

# Reflections on Leadership



## Faith Based, Mission Driven

April 2019

As a teenager I began working as an orderly on a medical surgical floor in a Sister's of Mercy Hospital in Port Huron Michigan. At that time I knew nothing about the corporate structure of organizations and the difference between working in a for profit or not-for-profit environment. All I knew is that I enjoyed my work and got great satisfaction in being able to help people. The time spent in this entry level position shaped my outlook on life, and led to my decision to become a Registered Nurse, which ultimately took me to Presbyterian Senior Living and a career that has lasted for over 45 years.

It did not take me long to figure out that the hospital was different from the other places I had worked. It was a time in history when the Sisters of Mercy could be found in positions throughout the hospital, and by their very dress, communicated the idea that this was a spiritual environment. My Catholic friends seemed to have a fear of the Sisters that I did not share, though after hearing the stories of life in Catholic school, I was inclined to give the Sisters a wide berth whenever possible. The



morning and evening prayers offered by the priest that echoed in the hallways and hospital rooms imparted a sense of peace and comfort to patients and staff alike. Being a Presbyterian made no difference to anyone. I felt that I belonged in this place.

Slowly I began to understand what it meant to work in a faith based, mission driven, not-for-profit environment. Working in a front line service role the difference was relatively simple to describe. I was expected to bring my whole self to work – body, mind, and spirit. In addition to learning the skills necessary to do my job and working hard to complete my daily assignments, I could pray with someone who was in pain. Extending kindness to everyone was an expectation, not an extra effort. Furthermore, the people I worked with shared values that guided our relationships with each other. I was told that I possessed the very hands and feet of Jesus to serve others in need. In many ways such standards were impossible to live up to every moment of every day. But I believe that aspiring to live up to these expectations made me a better person.

Later, in my business law classes as an undergraduate I learned about the difference between a for-profit and not-for-profit enterprise. For-profit businesses existed for the financial benefit of the owners of the company. Profit is the goal, and businesses pay state, and federal taxes on the



profits of the business. Not-for-profit organizations had a mission to benefit the greater good of the community. It did not pay taxes, and could not use the resources of the organization for purposes outside of its stated mission. I also discovered that not-for-profit organizations can and should make a profit to fulfill current obligations and provide a solid foundation to continue to serve in the future. None of this was as personally inspiring as working as an orderly in a hospital or as a nurse or director of nursing for Presbyterian Homes, but it did help me to understand the underlying difference between organizational types that sustained the culture of care and compassion.

As I was given more leadership responsibilities at Presbyterian Homes, I gained an appreciation of the role of volunteer board members who made sure that the organization fulfilled its mission of serving seniors. Board members were the keepers of the flame, making it possible for the staff to sustain this atmosphere of care and concern to generation after generation of older persons.

Continued >



At the heart of the faith based, mission driven, not-for-profit story is a clearly articulated and inspiring mission. For Presbyterian Senior Living the mission is defined as follows:

**Guided by the life and teachings of Jesus, the mission of Presbyterian Senior Living is to provide compassionate, vibrant and supportive communities and services to promote wholeness of body, mind and spirit.**

PSL also articulates the values that describe how the mission is to be carried out every day:

1. **Inclusive** – Reach out to include all persons in the communities in which we serve, as recipients of service, employees, and volunteers.
2. **Transparency / Integrity** – Adhere to the highest standards of transparency, honesty and impartiality to assure the public trust in the organization and its mission.
3. **Quality** – Promote successful aging and enhance the quality of life of those we serve through the provision of exceptional services, innovation, maximizing the options available to seniors, and empowering them to choose the services that best meet their needs.
4. **Stewardship** – Be good stewards of the resources available to the organization with the goal of achieving the greatest good to the greatest number of seniors in the most cost effective manner possible, and to focus on environmentally sustainable practices in every aspect of PSL’s ministry.

5. **People** – Provide PSL staff and volunteers with a supportive, rewarding and challenging environment that gives opportunity for a satisfying experience in the service of others.
6. **Community Benefit** – In addition to providing subsidized care to those with limited financial resources, offering support to local people, clubs, schools, churches and social service agencies, and governmental entities to strengthen the fabric of the communities we service.



In a few short months I will conclude my time of service as CEO of Presbyterian Senior Living. In this period I am naturally drawn to looking back and looking forward – appreciating the journey to this point, and contemplating what comes next for a faith based, mission driven, not-for-profit organization like PSL. I believe that there are a number of questions that all not-for-profit organizations need to ask as they look to the future:

- **Mission Drift** - Are we continuing to adhere to the founding vision of the organization - including a clear expression of the faith underpinnings and the reason why it exists?

- **Values in action** - How effective are we in making sure the values of the organization are operationalized to reach everyone we serve?
- **Charitable Intent** - In what ways are we reaching out to serve those with few resources? There is nothing wrong with serving the affluent with kindness and compassion. But that work is not enough. In the words of the great Presbyterian preacher (and Kirkland Village resident) Elam Davies – we are called to serve “the least, the last and the lost.”
- **Capacity** - How do we intend to grow to serve more people? Complacency is the most dangerous threat to the successful organization. The needs of the larger community call us to respond.
- **Preserving the mission** - What are we doing to strengthen the organization to continue to serve in a changing environment? This includes staff and future leadership development, maintaining financial strength, and making strategic investments.
- **Innovation** - What steps are we taking now to remain relevant in a changing world? Innovation is needed if we intend to lead instead of simply following others.

A lot has changed from my first days as an orderly 50 years ago. But the satisfaction that comes from working in a faith based, mission driven, not-for-profit organization will continue as long as we are faithful to that sacred call to serve.

Blessings,