

Speaker 1:

In this episode of Tim Talk we continue our discussion on religious diversity with Melissa Skahan, Vice-President of Mission Integration at Northern Light Mercy Hospital.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, President and CEO of Northern Light Health. If you're new to our podcast, I welcome you to the discussion on racial, social and medical justice and hope you find it as essential and relevant as I do.

Tim Dentry:

If you're a regular listener, you know we are reinforcing our culture of inclusion, and we thought it good to include thoughts of Northern Light and community leaders on religious diversity in healthcare.

Tim Dentry:

Joining me to continue in the discussion is Melissa Skahan, Vice-President of Mission Integration at Northern Light Mercy Hospital. Thank you for joining me here today, Melissa.

Melissa Skahan:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. So first of all, I should note to our audience that Northern Light Mercy Hospital, our key care hospital in Portland, such an essential part of our healthcare delivery system at Northern Light is a sponsored ministry of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

Tim Dentry:

I can't ironically, because there's nothing ironic about the fact that during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, the irony is to pandemics, that the Sisters of Mercy opened a hospital in Portland to heal the sick. Melissa, that certainly gives Mercy a unique perspective as a healthcare organization with religious roots. How is Mercy's faith based foundation shaped the organization?

Melissa Skahan:

Absolutely. As a Catholic organization, there is a history and a comfort at Mercy delivering holistic person centered care. That may include responding to the spiritual needs of our patients and their families if they so choose. They have wonderfully skilled certified chaplains, including a Sister of Mercy, or dear Sister Pat, who is specifically trained to welcome and serve patients from all religions, as well as patients who do not identify with any religion or faith tradition.

Melissa Skahan:

It truly is always identifying what matters most to our patients. We've always worked very closely with faith leaders in greater Portland, and this partnership has become increasingly important during the pandemic. For some patients during COVID receiving the sacraments or spending time with a beloved priest, rabbi or iman, especially at end of life, has been one of the most important interventions to them.

Melissa Skahan:

A local Episcopal priest had the opportunity at the onset of COVID to don PPE and spend time at the end of life with a beloved parishioner. He wrote to us afterwards and said, "Yesterday I was called in to anoint a dying COVID-19 patient. She was still able to talk to me and told me about her grandchildren. She said the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer and smiled and held my hand. It was one of the more moving visits I've ever made.

Melissa Skahan:

"I want to tell you how amazing the staff was, from the person at the employee entrance, to the Catholic chaplain, to the incredible nurses at the nurses' station. Every person was a model of compassion and gentleness combined with real professionalism and care.

Melissa Skahan:

"Their attention to making sure I was gowned up and scrubbed correctly and their support of the family who were there made it all feel safe. It also felt loving and peaceful, mercy at the heart of healing."

Melissa Skahan:

It is in these moments, Tim, we draw upon our faith traditions and our partnership with local clergy to deliver the expert care that truly honors the person and the interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you, Melissa. The interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit, that is such an important awareness of our caregivers, that we have a responsibility to be sensitive to all three characteristics of the lives of those that we serve and each other.

Tim Dentry:

As we record this conversation the COVID-19 infection rate is rising rapidly. Hospitalizations are increasing around the country and here in Maine. While we are now COVID seasoned veterans in many ways, we're in our ninth month of pandemic response. Everyone is a bit fatigued, some more than a bit fatigued, and the situation can be emotionally exhausting even as we brace ourselves for more outbreaks.

Tim Dentry:

What I know of healthcare workers, and especially my colleagues at Northern Light, is that under those stressful conditions we still rise to the challenge and show our true colors as people caring for others who are the most vulnerable, but still it's a huge demand on our staff. How has Mercy Health tendered the spiritual needs of each other, of our staff?

Melissa Skahan:

Absolutely. When I think of this moment the distress is ever present for our team. As we prepare to serve it is so important to hold space for colleagues. Really holding space for colleagues gives voice to their concerns. Truly by naming the implications of the pandemic for our staff and normalizing the distress we set the stage to identify new ways for both self and group care.

Melissa Skahan:

Rounding by our senior leaders, chaplains, behavioral health colleagues and managers, and responding to the staff needs demonstrates our caring and concern. At Mercy we've had daily debriefs with our behavioral health team, partnered with Acadia. We've had chaplains staff warm lines and encourage colleagues to use EAP. Our chapels and meditation rooms remain open to our staff and daily mass is projected into the patients' rooms.

