

Issues in Tertiary Chaplaincy at Flinders University

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This paper summarises the material presented at a workshop "Re-Imagining Tertiary Chaplaincy" which was first presented by the Flinders University chaplains to the Centre for Theology, Science and Culture "Research Think-Tank" on May 3, 2001 and repeated at the 2001 Tertiary Campus Ministry Association conference in July.

Executive Summary

Responding to rapid cultural changes in society and, in particular, the university, and corresponding reduction of resources from the churches and sponsoring faith groups, the chaplains at Flinders have embarked on a process of "re-imagining" what chaplaincy might look like in the emerging milieu. The workshop traces their journey from sectarianism, to ecumenical to multi-faith and alludes to some of the emerging agenda.

This story begins in 1997. In that year there was an almost complete turnover of chaplains, representing Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and Uniting traditions. I commenced in August but by the end of the year the existing Anglican chaplain, a curate, left without replacement. Those of us starting out that year were each employed by our respective churches part-time (half-time or less) and none of us were ordained.

What a contrast to former times when chaplains were generally ordained and full-time, each busy with their own communities making their own contributions out in the university. We look back on what appears to be a golden age – a time when there were significant denominational clubs, their activities supplemented by off-campus activities such as camps and retreats. This was an era when each chaplain and their student club or society had clear and defined identities. Chaplains engaged in pastoral care, apologetics and worship with those of their own tradition; the wider university role was generally played out in ethics and advocacy.

At the same time, 'non-denominational' Christian clubs like the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES), known at Flinders as the Flinders Christian Fellowship and the Student Christian Movement (SCM) existed side by side with these denominational groupings.

From the university perspective, the chaplains' legitimacy was based on the support they provided to significant subsets of the university community. Their independent advocacy role and contribution on such bodies as ethics committees was also valued. This valuing of chaplaincy was inevitably linked to the status of the church at that time; not only did the university value chaplaincy on the basis of the reasons above but the churches reciprocated by also valuing tertiary chaplaincy.

At that time chaplains were appointed by the Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of the churches wanting to fund them (clearly the larger 'mainline' churches).¹

At Flinders the Christian Churches and the Jewish community gave the Religious Centre² to the university as a gift in 1968 "for the spiritual benefit of staff and students...for the well-being of the university and all who study here."³

In summary, from its inception the religious culture as expressed through chaplaincy and the set-up of the Religious Centre was Christian and essentially sectarian.

From Sectarian to Ecumenical : 1997 -2000

The moves toward an ecumenical approach to chaplaincy were heralded by the diminishing resources of the mainline churches.

The Tertiary Chaplaincy Committee (TCC) was formed in 1996, linked to the Heads of Christian Churches Chaplaincy Advisory Committee. Its prime purpose at that time was to create a united front to approach the university to see whether they would pay for and appoint an ecumenical chaplain (there was a precedent at Curtin in WA). The approach failed.

However the TCC continued, its major role being the accrediting of chaplains.⁴ A document "Protocols and Guidelines for Assessing the Suitability for the Appointment of Chaplains by the Tertiary Chaplaincy Council" was developed. This was the beginning of an attempt to articulate what chaplaincy was about, taking into account the variety of situations on the different campuses in South Australia while also trying to respond to a rapidly changing cultural environment both within the

¹ It would be fair to say that the smaller and more independent churches tended to support the AFES. AFES workers are employed on a 'faith' basis, each developing a support team to finance them - a practice understood and valued by the more independent churches in contrast to the more centralised practices of the larger ones.

It should be noted that these "staff workers" are not appointed by the university and work within the framework of the Clubs and Societies organisation, which encourages students to form clubs and societies as a means of broadening the university experience.

I think it is also fair to say that the Uniting Church, having made a decision not to run a Uniting Church student club on the campus, often found itself supporting the SCM club.

Quite independently, the Overseas Christian Fellowship (OCF), while ideologically aligned with AFES, concentrates on international students. At Flinders, OCF is not affiliated with Clubs and Societies; they use the Religious Centre "out of hours".

² The Religious Centre, situated in the Union Building, comprised a large meeting room with a section that could be divided off as a "chapel" and four offices – one each for the four main Christian denominations. A further two small meeting rooms were later added but it was not until 1985 that the university provided the Muslim Prayer Rooms, which were placed alongside the Religious Centre. They were not regarded as part of the Religious Centre.

³ (quoted from the original agreement between the University and the Heads of Christian Churches and stated at the opening ceremony)

⁴ It should be noted that only the university may appoint chaplains, the churches may only commend.

universities and at large. It is significant that this discussion was held in an ecumenical environment.

Between 1997 and 2000 the three chaplains at Flinders, all part-time and non-ordained, decided to work as a chaplaincy team. They created a 'Chaplaincy Forum' as a sounding board for their endeavours, which included one representative from each of the denominations represented by the chaplains, a representative of the geographically local Blackwood Inter-Church Council and a university appointed representative. They produced the first of their annual reports to the Vice-Chancellor and the Heads of Christian Churches in 1998.

A Religious Centre Steering Committee was formed in 1997 as a forum for all users of the Religious Centre to be able to air their concerns and suggestions. An uneasy truce was brokered between AFES and SCM. It was agreed that the vacated Anglican Office be re-allocated as a room for staff workers of religious clubs and societies - providing the AFES staff worker with long sought after office space. By sharing their own office space the chaplains created a prayer and meditation room in the Religious Centre; they programmed themselves so that one chaplain was always available over most of the week, meeting altogether on Thursdays for ecumenical activities, studies and worship.

