

# Forgiveness is a Passion For This North Dakota Chaplain

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“Forgiveness is my passion,” said Preston VanLoon, who writes and speaks about it around the world to teachers, social workers, clergy, chaplains, and others involved in health care. This passion began 20 years ago when he was wondering what to focus on for his doctoral dissertation in educational psychology at Northern Illinois University. A pastor he knew had been talking about his own interpersonal pain and conflict. “I was a neutral, safe person outside the denomination for him to talk with,” VanLoon recalled, and I became more and more curious about how people who embrace and value forgiveness cope with hurt and pain in their own lives.” The title of a popular talk VanLoon gives today is “The Practice of Interpersonal Forgiveness in the Personal and Professional Lives of Healthcare Workers.”



VanLoon is Director of Spiritual Care, Advance Care Planning and Bioethics for [Sanford Health](#) in Bismarck, North Dakota, which also operates in Fargo, Sioux Falls, and in Wisconsin. “They value and embrace spiritual care,” he said about his employer’s dedication. VanLoon also chairs the Bioethics committee for the Sanford enterprise. At Sanford in Bismarck, they provide a Pause for Prayer service on Wednesday, the C.A.R.E. Channel on patient room televisions, and daily phone devotions. VanLoon, who has been there five years, leads a department of four full-time and two part-time chaplains. Board certified by the APC, VanLoon is also that organization’s North and South Dakota state representative and previously served as the continuing education representative.

VanLoon also cross-trained over 50 Sanford personnel to become certified advance care planning facilitators. Two years ago he invited [Bud Hammes](#), a medical ethicist from Gundersen Health in La Crosse, Wisconsin to speak at an annual Bioethics conference. Hammes became well known in the 1990s when he began training nurses to ask patients ahead of time if they wanted to be kept alive on machines if there was no chance of recovery. La Crosse became the first town in the U.S. where 96 percent of the population had written advance directives.

While VanLoon was gathering material for his forgiveness dissertation, he did an experimental research study involving clergy and chaplains from eleven different Christian denominations. The experimental and control groups each received six different psychological tests--six times, over a six week period. He found that as the subjects in the experimental group learned how to apply interpersonal forgiveness in their own lives, they became more effective in helping others, while in the control group there was no change. “We value and embrace forgiveness but it became clear that most pastors didn’t know how to apply it themselves,” he said.

On his website, VanLoon features a quotation from the famous Vietnamese Buddhist Monk and peace activist [Thich Nhat Hahn](#). “When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don’t blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet, if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuces.”

VanLoon believes interpersonal forgiveness is difficult and often misunderstood. As he explains on his [website](#). “Forgiveness is a process that affects our thinking, feelings, and behavior. The path to forgiveness brings release from the hurt and pain of the past, offers freedom and peace in the present, and hope for a better future. Research has found that as people learn about and practice interpersonal forgiveness, positive changes are experienced holistically and in our overall well being. Forgiveness strengthens our self-esteem, confidence, and sense of hope and improves our relationships with others at work, in our homes, communities, schools and churches.”

Along with his many writings and teachings, VanLoon provided a two-hour continuing education workshop for North Dakota social workers called “The Practice of Interpersonal Forgiveness in the Workplace: A Collegial Ethic.”

VanLoon's new book for the lay audience, *The Path to Forgiveness: Moving Forward with Hope and Healing One Day at a Time*, will be published early next year. It includes individual meditations to lead readers through their own process of forgiveness.

When he's not working or traveling, VanLoon enjoys the outdoors of North Dakota, which he calls "a beautiful place." He and his wife Mary have two adult sons, one, an Air Force major in Texas and another who lives in Chicago, where VanLoon is from originally.

Bismarck, the seventh fastest growing small city in the country according to Forbes Magazine, is located on the Missouri River across from Mandan, named for the historic Native American tribe of the area. The combined metropolitan area has a population of 100,000 and is a hub of retail and health care. The Dakota access pipeline is nearby. While the largest part of the population is Lutheran and Catholic, the Sanford Health Care system also provides spiritual care to Native Americans, who VanLoon describes as "a very spiritual people. We often work hand-in-hand with their medicine man or other religious leaders, especially in cases of death. We attempt to integrate the cultural and religious backgrounds of the patients. It's is very meaningful and unique," he said.



*Marian Betancourt is associate editor of PlainViews@ and a professional writer and editor who has published many books and scores of newspaper and magazine articles. Her book, *What to Do When Love Turns Violent*, published in 2001 by HarperCollins was called "the best single resource" by The New York Times and is available as an e-book. Her latest book, *Heroes of New York Harbor: Tales from the City's Port* was published in October 2016 by Globe Pequot Press. A new novel follows in October.*

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