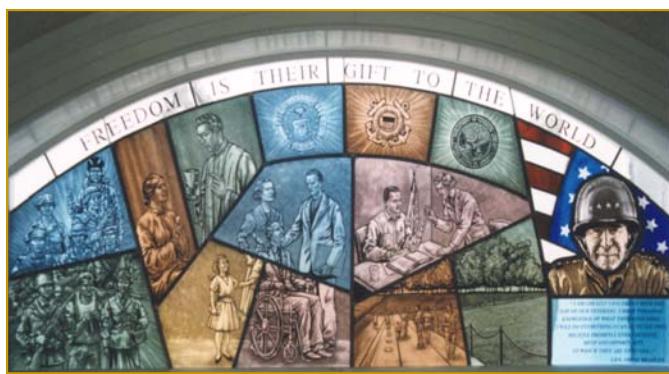
During the summer, hundreds of people from our local community fill our Vietnam Veterans Memorial Garden for an evening of music. This concert series is an out-growth of a question I once asked a Veteran who wanted to plant a tree in memory of a Vietnam Veteran. I replied "Why not a garden so that we may honor all those who

served in Vietnam?" He went back to his Vietnam Veterans of America chapter and they reached out to the community. A beautiful garden emerged. Our director invited Dignity Memorial to bring the traveling Vietnam Wall to our campus. We built a stage and a patio for the ceremonies that marked the visit of the wall and where we now have our summer concert series. When the wall left, the VVA chapter wanted something permanent in its place. The result was twelve monuments to the twelve wars in which our country has been involved, which they named the Wall of Wars. All this happened from a simple question — "Why not a garden for all?"

A local school district wanted to honor their graduating students who were going into the military. I was invited to offer an invocation and a benediction. A synagogue wanted to acknowledge Veterans Day and invited me to speak. I spoke to the directors of pastoral social ministry from several parishes about what services our medical center offers. A breakfast by our town for Veterans was being planned. I contacted the person responsible and asked if they would like a chaplain to offer a prayer. The response was “only if you are the chaplain.”

As I look forward to the coming year, I shall continue to serve the Veterans within the gates of our medical center as well as those who are beyond the gates. For the community in which I live, I shall be the Veterans' Chaplain. Through my efforts, I have created an essential link between our medical center and the community in which we live to the benefit of both our Veterans and our community.

Chaplain Paul Swerdlow  
Northport, New York



# A New Trick for an Old Veteran

A Veteran, the other day, asked me, "Chaplain, can an old dog learn a new trick?"

I said, "Well, it's funny that you should ask me that, because I had a conversation with an owner of a greyhound the other day. He said his dog had retired from racing."

The Veteran asked, "Did the dog retire because it was too old?"

I said, "No, the owner told me his dog was not too old when she retired."

The Veteran asked, "Did the dog get hurt racing?"

I said, "No. The owner said his dog never got hurt racing."

The Veteran asked, "Was the dog not winning any races?"

I said, "No, according to the owner, his dog was still winning races and making a lot of money for him before she retired."

The Veteran asked, "Well, why on earth did the dog retire then?"

I said, "The owner said that his dog retired when she discovered she was chasing a 'fake' rabbit. In fact, after the dog's epiphany, the dog would look at its owner, even if they were in the vicinity of a racetrack, as if to say; 'What is the point?'"

The Veteran stared at me for a while, grimaced, scratched his head, and then left my office stunned and in deep thought.

Later that day, the Veteran came back and confessed that he had wasted a lot of his life chasing "fake" rabbits— sex, drugs, alcohol, and gambling. He then proceeded to tell me he had spent most of his post-Viet Nam life drunk, doped up, and miserable, trying to numb the pain of what he had seen and done in Viet Nam, fully knowing, but fully denying, that he was only adding to his pain.

I said, "It sounds like you need to learn a new trick." And then I shared a scripture with him.

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will." - Romans 12:2 (NIV)

I am happy to report that this Veteran is doing better now and has been doing everything he can to learn several new tricks: joining different support groups, getting a sponsor, finding a place of worship, reconnecting with family and friends, and making amends as best he can.

