

Rev. Ridley Barron

It is one thing to talk about a “Just Culture” and another to espouse the idea of forgiveness. It is quite a different matter when the person “walking the talk” of adverse medical events is himself a man of faith. Such a person is Ridley Barron, now the pastor of a congregation in Tennessee.

In April 2004 Rev. Barron was the spiritual leader of a Georgia congregation. On his way home with his wife and three children from a family vacation, he was seated in the front passenger side of his vehicle. While working away at his Easter sermon, the vehicle was broad-sided by an SUV that ran a stop sign. The pastor’s wife died shortly after the impact. His two older children sustained bruises and he himself suffered fractures and other injuries. A Good Samaritan came to the family’s aid and found the pastor’s 17 month-old son several feet from the vehicle, the toddler having been ejected by the force of the impact. The toddler sustained head trauma and was taken to a pediatric center for treatment. Due to an overdose of an anti-seizure medication, the toddler died five days after the car accident. Instead of burying his wife, Rev. Barron ended up with a funeral interring two beloved family members.

The story that Rev. Barron shares with healthcare professionals is one of hope. He is honest, describing his own torment and anguish. How he reconciled himself to this “test” being part of a grand design for him is at the core of his mission: helping care providers come to understand what precautions they should take to avoid similar tragedies and medication errors. His lessons are manifold, offering very practical insights into how to talk with family members, how to discuss early resolution of such situations, while avoiding flawed assumptions about the victim’s professional calling preparing him or her to “handle” such events.

Perhaps the greatest part of the Barron story is what he did for the “second victim” of the tragic medication error: the pharmacist who dispensed the wrong dose of the drug. Although he had asked hospital officials to convey his message of forgiveness shortly after the adverse event, the communication was never conveyed to the distraught pharmacist. It was not until some eight months had elapsed and he had completed grand rounds at the hospital where the event occurred that Rev. Barron learned no one had ever informed the pharmacist he had forgiven her. A few days later, Rev. Barron received a telephone call from the “second victim” and together they talked and cried. That outreach to the person whose actions set in motion the adverse event is a hallmark of his approach to dealing with *all* who experience loss when there is a medical error. His is a message of forgiveness and hope that transcends many faiths and cultures.

Rev. Barron has worked with physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and hospital administrators to learn from his vantage point what it takes to have a well-rounded and meaningful discussion of adverse outcomes. He has offered them practical insights into how to listen to patients and their loved ones in an effort to avoid untoward consequences. Through his powerful yet simple message he has granted them permission to be empathetic, sympathetic and forgiving, remembering too to help those

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who had the misfortune of being at the “sharp end” of the stick.

It is not a statement of hyperbole to suggest that Rev. Barron has had a profound effect on care providers and healthcare administration leaders. They are moved by his story and his message. They are touched by the fact that he is not a bitter person, but rather, an individual who provides the wisdom and lessons learned in a tragedy in a way that says three important things. First, take the right steps to avoid error in the first instance. See what I see as a patient or family member and listen to what I have to say. Second, if an event occurs be upfront, be honest, listen and be empathetic. Third, take care of those who are involved in the error for surely they are victims, too. One loss should not be turned into a second loss when a medical error occurs.

On a personal note, I have seen Rev. Barron in action. I am a professional healthcare risk management consultant and an author on topics such as informed consent and disclosure. Rarely have I seen *anyone* deliver such a powerful message on medical error prevention and management of adverse outcomes. I have witnessed what might be described as “hard boiled” physicians physically embrace Rev. Barron and thank him for helping them understand the importance of adverse outcome communication. Moreover, I have seen the president of a well-respected medical college tell his colleagues that *this approach* is what they must follow and inculcate into their students. Such a positive, transformational outcome is most welcome among patient safety and risk management professionals.

Like the name of the MITSS Award, Rev. Barron offers a clear message of HOPE. It is for this reason that I recommend him to you for consideration for the 2010 award.