

“Advocacy for Leaders: Crafting Richer Stories for Public Health”
Closing Remarks by Dr. Gary Gunderson, M.Div., D.Min., D.Div.
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The Public Health Context & Framing

Johnathan Haidt's framework is way better than no framework, but not as good as the story of real public health. He doesn't know much about that and especially doesn't know anything about its religious history. I'm quite sure that every single one of the 100 county health departments has at least one clergy on its founding Board in a meeting that was almost certainly opened in prayer. Many still are today, because this is viewed, appropriately, as a "sanctified movement." That is, it does and always has embodied the moral imagination of our highest goals as people.

The Overlap and Alignment of Public Health and Faith Communities in NC

Practically, this helps us see that the billions of dollars invested in public health assets and programs function in a cloud of religious health assets. The mediating social structure of the social determinants includes the 3,600 congregations of the NC Baptist Convention, which invented the hospital I work for in 1922, and the 2,000 congregations of the General Baptist State Convention. Those churches embody a powerful stream of public health intelligence because of the work of UNC Professor John Hatch. Another 2,000 congregations are part of the United Methodist Conferences, both of whose Bishops could give a very good public health sermon anytime you want. The state has a rich history of many other religious groups, many, such as the Moravians and Muslims with a distinctive tradition of prevention and well-organized positive social determinants. The practice of public health in this state simply must include a sophisticated and nuanced alignment of these complementary health assets.

Inclusiveness

What both faith and public health view as sacred, blessed, honorable, worthy or praise and sacrifice—are the practices, behaviors, choices that lead to life, protect it, enhance it, extend it and spread its blessings widely across the people. The Hebrew prophets always meant the whole public whenever they said “people” and never meant selected individuals. There can be a lively dialogue between public health and faith because we are family; both optimistic about the future. We don't think God is done; and we don't think science is done. There are things to do worth doing together (even when some of us don't care about God and others don't care for science).

Public Health Will Not Quit

My counsel to our beloved field of public health is to NOT stop talking about facts, analytics, determinants, vectors, patterns and predictors. But we must ALSO talk about our crazy love for the people—the public. And we talk about why we continue to hope for better, hope for more and simply won't quit hoping no matter what. You can take our money, put us in the dumpiest offices and cut our staff. You can relocate our building to a place so far down the road you can't find it in broad daylight. You can treat us as pitiful, hardly even as honorable as a primary care doctor, which in hospital world is hardly on the map. We won't quit. Why? Because we are in a lovers quarrel with the public we love.

Our Love for the Public

If you are a public health professional and cannot profess love for the public, I'd recommend that you take your high end analytical tools and move on down the street to do hedge fund manipulation, which is not played for life and death stakes. If you don't love, you're a danger to the public and the rest of us in the field of public health. Don't even tweet.

We Are In JUST The right Work At JUST The Right Time

This is the time for those who just can't stop loving the messy, disappointing, ever-muddling gaggle of humans called "the public." We are in JUST the right work at just the right time. While others rant, we must speak out of that love. Bring our facts and laptops, as we know that science is a friend of humans and what we are possible of. But we must speak out of love first, especially in public, especially with the public, especially about the public.