



Tending Hearts and Souls

His days are packed with emotional conversations, prayers, and acts of kindness for patients and their families as they confront all kinds of loss, including serious illness and death.

“Each day, people surprise and inspire me with their courage, their humor, their generosity, their grace, and their love,” O’Neal says. “The work is uplifting.”

He felt called to this ministry after reinventing himself several times during his business career. “Since I was a kid, I have always thought that life is about adventure. I have always been looking for the next adventure,” O’Neal says.

“Being back in the hospital is a kind of coming home for me,” O’Neal says. “I was pre-med as an undergraduate, and I had worked in Washington, D.C.-area hospitals as an orderly and then as a surgical assistant.” When he didn’t get accepted into medical school, he found industrial chemical sales a natural fit. He had success there and was recruited at a young age to be a sales manager in a small company.

Recognizing that business would be his career for a while, he earned a Master of Business Administration degree from the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From there, he went to Northern Telecom and then to the American Social Health Association, where he helped get the National AIDS Hotline up and running.

But O’Neal missed his roots in the natural sciences and, after several years, found his way into the environmental consulting field, specifically around ambient air quality. He and his colleagues at a small firm in Chapel Hill guided sections of industry on air quality science, policy, and regulations.



Seeking a solid foundation in the field, he went to graduate school and earned a Master of Science degree in environmental science. In his final role before becoming a chaplain, he was a project manager on a hydrological forecasting project in Eastern Europe.

Turning an Avocation into a Vocation

While juggling demanding careers and raising three children with his wife, Janice Whitaker, O'Neal participated in pastoral care work with his church, Christ Episcopal, in downtown Raleigh. One of these pastoral care roles was that of Eucharistic Visitor, where laypeople take the Eucharist to those who are homebound or in the hospital.

"I think I wore the rector out with my unending stories about 'how powerful this seems, how meaningful it was to me and to those I minister to.' He suggested I investigate clinical pastoral education (CPE) at one of the local hospitals. I hemmed and hawed for about a year," O'Neal says.

Finally, he had the opportunity to talk with a veteran hospital supervising chaplain. About 20 minutes into their conversation, she said, "Jesse, you know what your problem is? You are afraid you are going to get into this, and you are going to fall in love with this work. Then, what will you do?"

He accepted the challenge and took his first CPE training at WakeMed during the summer of 2014.

"I did fall in love with the work," O'Neal says. "I fell hard." His first internship with WakeMed's Clinical Pastoral Education Program led to a second and then a yearlong chaplain residency.

The timing was right. His three children were grown, his wife had retired from a successful career as an executive with a pharmaceutical company, and they had saved well.

"Emotionally, I don't think I could have done this in my 20s or 30s, maybe not even in my 40s or 50s, because I hadn't accumulated the life experience that supports me in the work," O'Neal says.

He draws on his project management experience for his new field. "There are lots of ways to be successful as a project manager," O'Neal says. "My style was to be aware of and invest in the emotional dimensions of the team, hoping to understand what keeps them moving forward and what holds them back," he says. "Knowing them emotionally was a dimension of that."

He says, now, instead of caring about people as an adjunct of the work, caring for people is the work.

Like his other endeavors, O'Neal wanted to be sure he was well trained for his new career, so he recently completed his Master of Arts degree in pastoral and spiritual care at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. Before COVID-19 hit, he traveled to Denver for several days each 10-week quarter for in-person classes. Under COVID-19 restrictions over the past year, all hybrid classes have become completely online.



Finding Those in Need

Every day is unique for a hospital chaplain. O'Neal leans on emergency room nurses, whom he calls "absolute rock stars," for guidance on where the pastoral needs might be.

He often meets with patients who have had heart attacks, strokes, or other serious illnesses. He also meets with the patients' families to help them negotiate their feelings as well as hospital procedures.

Once family members arrive, he stays with them. In all these situations, there is loss: loss of function, loss of capabilities, and, sometimes, loss of life, O'Neal says. "My job is to provide the emotional and spiritual support that allows them to initiate their grieving process."

"When people lose a loved one, their grief can be overwhelming. The reason people grieve is that they had the courage to love as if that love could last forever. I appreciate that courage. And I want to be around people who have that kind of courage," O'Neal says.

When they're grieving, they're coming to terms with the reality that this grief is going to be with them in some form forever, he says. "When you live in a world that has great love, you also live in a world that has great grief."

