

## Tribute to Chaplain Nancy Hastings Sehested

*Mahan Siler offered this tribute to “Chap Sehested” at an interfaith farewell service at the Marion Correctional Institution in Marion, NC, on June 30, 2013, upon Nancy’s retirement from thirteen faithful years of prison chaplaincy.*

I speak as a volunteer. Nine years ago I was feeling very self-absorbed in my recovery from a hip replacement, when Chaplain Sehested invited me to rejoin the larger world by volunteering here, at Marion. And what a widening of my world it has been! These years working alongside of her, often weekly, has been a heart-opening experience that has changed my life.

I have been in a unique position. I know her as my pastor; I know her as chaplain. I watch her move back and forth between two very different work settings. As pastor, she helps lead a loosely organized congregation, very interactive, with minimum rules and maximum appreciation, along with lots of permission to try new things. Here, as chaplain – after all this is a prison – she is in a low-level staff position of a highly organized institution, with little interaction, with maximum rules and minimum appreciation, along with little permission to try new things.

In both places she is good news. But I speak to you, with her overhearing, about my witness to the bright light she has been in *this* place.

In a place with sectarian, religious divides, at times to the point of hostility, Chap has given respectful support to all faith traditions, requiring magical feats of organizing and negotiating. Have you noticed her frequent word for God as “the Holy One,” a divine name for all of faith? And this service, which she insisted on, gives witness to her inclusive spirit as well. It is important for her to celebrate with you her thirteen years as prison chaplain in this interfaith service. Good news, indeed!

In a place that defines you as inmate, as criminal, she consistently went around declaring or whispering, “No. That’s not who you are at the core. I’m here to remind you of a deeper identity: you are beloved, beloved of God, loved with a love from which no-thing today or tomorrow, nothing in life and nothing in death can separate you. Good news, indeed!

In a place of uncompromising law for those who have broken the law, she came along embodying both law and grace, both tough love and tender mercies. “She’s a cat,” said one inmate. She purrs with warmth and acceptance, but can, without notice, hiss and show her claws at the very scent of manipulation. A person of grace within a climate of regulations. Good news, indeed!

In a place marinating in anxiety and fear, the very air we breathe here, she has brought fresh air, a counter breeze, even for a moment or two, along with an alternative word: “Yea, though you walk within shadow of death and death-dealing behavior, fear not, be not afraid, God and a few Godly persons are with you and for you.” Good news, indeed!

In a place with hallways of mirrors that keep reflecting reminders of failure and loss of relationships, here comes Chap and those of her stripe acknowledging that hard truth . . . yet, if invited, stays long enough to sit with you in the darkness . . . then, when it can be heard, says, “There is light in this darkness. Let me help you see it.” Good news, indeed!

Chap, in this service of worship, we give thanks for God’s good news that over these years has become flesh through you – your words, your silence, your presence, your laughter, your actions. Good news, indeed!