Chaplain Mel Brinkley  
Tucson, AZ

## FORMING HEALING PARTNERSHIP

I am one of twenty-eight VA chaplains trained earlier this year to be a facilitator for the Community Clergy Training Program (CCTP). This program is the collaborative efforts of the VHA Office of Rural Health and the National VA Chaplain Center, partnering to ensure that Veterans in rural areas receive quality health care and to bring awareness of the resources available to them within the VA. Members of the clergy attending this training receive education on the Veteran's experiences of military service; they learn to provide unique spiritual care to Veterans and their families; they are informed of the resources available to Veterans at the VA and are invited to partner with VA chaplains to help Veterans access these resources. We hope our partnership will contribute to the holistic care of our Veterans and bring about healing. We want to reduce the incidences of mental distress that lead to dire outcomes - suicide being at the extremity.

In my experience, being a CCTP facilitator requires persistence and courage. It's hard work but rewarding because it contributes greatly to the ministry of caring for Veterans and their families. I have conducted two viewing events with twenty-six ministers, six lay ministry providers and two local elected officials. Viewing events are the actual training sessions. They are called viewing events because of the use of prerecorded presentations, along with a training facilitator. Before each viewing event, there are a lot of one-on-one meetings with individual ministers – trying to obtain their buy-in and commitment to host the event. In both events I conducted a minister invited me to attend the local ministerial alliance where I presented to the group. They subsequently voted to sponsor events. As a result, I have formed some solid working relationships with ministers and other community leaders. I have also made some important discoveries during this time and realized that I have been missing out on a valuable resource, that of "collaboration" with the community clergy.

While sharing CCTP with the community clergy, I also met with chaplains in the community hospitals and the elected officials of two rural cities. They appreciated the VA for reaching out to the community in order to help them better understand Veterans and their needs. In one of the sessions, a minister remarked, "This is good stuff!" Several of the ministers were Veterans and they helped to personalize the training, while others were astonished on learning the Veterans' experience. Some said, "I had no idea things were so difficult for them (Veterans)." Another said, "I've never thought about it before" (referencing how becoming a warrior and experiencing war trauma changes the Veteran). I was reminded then, that I am the expert at providing spiritual care to Veterans. It further dawned on me, that my skills need to be shared with the community clergy/leaders, because it will have a positive impact on Veterans and their communities.

At the end of one viewing event a pastor requested help in understanding one of his members who is a Korean War Veteran. He said that over the past fifty years of knowing this Veteran, there are times when the Veteran becomes emotionally distant. He said that while he doesn't know exactly what is causing this behavior, he strongly believes it has to do with the Veteran's military experience. I spent some time sharing avenues of approach he might consider in caring for the Veteran and how to create an emotionally safe space for the Veteran to tell his story, if he chooses to. I realized that while this pastor is educated, intelligent and caring, he is not properly equipped to provide the unique care the Veteran needs. However, this pastor was willing to learn and I was privileged to share my specialized pastoral skills with a ministerial colleague. In the end, this pastor stated that because of the training he now has, he will start a Veterans

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ministry program in his church. He further stated that he will ask the Veteran if he would be willing to lead this program, because he has noticed that the Veteran “comes to life” in the church’s once-a-year Veteran program.

One pastor who attended the CCTP event calls me on occasion to help him connect Veterans to the appropriate VA department for their particular needs. Immediately after Hurricane Harvey, he called and requested that I connect him to someone in the hospital who could help with an initiative. He had been contacted by a network associate who operates a Veteran housing facility in a Midwestern state. This associate is the executive director of the facility and wanted to contact the Houston VA. Knowing of the pastor’s recent training and working with Veterans, he solicited the pastor’s help to expedite the connection. The facility offered relocation and housing for 300 Veterans identified by the VA as displaced by Hurricane Harvey. I connected them to the appropriate department to address their offer.

