

# Three lessons about deaning learned in a nursing home

By TOM TANNER

[Editor's Note: This article is based on reflections the author has offered for many years at the ATS School for New Deans.]

*I was a dean for nearly two decades before I joined the ATS staff in 2012. I learned a lot about deaning in those years and since—from books and peers and mentors and others. But three of the best lessons I ever learned about being a dean, I learned in a nursing home. It was the home where my mother resided during the last few years of her life. When I didn't have other obligations on Sunday morning, I worshipped with her there in that nursing home she called home. Following are three lessons I learned about leading and deaning from those wonderful residents.*



## **Lesson #1: Some habits are holy**

This particular nursing home had perhaps 150 residents. On any given Sunday, as many as half of them were often in church. We had no sanctuary, so we met in the nursing home activity room—next to card games, Bingo, and Wii bowling. What struck me about these faithful church people was just *how* faithful they were. To paraphrase Proverbs 22, they had been "trained up" as children in "the way they should go" on Sunday, and "when they were old," they "did not depart from it." It was a holy habit that stuck with them. In wheelchairs and walkers, they came to that church. In sickness and in health, they came to that church. On good days and bad, they came to that church.

One story illustrates well the holiness of their habits. This church had no officers or official meetings, but they did have a chaplain—a wonderful young man and a graduate of the seminary where I served as dean. He

loved those people, and they loved him, but I remember one Sunday quite vividly. He began services by complaining about having a cold that week and wondering if he should have just stayed home and rested. One resident who had just turned 100—blind as a bat and in constant pain—whispered rather loudly from her wheelchair, "Well, some of us don't feel too good either, but we came." It was a holy habit.

Having served as an academic dean for nearly 20 years, I can affirm the value of having holy habits. Whether you've been a dean for a few months or a few decades, one lesson worth learning is to have some helpful, if not holy, habits. I don't mean going to church every Sunday—though that's not a bad one. I mean any holy habit that will help you be a better dean. Let me share just one.

I learned early on in my decades of deaning the wisdom of this line from the Lebanese-American poet and theologian Khalil Gibran, "Let there be spaces in your together-ness." One of my holy habits I called "Good Friday." Whenever possible, I tried to avoid the office on Friday afternoon. It was not just dead time; it was a great time to get away and do something different. It might be reading or writing (and not ATS reports!) or just relaxing. It was simply a welcome "space in my togetherness" with faculty, staff, and students. It was my holy habit. For you, it might be "Good Thursday" or "Quiet Monday," but the

lesson to learn is to develop a holy habit of "away time." As one of my mentors once told me, "Tom, if deaning is all you ever do as dean, you will never do it well."

## **Lesson #2: Some songs are sacred**

We sang a lot of hymns in this nursing home church. Let me correct that—we sang a *few* hymns *lots* of times in that nursing home church, mostly from memory. And the songs the residents remembered were the hymns of their youth. Great songs. Classic songs. Sacred songs. You could tell they were sacred by the way they sang them. Residents—who could barely whisper when speaking—would sing these songs so clearly and so compassionately, with a look of almost awe on their faces. They didn't just sing those songs; they prayed those songs, their sacred songs.

As a dean for nearly two decades, I learned to "sing my sacred songs." Some of them were not hymns, but they were still sacred to me. And I usually didn't sing them—I just hummed them, in awe. In

the midst of the daily-ness and sometimes dreariness of being a dean, I learned to find my sacred places and my sacred songs took me there. One of those songs is

"Gabriel's Oboe" from the movie, "The Mission." It was especially sacred to me because I didn't have to sing it; only hear it. Difficult faculty meeting? I'd play "Gabriel's Oboe." Angry student? "Gabriel's Oboe." Cranky colleague? "Gabriel's Oboe." It's a sacred song to me.

Another sacred song to me as dean was the hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul." I'll never forget what that hymn meant to a faculty member facing a crisis. I hadn't been dean long when a faculty member came into my office, closed the door, and began to weep. He'd just learned his wife was having an affair. He was hopeless, and I was helpless. But I thought of this hymn and later gave him a printed copy. He said that song meant a lot to him during that difficult time. It meant a lot to me, too—and still does. Every dean needs their sacred songs.

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## **Lesson #3: Some facts are hard to forget**

One of the things that struck me most about this nursing home church was what these residents remembered. To be sure, aging can be cruel and some of them forgot even the most basic facts. But I noticed something strange each Sunday. Whenever the chaplain read a familiar passage of Scripture, many of these same residents mouthed the words right along with him. They might have forgotten simple facts (names, birthdays, room numbers), but they remembered these special things—passages from Scripture tucked away in their minds and memories.

Some facts are just hard to forget. That's another important lesson I learned about being a dean. Some facts you might forget . . . your faculty member's publications or presentations? You might forget some budget details or even the date of your next ATS visit! But some facts you should just not forget. I learned that lesson during my first big controversy as dean.

I had been dean only a few years when a faculty member came up for our school's equivalent of tenure. To me, he was one of our brightest lights:

great teacher/great thinker, great mentor/great mind. I thought his tenure/promotion was a slam dunk. And then the concerns surfaced—doctrinal controversies. He was a little too liberal for the established faculty guard—and, in that school, faculty had the biggest say. There was an ugly faculty meeting that resulted in this professor quitting—mid-semester. I was angry. I was frustrated. I was ready to quit myself. And then I was reminded by a friend that the faculty who opposed his promotion did so out of profound love of the school's mission. The controversy was not about the man, but about the mission. My friend reminded me of an important fact that I never forgot as dean—*mission matters*. In my nearly two decades as dean, I lived through several more controversies, but that one fact I never forgot—mission matters.

Every deanship is different, so I don't know what facts you should never forget as dean, though I hope your school's mission is one of them. Those new to the deanship may feel so swamped that it's hard to remember anything. Those who are veteran deans may be trying hard to forget some things. Regardless of where you are in your journey as a dean, I hope some facts will never be forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

I will always be indebted to this nursing home church, to the residents who taught me so many valuable lessons—about living and dying, about leading and deaning. And three of the best lessons I ever learned about being a dean, I learned from them—some habits are holy, some songs are sacred, and some facts are hard to forget.



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