

Remembering a minister, chaplain, mentor and friend



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A former colleague in California passed along the sad news that a long-time friend passed away. Dan was a pastor, a chaplain, a coach, a counselor, and

for me, a significant mentor and cherished friend. This won't be an obituary for Dan; more a fond remembrance of a remarkable guy who left a deep mark on my life.

From 1990-2000, while working as a chaplain, I also served as a Parish Associate with Dan at St. Luke Presbyterian Church in San Rafael, California. Dan was happy to have me lead services with him, often inviting me to preach a sermon. He welcomed my teaching of

Adult Education classes such as "World Wisdom Traditions," "Sacred Scriptures of the World," "Interfaith Mystics" and "Living Buddha, Living Christ," co-taught with my friend Lee, a Zen Buddhist priest (one of Dan's grandfathers was a Buddhist priest). Every Christmas Eve, I walked into Dan's office to "robe up," preparing to lead the candlelight service. Just before entering the sanctuary Dan would invariably make me smile with comments like: "Alright, let's

get this baby born!" The tradition became an essential part of my enjoyment of the season and kept me connected to "churchianity" even while I was drifting away. Dan may have been somewhat disappointed when I left Christian ministry, though his steady support of my decision and ongoing service work was an invaluable gift.

With a contagious sense of humor,

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Dan loved to laugh and make you laugh. In this sense, he reminded me of my jovial Dad. In every Sunday sermon, and in most conversations, Dan had a knack for joke-telling while sensitive to serious moments that called for thoughtful words of encouragement. He was a person of deep faith, yet wide in thinking and loving in action. He not only made me feel that a chaplain was no less a minister, but showed how a pastor could be a down-to-earth human being relatable to anyone. Along with several other colleagues, we enjoyed sharing non-traditional views (over local brews), as proud members of “heretics anonymous.”

Dan not only coached a high school girls softball team, he enthusiastically assumed the position of coach for the San Quentin baseball team. Deeply respected by prisoners, he was an inspiring role model for many behind bars and on the field. I think his years of coaching the team inside a state prison made it natural for him to transition to chaplaincy in the sheriff’s department. A few years earlier, while I was the jail

chaplain, I brought Dan inside the facility to meet my “invisible congregation.” He was clearly comfortable conversing with the men and women he met in those dark and lonely spaces. His support meant so much in those years, especially when our jail chaplaincy was struggling financially and I was enduring family troubles.

Dan attended several courses I taught on nature and spirituality at a local community college. A humble man, he never let on he was a pastor and teacher for decades. After one class session, he wrote: “I’m really enjoying myself – I haven’t been in class for a long time but yours has made it very worthwhile. You have a very inviting, welcoming teaching style and each week the class seems to warm up and want to engage in more conversation.” Pleased to hear these words, I was aware he was also describing himself. The fact that this was from my colleague, mentor and friend gave the words even more meaning.

Dan’s storytelling skill, especially in sermons, was engaging. Even as I became less interested in the rituals of worship, he had the ability to express lessons that I could carry into my emerging secular worldview. As any good preacher, Dan could make even the most oldy-moldy biblical passage come alive with rele-

vance. That took artistry.

Endlessly giving of time and heart, Dan volunteered with the fire department and served several churches but the primary thing I want to highlight is the man’s fundamental human decency. Much of what I learned about ministry, and continue to respect in some “church work,” owes a debt to Dan. Yet it was his friendship that carried through the years. Full of life he touched so many of us with his compassionate presence. It’s that presence he embodied as a minister and as a man that I will treasure.

Dan lived for over a decade after his liver transplant continuing to do many of the good things he loved. I was amazed he could stay so active, yet nothing was going to stop him from serving as an incarnation of inspiration.

A “buddy,” a “brother,” my chaplain and my unforgettable friend. I’ll greatly miss him.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker’s Gospel.” Learn more at chighland.com.