Melissa Skahan:

Active listening and allowing the time to be fully present for any colleague who is expressing distress is sacred work in healthcare, and it calls on each of us in this moment.

Melissa Skahan:

I'm also reminded this week of the power of rituals such as daily reflections, and we always look forward to your reflections every week, Tim. At Mercy we post daily reflections on the internet, and a provider reached out to me to share that she felt overwhelmed and turned to the internet to spend a moment with a reflection.

Melissa Skahan:

She shared that she had chosen to print that reflection and hang it in her office, where she could see it throughout her day for comfort, but also to reconnect her with her purpose. Whether prayer, poetry, art or inspirational quote, the reflections allow us to center ourselves during these extremely challenging times.

Tim Dentry:

Melissa, thank you very much for your thoughtful answers. The examples you gave are waiting by serving. In my formative years as a leader in healthcare were with two Catholic health systems, one sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy and the other by the Sisters of Bon Secours, and servant leadership was ingrained in us.

Tim Dentry:

I will say that now in these not latter years... Well, latter than it was before of my career, being a servant leader is actually the most rewarding aspect of my career and of my work. I would say that early on it's something I was learning and I was making sure I had in the forefront. Now it's just who I am, and therefore it is the most rewarding aspect, because I can be who I am and it's something that is giving and nurturing those that I work with.

Tim Dentry:

So it is in seeking out others and showing them that you care, and start by listening, and tuning in to what might appear small to you on the surface but what may be a very big matter in someone's life. That example that you gave of your colleague is one. That's what it's all about, and how we get better as an organization, and how we get better as individuals.

Tim Dentry:

So I would like to take this opportunity now to hear what's foremost on your mind with regard to these issues, Melissa. What would you like to ask of me?

Melissa Skahan:

Absolutely. Beyond our patients' symptoms and their chronic conditions and diagnoses we want to know them as people. We want to know how their medical conditions impact their life, their families, and their spirits. How do we prepare our colleagues to embrace religious diversity and spirituality to insure that healing and comfort is part of our person centered care? Does spirituality have a place at Northern Light Health, Tim?

Tim Dentry:

Great, great questions. Some of the most beautiful experiences in my lifetime came from different countries around the world and learning from their spiritual and faith based cultures. I saw profound expressions of faith in East Africa and the Middle East and other regions around the world.

Tim Dentry:

There was a common thread, a universal truth, a connection with something bigger than ourselves. There was a clear sense of service to others and what is most important in their lives. I see that as spirituality, and it's common in us all. We may express that spirituality in different faiths or within people who do not profess to a certain faith, but it's still spiritual. It's still personal.

Tim Dentry:

So to your questions, we are emphasizing training programs at Northern Light and within performance reviews which include awareness and sensitivity to the healing and comfort needs of our patients, including an appreciation of religious diversity. Most importantly, through these talks, our Friday reflections and the actions of our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council we're helping to nurture a Northern Light culture of caring for one another.

Tim Dentry:

That's a concept which now it's a vision for me. It was a concept that I struggled with previously in my career, and now I think it's full-blown, and as CEO I believe I'm able to really nurture that every day and have a big influence on that. I just want to say it again, culture caring starts with caring for one another, and that means having a place at the table for all those who embrace that culture and respect differences of practicing one's faith, or even those choosing not to practice a particular faith.

Tim Dentry:

So you also asked me does spirituality have a place at Northern Light? Great question. I have always believed that hospital, the practice of medicine, nursing... As you know, I think I've told you before, my mom was a nurse and my early mentors were nurses, and women religious by the way.

Tim Dentry:

In all aspects of care in all those who support the direct caregivers, all of us are in the service of a higher cause, something bigger than ourselves. The diversity of faith among our Northern Light colleagues and the communities we serve strengthen our culture.

Tim Dentry:

At the heart of that diversity is, again, the universal truth at a spiritual level where our work lies. I see examples of spiritual depth everywhere, the supply chain staff doing all they can to assure safe and

available material for our colleagues; our HR staff helping colleagues navigate their families' health plans; pharmacists increasing their personal interactions with patients during COVID; our environmental staff being so diligent in their work to keep us all safe; and the care and love in the eyes of our caregivers in helping worried families and patients in the office practices, hospitals, and even their homes.

