



## Rev. Joseph J. Driscoll

# Not One Way, Not My Way, Not Even the Right Way

Yahweh of the Hebrew scriptures seldom reverts to name-calling – schoolyard style, that is – though the constantly bickering tribes certainly deserved such treatment. And centuries, even millennia later, all the so-called religious bodies, right to the present day, still bicker, and in the extreme, bloody one another in tribal warfare. It is no wonder so many people stay clear of organized religion.

But I do remember the voice of an angry Lord God calling the people “stiff-necked.” Not only once, but many times over would the voice of the Lord echo through many pages and many events in the lives of the people whom Yahweh loved particularly and peculiarly, even if they were “stiff-necked.”

Good for you, God, if you don’t mind me saying so. You chose a good name – an accurate adjective when you pause and play with the image. Stiff-necked: head held high, self-righteous, above the fray (those tax collectors and sinners, for example), rigid, a know-it-all. Very different from a head bowed, humble, one with the crowd, flexible, willing to listen and learn from the other.

All of us, individually and collectively, do at times get stiff necks from looking out *one* way, that is *our* way, and of course, though often unsaid, the *right* way. So how does one relieve a stiff neck? Let it drop first. Then move it back and forth. Massage it. Roll it back and forth, up and down. Of course, you know what might happen then? One might actually catch a view of something from the side, or from below, or a little to the right, or left. A different way of seeing things, someone else’s way of seeing things, perhaps a better way of seeing things.

In early September, representatives of the tribes of six major pastoral care, counseling, and education organizations gathered in New York City – nearly 50 of us. This initial meeting is the first of a year-long process by which we will move closer to the goal of agreeing to one set of universal standards for the profession of chaplaincy, one set of universal standards for supervised pastoral education, and one universal code of ethics.

I have no doubts – whoops, that is a little stiff-necked

– rather I have few doubts – of where the membership of our respective organizations rests on the goal of this monumental effort to be one people with one voice in our profession. Anyone in the ballroom in Toronto where 1,500 of us gathered last February will remember the spontaneous eruption of applause that stopped Neil Elford, then President of CAPPE mid-sentence when he was announcing the decision of the four boards who earlier that day voted to move forward with this venture. That was an incredible moment. Standing on the dais witnessing the spontaneous ovation, I caught Neil’s eye and he looked as stunned as the rest of us standing there, taken aback by the passionate response of our members.

The lights down, the dais darkened, the tables cleared and away from the glamour of standing dreams, we now sit at working tables with lots of tribal differences, or in more refined language, cultural differences among the now six organizations.

My prayer is that when any of us, individually or collectively, start to stiffen our neck, that we will have the courage, respect, and care to invite the other to drop one’s head, move it back and forth, massage it a little, and roll it back and forth, up and down.

The NACC’s way, or Joe Driscoll’s way, or whoever else’s way, collectively or individually, is only one way, not necessarily the right way, and maybe even not the best way. There are different ways of seeing or doing things – someone else’s way of seeing or doing things, perhaps a better way of seeing and doing things.

From the many conversations with our colleagues in the other cognate groups, especially during the last six months among the leadership, I have discovered approaches and processes in the other organizations that I believe are far better than our own; likewise I have seen methods and processes where I think the NACC leads the way.

A fundamental approach to this common venture, I believe, is the premise that each group contains some wisdom, and that if we can gather that wisdom from each, we will come away with not just a common set of standards or ethics, but an *excellent* common set of standards and ethics.

Last month, I was on a conference call with several physicians with whom I will be working to draft guide-

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lines for physicians on how to approach spiritual issues with patients. As you can imagine, this is a critical issue that has particularly come to the fore through the conferences the last 10 years on spirituality and medicine. In a lively, at times challenging exchange, Dr. Francis Lu (a pioneer among physicians in raising the need to attend to a patient's spiritual concerns; see the interview in the March 1999 *Vision*) asked me if chaplains had any written guidelines that could support the position that I was laying out for them.

I shared that ironically six of the major chaplaincy, education, and pastoral counseling organizations would be gathering to look at formulating one set of standards that will hopefully address some of the issues that we were discussing. He seemed quite excited about this prospect as I indicated our proposed timeline of the fall of 2004. This experience further underscores the importance of "getting our act together" as now even the physicians are looking to us.

Jim Gibbons, ACPE President, issued a word of caution that I found an important balance as I find myself ratcheting up my own expectations for this ambitious undertaking. He said, "We need to have the freedom not to succeed." While that may seem overly cautious, perhaps

even self-defeating, I believe the wisdom that Jim offered is to loosen up our expectations which themselves can become "stiff-necked." He and all of the executives and presidents want very much to succeed, and hope we do; however, this is a process that is far beyond any one individual or any one organization.

Many of us call this the work of the Spirit. God's spirit. And God is not stiff-necked; rather it is God's people that are stiff-necked in our petty bickering, maybe not so petty, or seemingly so at the time.

Our organizations have been blowing with the Spirit of God more or less from our beginnings. Our organizations are not an end in and of themselves. In fact, they are merely dust formed into clay for a particular purpose at a particular time. We are a part of the religious tribes to which we belong, and all 12 or 20 or whatever many, somehow originating with the one God over all.

Our organizations are blowing with the Spirit of God, more or less. When we are stiff-necked, it seems then that we are less of God. So let's drop our heads, let's move them back and forth, let's massage them, let's roll them back and forth, up and down. Let's be more of God.

Let's show God that we heard God's voice. We seek not to be a stiff-necked people. ▼