The biggest discovery for me in working the CCTP is finding so many community clergy members who have little knowledge about the unique needs of Veterans and how their military experiences changed them from the persons they once knew. Forming professional ministerial relationships outside VA is not always easy, but I have discovered it to be a very rewarding experience for my pastoral ministry and it is beneficial to the overall care of Veterans. I am presently forming a professional relationship with a funeral director who is also a local elected official, who knows and supports the needs of the Veterans in her community. She stated that while she knows individuals at this VA hospital, she has never collaborated with any representative of the VA. Working with others, I hope to change this.

This article would be incomplete without the mention of a valuable stakeholder who attended both viewing events and co-facilitated the training. Chaplain (MAJ) William Cork, formally a Texas Army National Guard chaplain and now serves the Army Reserve, both advocates and cares for Veterans immensely. He is a trained CCTP facilitator and has introduced me to several community leaders who also care for Veterans.

I am excited about the opportunity CCTP provides me to work with the community clergy and other leaders who are willing to learn about the needs of Veterans and their families. It is also an honor and great privilege for me to be an ambassador for VA Chaplaincy and share our unique ministry with the community clergy - then form healing partnerships to care for Veterans.

Chaplain Sherlock Brown  
Houston, TX

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

“Joe” is far from typical. However, many Veterans do understand his plight. Joe came to me one day to express concerns over his inability to maintain a healthy spirituality. He explained - he was a Vietnam combat Veteran who had served “in country.” When he returned home, he wasn’t the same. He shared he didn’t relate well with people. Even those that were closest to him seemed distant and aloof. His challenge was he knew “they” weren’t the ones that changed!

Over time Joe had “burnt his bridges” with family and friends. He’d seen and experienced the atrocities of war. He told me that he didn’t like whom he had become. Rage and anger had become his best friends and the worst of his enemies. Like so many combat Veterans Joe turned to alcohol and illegal drugs to numb the deep and unrelenting emotional pain that was his life. He took whatever job he could get to simply pay the bills and fund his habits.

Eventually Joe lost everything. He became homeless. He moved from city to city doing what he could and staying wherever he could find a place. Life was not easy. Joe had all but given up hope. At some point, he made his way to the local VA. It was there that Joe rediscovered hope.

Joe was unaware of so many of the excellent services available to him. One person got him connected with a Veteran Service Officer (VSO) who helped him fill out disability claim paperwork. Because of his service in Vietnam he was eligible for compensation based on various illnesses related to Agent Orange. He got care for his mental health distress as well as for physical ailments.

Eventually Joe found his way to my office. He explained that he’d received help for his mental and physical challenges and he was grateful for the care. However, he shared there were still some things missing. He indicated he was receiving enough money that he could afford a decent place to live, but he had nothing other than the clothes on his back. He stated that the most challenging part was he didn’t even have a place to sleep other than on the floor. He told me that he was always tired, and it seemed he struggled with his spirituality because he was always exhausted.

With his permission, I connected Joe with several local agencies. One organization provided him with pots and pans. Another local group gave him linens such as towels and wash cloths. A community second hand clothing store heard about Joe and provided him with a few changes of clothing at no cost. He started making use of the “Pop-Up Food Pantry” coordinated by the VA’s Suicide Prevention team. One of the VSOs found out about Joe’s plight and shared Joe’s story at their monthly meeting. Before long, one of the members said they had a bed in storage that they weren’t using. Another member stated they had a recliner that was in near mint condition. Unfortunately, neither one of them had a way to get the furniture to Joe’s apartment. Others heard and offered up the use of their pickup truck. Another member worked with the city and knew how to navigate the system to get Joe a free bus pass because of his age. Before long, Joe had everything he needed and a way to get around.

The following Sunday Joe showed up for worship at our VA Chapel. He was clean, well-groomed and dressed appropriately. At the beginning of the worship service he said he just wanted to give thanks to his “Maker” and to all of those that helped make his life livable. Joe has not missed a worship service since.

(continued from page 7....)

