

CLERGY EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters in Spiritual Care

When Presence Becomes Ministry

01 “Why Did God Let This Happen?”

After a sudden death, a grieving family member asked, “Chaplain, why did God let this happen?”

There were many theological responses the chaplain could have offered. Instead, he recognized that this might not actually be a request for a theological explanation.

He said, “I don’t have an answer that could make this loss hurt less. But I will stay here with you.”

The family member began to cry.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain resisted the pressure to explain the unexplainable, even though he likely had a theological answer ready.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He heard grief underneath the theological question, and answered the grief instead of the question.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that sometimes people asking “why” are really saying, “this hurts.”

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Not every question is actually a request for an answer.
- I try to let theology make room for lament instead of replacing it.
- “I will stay here with you” can matter more than any explanation I could offer.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Can our theology make room for lament?*

02 “I Don’t Want to Pray”

A person in crisis told the chaplain, “Please don’t pray for me.”

The chaplain responded, “Okay.”

No argument. No correction. No attempt to sneak prayer into the conversation. They continued talking.

Before leaving, the person said, “Thanks for respecting that.”

What Presence Looked Like That Day

Spiritual care began with respect, not with the chaplain’s own agenda for how the conversation should go.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He followed the person’s spiritual cues instead of his own, and let “okay” actually mean okay.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that the ministry of presence isn’t measured by how many prayers we say. Sometimes love looks like respecting someone’s no.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “Okay” doesn’t need an asterisk or a follow up attempt.
- I try to follow spiritual cues instead of setting my own agenda.
- Respecting someone’s no can be its own form of ministry.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Can we remain fully pastoral when the person doesn’t want the spiritual intervention we hoped to offer?*

03 The Pastor Who Had No One to Pastor Him

A pastor had spent weeks caring for a grieving congregation. Funerals. Hospital visits. Counseling families. Phone calls. Prayer.

A chaplain asked, “How are you doing?”

The pastor immediately began talking about the congregation. The chaplain gently interrupted, “I know how they’re doing. I’m asking about you.”

The pastor fell silent. Then his eyes filled with tears. “I’m tired.”

For the next few minutes, the shepherd got permission to stop shepherding.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain saw the human being underneath the clergy role, and refused to let the deflection stand as the whole answer.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He noticed when service was becoming a way of avoiding one’s own needs, and gently redirected the question back to the person, not the role.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that spiritual leaders need places where they aren’t required to be spiritually strong for everyone else.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “I’m asking about you” sometimes needs to be said twice.
- Service can become a way of avoiding my own needs, and I try to notice that in myself too.
- Even the shepherd needs permission to stop shepherding sometimes.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Who pastors the pastor?*

Walking Together

A classroom. A hospital room. A veterans' center. A disaster shelter. A school hallway. A church.

The environments change. The uniforms change. The responsibilities change. But one need keeps showing up in every single one of these stories: people need to know that they have been seen.

That's why these encounters were never really about having the perfect response. They're about learning to notice the moment. Presence asks, how am I showing up? Attunement asks, what might this person need from me right now?

Sometimes we speak. Sometimes we listen. Sometimes we help solve a practical problem. Sometimes we connect someone with additional support. Sometimes we pray, when prayer is welcomed. And sometimes we simply pull up a chair.

Whether I'm sitting with a student, a nurse, a veteran, a disaster survivor, a teacher, a pastor, a first responder, or a colleague, I don't have to become an expert in someone's pain to get better at being present with them.

Thank you for spending this time with me. I don't share these stories because I have every answer. I share them because every person in these pages, whether I sat with them myself or simply learned from their story, has taught me something about compassion, hope, and what it means to truly show up.

HEALING BEGINS WITH PRESENCE™

Practice Note: These stories span multiple professional settings. Some are drawn from real encounters and have been shortened and de-identified; others are composite teaching illustrations built in the same spirit, to protect confidentiality while teaching trauma-responsive principles. They do not provide medical, psychological, legal, or educational policy advice. Supportive practices should be used with informed consent, within the practitioner's training and scope, and alongside appropriate emergency, medical, behavioral health, supervisory, or spiritual-care resources when indicated.