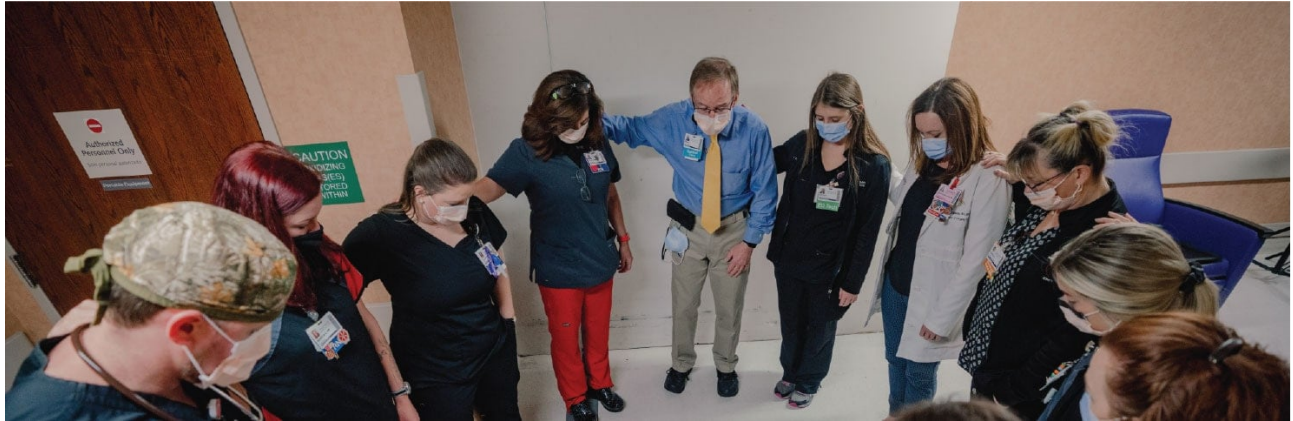
Being there is important, O'Neal says. "I cannot ever fully understand the suffering of another human being, the depth and the texture of their suffering," O'Neal says. "They are on their own unique path through this world. I don't know what their suffering can or should mean in this journey."

Although he doesn't leave anyone's side during difficult times, he knows it's a process that people have to go through themselves with the help of their families, friends, and beliefs. "They have to find emotional traction. They have to find something that allows them to get through to the next minute, and the next, and the next," O'Neal says.

"When our kindred humans, in the face of devastating grief, find that inner resolve that their life can go on, that their life must go on, and gather their family and their love and leave the hospital burdened with grief, but strengthened by hope, this fills me with wonder," O'Neal says. "I cannot explain it without God."

Unfortunately, comforting people with physical touch hasn't been possible this past year because of COVID-19. Everyone keeps the recommended distance, says O'Neal, and hugging has been replaced with elbow bumping.

O'Neal says physical touch is very important, and it can be reassuring to everyone. "I am a hugger, but, during COVID, we try to keep our distance," he says.



Offering Company to Others

When he has time, O’Neal does what he calls “cold calls,” visiting patients and their families throughout the hospital dealing with less serious conditions.

Sometimes, these visits and conversations last for five minutes. Sometimes, they are an hour long. “I never know where conversations are going,” says O’Neal. “I try to be receptive to where the patient or family wants to go.”

During the visit, O’Neal usually learns something about the person’s faith. “Some people want to immediately open that door and want spiritual and emotional support, and some don’t.”

Often, the conversations lead to a request for prayer. “I do that with great delight. I am in prayer multiple times a day, really continually throughout the day, which is a great joy to me,” O’Neal says.

He lets patients initiate prayer requests. Sometimes, the requests come in as O’Neal is leaving the room and he asks them, “Is there anything else I can do for you today?” They might look at him and look at his badge and say, “Well, you are a chaplain. You could pray for us?”

“I can never predict what people want me to pray about. Sometimes, they’ll ask to pray about healing or good results for a test they’ve had.” But sometimes, their prayer requests catch him by surprise.

In one case, the patient said, “I have been lying here for the last couple hours, and I can see that the people working here are good people. They have been exposed to all kinds of risks in the last year. I want you to pray for them.”

Another patient spent an hour explaining why he was an atheist. As O’Neal was leaving, the patient said, “You’re a chaplain. Aren’t you going to pray for me?”

He did.

Often patients repay him in kind. “I can’t count the times patients have prayed for me and over me,”



O'Neal says. "They lift me up with their humor, resiliency, and grace. It would fill up your heart to the breaking point."

O'Neal has been trained to minister to people of every faith, including those who are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu.

One day, early in the pandemic, he stopped to talk to a Hindu woman. She was quietly weeping against a wall in the emergency department because visitation was so constrained. O'Neal asked how he could be of assistance. "Would you pray for me?" she asked.

He told her he knew a little about Hinduism, but he didn't know how to pray in her faith. She said to him, "You just pray how you pray. That will be enough."

Giving It All He's Got

O'Neal is in awe of his medical colleagues. "I feel extremely grateful to be working with rock stars every single day. If you could see what this team is able to accomplish with their clinical skills and their compassion, it would touch your heart," O'Neal says.

"I believe in the mission of WakeMed," says O'Neal. "It's an extraordinary place that began as a community hospital in the 1960s, with a mission of serving all. It has grown and expanded and is regularly mentioned in the same sentence as the well-known university-based hospitals in the area."

His wife, Janice, says, "Jesse has been successful in various business roles but never as fulfilled as in the chaplaincy work. Each day, he feels that he's making a difference by helping patients and families, some of whom are experiencing the most difficult times in their lives. "He is a compassionate extrovert who is able to sense what people need and how to help them," she says. "He loves his work and has found his calling."

His daughter, Meaghan O'Neal Woodhouse, adds, "If I or one of my loved ones had to be in the emergency department, I would want someone like my dad there to help support us through the process."