We don't often think about the everyday things that we're able to do as being spiritual. In Joe's case, he didn't have anything to give thanks for other than life itself. Joe has shared that seeing so many people working to provide his basic life needs has truly helped him spiritually. He now sees that people do care. He sees there are those who expect nothing in return. We often think about "incarnational ministry" as being present with people in the middle of some tragic crisis. It's easy to think of ourselves as God's heart extended when helping Veterans with their issues of guilt and shame. We become experts in specific ministry settings such as Hospice, Substance Abuse, Mental Health and others. And, these gifts are so vital to bring about change for those we serve.

However, we can't forget there are those who just want and need life's basics. It truly does take a village to provide for our Veterans' spiritual needs. It is my prayer that each Chaplain Service have somebody that's able to be God Incarnate by providing the most basic of needs, or simply knowing those that can.

There's an old story (author unknown) about a person walking along the beach. Every few feet he'd or she'd stop and pick up a starfish and throw it back into the ocean. A passerby saw and said, "There's thousands of starfish. You can't make a difference." The beach goer picked up another starfish and tossed it into the ocean. He or she grinned and said, "It made a difference to that one!"

What can you do to make a difference for someone today?

Chaplain Thomas Mills  
Danville, IL

## Beer Run

A hospice nurse at another hospital told me this: "My eight year old daughter said to me: 'Mommy, you must not be a very good nurse because all your patients die'." This is the reality of working in hospice.

After one grueling week in which we had four deaths, I noticed that gloom had set in our hospice unit. There are many ceremonies one can do.... What I did was a beer run.

I bought one case of diet root beer and one case of regular root beer and distributed them ice cold to the staff. This ceremony brought a level of relief to our floor.

Chaplain Paul Bricker  
Beckley WV



Supervising Chaplain Mark Lobst & Staff Chaplain Paul Bricker (with cap) prepare for our Beer Run

## BY ANY OTHER NAME

My grandparents, Otis and Elsie, survived the Great Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and World War II. Surviving three great Twentieth Century disasters is largely why they and their generation earned the title, “The Greatest Generation.” They certainly demonstrated what it means to sacrifice and live without. They were religious, too. As a teenager, I can still remember watching the Billy Graham Crusade on TV with my grandmother, while eating a huge bowl of buttery popcorn. So, considering all my grandparents wonderful qualities, love, and hardships, I find it especially difficult to criticize them. To be clear, I loved and respected my grandparents. But for me, I am still embarrassed by this fact: my grandparents were racists. By “racists” I mean they believed in what the Oxford dictionary calls racism: “The belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race.” Now, I could excuse them for being locked into their time and culture. But racism by any other name is still racism.

Racism can be sneaky. Not all racists wear brazen swastikas or burn crosses on front lawns. My grandparents did not belong to any hate groups or alt-right organizations. They were devout Democrats. And, being from Illinois, the state that boasts, “Land of Lincoln,” they were certainly not nostalgic about the Confederacy. As far as I can remember, they never hated anybody. They were simple folks who eked out a meager existence. Due to poor health, my grandfather retired early and they survived barely on his social security paycheck. Whenever my grandmother could find work, she earned extra cash in greasy restaurant kitchens, darning socks and doing laundry for the locals. Looking back, I see their racism as more the product of ignorance, fear, misinformation, and a lack of friendships outside of their own protected social circle.

My grandmother was a warm and deeply loving person. And she had a particular point of view about those she called, “colored people.” For example, sometimes on a Saturday morning she would hold my little hand while she escorted me into a shoe repair shop owned by a local Black family. She was generous and polite, but grandma’s prejudices were deeply rooted, there’s no doubt about it. I heard her use the “N” word very seldom; but when she did she never apologized for it. My grandfather, on the other hand, was more theological about race. He believed Africans were descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, allegedly cursed by his father, making his descendants the dark-skinned African people, a theological myth and gobbledegook, for many reasons I cannot address here.

As I grew up, I became more and more unsettled by the logic that said a person’s value could be reflected by the color of his or her skin. This culturally induced racism is one of the few sad things I remember about my grandfather, whom I experienced otherwise as a kind but frail man, weakened by emphysema. My grandmother soldiered on after his death, continuing to work and draw a modest survivor’s benefit. She worked until she had a stroke in the fall of 1967, the year I graduated from high school. She died the following year, the same year Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I still remember where I was when I heard that my grandmother had died. And I never forgot where I was and the shock I felt upon hearing of Dr. King’s death. I don’t remember having a conversation about him with my grandma. Yet, his work, his message, and his life left a deep impression on me, a poor White teenager at the time.