Tim Dentry:

One Northern Light colleague recently wrote this. "I was privileged to visit over 20 foreign countries and directly observed and participated in the diversity that is our humanity. I worked directly with military members of seven different countries and as yet to find a one I would not call friend." Now that's spirituality, serving the higher purpose.

Tim Dentry:

We rock in our spirituality. That is what motivates us. We define spirituality universally and honor and respect diverse beliefs and faiths.

Melissa Skahan:

Wonderful. Wonderful. So, Tim, medicine, religion and spirituality have a long and intertwined history. Religion and spirituality often shape how patients interact with healthcare and how they shape their choices, such as an openness to a medication or other intervention, preferred gender of the care team, and end of life decisions. What resources does Northern Light have to help with navigation for our diverse patients?

Tim Dentry:

Great question. First I'll say that we are constantly developing this, so the way I'm going to answer that question today, we're going to have even more to update on and to share with the communities and those we serve in the coming months and years. We have great individuals, great teams all around this important topic.

Tim Dentry:

But today what I would say is in recognition of the role of spirituality and religion plays, and to bring increased attention to the spiritual needs of not only patients and families, but also healthcare professionals, we have an intentional presence of spiritual care providers.

Tim Dentry:

We serve many diverse communities, so we have many examples of patient care influenced by our religious and medical intersections, if you will. At Mercy, as you very well know, Melissa... You could say this better than I, but I'll state this. We have a minority health department or community health outreach workers that we contract with which acts as our cultural broker.

Tim Dentry:

Mercy also created with Bowdoin College a resource guide of the top 12 communities that we serve that identify cultural norms, faith and values. At Eastern Maine Medical Center we've incorporated an accredited spiritual care training program, this is relatively new, for those interested in learning spiritual

care in a multi faith clinical environment through the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education. It's a big deal.

Tim Dentry:

The aim of the Clinical Pastoral Education Program is to educate students around the complexity of religion and spirituality in the healthcare setting, increasing sensitivity and exploring the spiritual and moral stresses that may be present during the hospital admission. Really, really important.

Tim Dentry:

Also at EMMC one partnership that's really provided great education and resources for patients and staff alike is our relationship with Jehovah's Witnesses' Hospital Liaison Committee. Our care team there at EMMC has been instrumental in insuring all available resources, including an elder from the church be available to support our patients and care team when navigating decisions and alternatives related to blood transfusions, for example.

Tim Dentry:

Other Northern Light member organizations have created alliances with diverse communities of faith and spirituality for direct care in education in their communities. That's a big priority for Northern Light as a very community oriented and connected organization.

Tim Dentry:

Part of our uniqueness is that we serve so many diverse communities around the state, so we want to embrace the diversity on a spiritual level as well with what makes sense in those communities, and what are important groups and communities within the communities.

Tim Dentry:

So of course the common denominator is building trusting relationships with those community resources. Education, active listening, language support, and most importantly expressing humility, will most often develop the trust that is so necessary to meet all patient needs.

Tim Dentry:

From trust then evolves great communications and partnership, and to me that's a really important lesson learned post-COVID, is that we're all reacting to an acute health problem, people hospitalized, on respirators, some meeting the end of their life because of COVID, and all the just turmoil that this has created.

Tim Dentry:

But you know, maybe if we did more on the front end with the community and we had a trusting relationship we could do a lot more to prevent and anticipate and head off these kinds of awful situations that it brings into people's life, so I think it all gets connected.

Tim Dentry:

So, Melissa, thank you for joining me here to continue the conversation.

Melissa Skahan:

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Absolutely. Thank you for your leadership role, Tim, in really advancing these important conversations across Maine. It's heartwarming.

Tim Dentry:

Thanks, Melissa. It's an honor. It's great working with you.

Tim Dentry:

That will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk, so thank you, our podcast listeners, as well. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry encouraging you to listen and act, to promote a culture of caring, diversity and inclusion.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to learn more about the subject you can find additional information at northernlighthealth.org/podcast. We welcome you to join us for a new episode of Tim Talk every two weeks.