Along with this reallocation of space, the main meeting room was cleared of noticeboards (one of the vehicles of the religious warfare) and discussions began with Buildings and Property about upgrading the facilities – in 1998 the first coat of paint in 30 years! The chaplains were successful in obtaining monies from the university to buy and modify a computer for our blind chaplain. Later, minor works money was granted to begin renovations to the Religious Centre.

At the same time I wrote various "re-imagining" papers to engage the university in a discussion to clarify our relationships in the university and comment on how we might serve the university more effectively.

The emerging consciousness towards an ecumenical team approach was not only driven by declining resources for chaplaincy by the churches but also influenced by the prevailing ethos of antagonism and distrust between various users of the centre. The chaplains began to try to build a sense of a religious community among the diverse groups – with only mixed success.

Among the chaplains there was an increasing awareness of the importance of modelling, how they themselves were able to get on together. Hospitality, inclusivity and diversity became important themes within our own theological development and practice. However the expectations and imagery of the former paradigm were always apparent, in tension with this adaptive movement.

In summary, the chaplains began to move to an ecumenical (non-sectarian) Christian approach, directed toward serving the university while also serving the interests of the church.

From Ecumenical to Multi-Faith: 2001

Chaplains are charged with supporting and assisting staff and students of any faith tradition or none in their spiritual quest and to promote an environment of inter-faith respect and cooperation. This has always been part of their charter but only recently has it emerged to prominence, as the realities of the multi-faith nature of our society, and the university in particular, have begun to be felt.

The “East Timor Crisis” in 1999 proved a watershed as the chaplains responded to some of the reactions on the campus, bringing Christians and Muslims together with staff from the Asian Studies Department, and then organising an immediate week of prayer for peace, led each day in turn by members of the various faith traditions. This support was particularly significant for Muslim Indonesian students who were feeling the brunt of Australian anger directed toward them.

In 2000 the chaplains began to encourage volunteers to assist them. A retired university librarian with a Buddhist tradition was invited by the chaplains to teach meditation one day a week, a theology student at Tabor College to conduct a cycle of Celtic Christian prayer one day a week; secretarial assistance commenced... I made links between the Residential Hall and some people from local Uniting Churches so that international students might “adopt-a-host”, gaining friendship and support. I was invited to assist in multi-faith faith-sharing evenings at The Hall and links between The Hall and the Blackwood Aboriginal Reconciliation Group were made. The Chaplaincy Service discharged by chaplains was becoming the Chaplaincy Service discharged by chaplains and their assistants.

It was inevitable that one day a non-Christian tradition would seek university chaplaincy at Flinders. This possibility was raised within the Tertiary Chaplaincy Council in 1999. It was agreed that maintaining one tertiary chaplaincy accrediting body was desirable, implying reconstituting the TCC as a multi-faith body.⁵ A draft constitution for a multi-faith TCC was accepted by the TCC in November 1999. Attendance at the First Global Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Conference in Vancouver in mid-2000 by SA chaplains confirmed the need to address the reality of the multi-faith situation.⁶ During 2000 the Heads of Christian Churches Chaplaincy Advisory Committee were unable to expedite this development. In late 2000 the Pagan Association indicated to the TCC that they were intending to apply for chaplaincy at Flinders in 2001.

It was therefore decided that the TCC should invite the proposed applicant to a ‘think tank’ with the TCC and the SA tertiary chaplains to clarify issues and hope that some ways forward might suggest themselves. Following this think tank the TCC decided to pursue the Victorian multi-faith model which had been working in Victoria for a number of years.

⁵ The alternative, reverting to applications being made independently to the university by other faith traditions while maintaining a Christian TCC, would create a ‘them and us’ situation which was considered to be out of keeping with the collaborative multi-cultural ethos of universities. On non-discrimination grounds alone, it would be difficult for the university to refuse any application from a religious body having affiliated staff and/or students on the campus without refusing all such applications.

⁶ Airfares and conference fees of the two chaplains from Flinders who attended the Vancouver conference were financed by the university.

In 2001 the university received a submission from the Pagan Council of SA and subsequently the university appointed the Pagan chaplain.⁷

The TCC is yet to receive advice from the Heads of Christian Churches as to how they may proceed with respect to Multi-Faith Chaplaincy.

Following a planning day at the end of the year 2000, the chaplains adopted a program of interaction with the university focussed around four events over the year in which the chaplains would invite various groups and individuals to work together on common themes: International Women's Day, National Reconciliation Day, World Environment Day and Peace Week.

The chaplains have begun to play a more confident role, networking with various interest groups, supporting collaborative action, providing expertise and offering the chaplains' own resources, including the support of a growing number of volunteers. Effectively, the chaplains have begun a move toward being agents for community development on the campus. They have become the Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Service, their subtext, "Nurturing Spirit, Building Community" and are now in a position to deepen this exploration by developing a strategic plan that compares well with best international practice.

Summary

Over four years, Chaplaincy at Flinders has shifted from an increasingly marginalised sectarian approach to a Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Service supported by a Volunteers Service, that aims not only to nurture faith as it is expressed in various traditions, but to build community within the university. It has done so, not by attempting to investigate each other's traditions in the hope of resolving difference, but by agreeing to serve the needs of the university together, bound by a common code of respect for each other and each other's integrity. Over four years the chaplains feel they are only just making a beginning.

⁷ In full knowledge of their submission, the applicant willing to comply with the TCC's "Protocols and Guidelines" document and on the basis of the Flinders chaplains' knowledge of the character of the applicant, the TCC wrote a letter of support for their application to the university, indicating that as yet the TCC had no authority to commend other than Christian applicants.