In 1969, I was drafted and sent to the Vietnam War. I fought alongside of African Americans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and people of other races. I admit witnessing the tell-tale signs of racism and prejudice while I was there. But I also experienced interracial camaraderie and many of us were, and still are, proud to call ourselves “brothers.” Because what drew our hearts together wasn’t the color of our skin, but rather the “content of our character.” We were family in that fragile moment of time.

We are better at building walls than dismantling them. We form judgments about someone before we get to know him or her as a person. I remain amazed at how so many of us, with so little knowledge, buy into a stereotype about a particular group of people. That prejudice could be a sweeping negative perception of Black teenagers with hoodies, or a prejudice against all city cops, Kentucky coal miners, Irish Catholics, Latinos, Mormons, gays, or lesbians. Prejudice is a contagious sickness, fed by twisted logic and an unquenchable thirst for power. It eats up the soul. Racism and prejudice are the evil

twins that stir up fear, hate, and intolerance, ultimately tearing apart the fabric of family relations, community, and society itself.

A spiritual awakening that reminds us we are all God’s children: an unfettered love, and reaching out are the only antidotes to this disease. Being open-minded means being willing to risk going outside of one’s own comfort zone, one’s own culture and tribe. Someone said, “We all arrived on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.” The good news is that we have a real choice: as a Nation, we can choose fear and distrust of those other people, or we can choose to reach out and get to know those who seem different than us, with a spirit of love and kindness. In some ways, we have come further in our thinking than my grandparents did and many of the WWII generation; but we still have such a long way to go.

Chaplain Larry Taylor  
San Diego, CA

The Theme for the May 2018 Issue of the *Spirit of Chaplaincy* Newsletter.....

The theme for May 2018 is ‘Making a Difference.’ Each day as we interact with patients, staff, families and volunteers, we make a difference in their lives. Perhaps it may be as simple as bringing a smile to their faces or as profound as changing the direction of their lives. As chaplains we do make a significant difference. It is time to tell our stories. Please share with us an article describing how you have made a difference in the life of an individual, a group or your medical center. Perhaps you may wish to share how someone made a difference in your life.

Chaplain Paul Swerdlow  
Northport, NY



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Stained glass window at the  
National VA Chaplain Center.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

- APC and NACC Joint Annual Conference: "Partners in Shaping the Future" - June 12-15, 2018, Marriott Marquis, Anaheim, CA. [www.professionalchaplains.org](http://www.professionalchaplains.org) and [www.NACC.org](http://www.NACC.org).
- ACPE Annual Conference: - May 9-11, 2018, Atlanta, GA. [www.acpe.edu](http://www.acpe.edu).
- CASC/ACSS Annual Conference: "Exploring Spiritual Landscapes Through the Arts" - April 25-28, 2018, Deerhurst, ON. [www.spiritualcare.ca](http://www.spiritualcare.ca).
- CPSP Annual Plenary: "The Future of Clinical Chaplaincy" - March 17-21, 2018, Oakland, CA. [www.cpsp.org](http://www.cpsp.org).
- NAJC Annual Conference: "29th Annual Conference" - January 14-17, 2018, Rosen Hotel, Orlando, FL. [www.najc.org](http://www.najc.org)
- HealthCare Chaplaincy Network 'Caring for the Human Spirit' Conference: April 23-25, 2018, Sheraton New Orleans, New Orleans, LA. [www.healthcarechaplaincy.org](http://www.healthcarechaplaincy.org)
- Department of Veterans Affairs National Black Chaplains Association 2018 Annual Conference: "Battlefield Focus: Caring for Veterans, Their Families and Care Givers" - March 14-17, 2018, Hyatt Regency, San Diego, CA. [www.vablackchaplains.org](http://www.vablackchaplains.org)