

My Journey Towards Multifaith Chaplaincy

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When I was first appointed as chaplain to Flinders University 7 years ago I had no idea that I would ever have to confront ministering among other faith traditions. I expected only to be ministering to Christians. Formerly I had been State Director of Scripture Union, a Christian 'parachurch' organization concerned with outreach to young people, children and families.

My appointment by the Uniting Church was to be a chaplain to the university, but traditionally that meant ministry among Christians. At the time there were only Christian chaplains on campus. But the student culture of the university was changing and it was increasingly difficult to conduct ministry amongst students along traditional lines. With the introduction of HECS, (a scheme to charge students for their tertiary education), not only did many students need part-time jobs, but there was the increased pressure of the cost of failure. Fewer and fewer students attended meetings. So the chaplains found themselves having to reinvent chaplaincy. We began by deciding to be a chaplaincy team. This meant collegial support for and a transparency with each other.

Flinders University chaplaincy is located within the Religious Centre. This complex of meeting rooms and offices was a gift to the university at its inauguration in 1967. As a team we encouraged other groups, Christian and non-Christian, to use the Religious Centre because the intention of its founders was that it was "for the spiritual benefit of all". However, some groups did not feel safe within the Religious Centre and continued to use other facilities. The Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) group dominated the centre. The chaplains embarked on a process of redeveloping the Centre for multiple use and inclusion of non-Christian groups. When a Pagan group was officially formed on the campus the AFES group, who had been using the centre almost exclusively for a number of years, vigorously opposed it at official and unofficial levels. I was as shocked as anyone to be confronted by the word "Pagan" and that a group of students were seeking recognition as the Pagan Association. I pictured blood sacrifices by the lake and naked orgies in the light of the full moon! But, as a matter of principle, I recognised the right of any religious group to use the centre. So I rang the leader of the Pagan group and was surprised to find an intelligent, thoughtful person – not at all as I expected. This encouraged me to listen to what she was proposing. Paganism is certainly different and certainly not Christian. But I began to see where they were coming from. It seemed to me that they were finding a way to react to elements which had been lost from, or distorted by, the Christian tradition, such as a profound respect for the environment, the importance of ritual and the significance of the aesthetic. What impressed me most was a strong ethical sense, focussed on mutual respect. This seemed profoundly absent from within the leadership of the AFES Christian group. In fact the introduction of the completely "other" seemed to bring into focus the corruption of the dominant Christian group – the arrogance and controlling spirit instilled in its members by its leadership – so

that, paradoxically, the Christian chaplains often found themselves advocating for non-Christians in the face of what was essentially violence and abuse by the 'Christians'.

The challenge really came home to me when the Pagan Association told me that they wanted to appoint a Pagan Chaplain. I knew that if the Pagan Association requested the University to appoint a chaplain, under Equal Opportunity legislation, they would have to agree. There would have to be serious reasons for exclusion. With regard to civil behaviour I could find none.

Amongst the chaplaincy team there were varying degrees of acceptance of the possibility of Pagan Chaplaincy. During this time, the 2000 Vancouver Global Multifaith Conference of Tertiary Chaplains was held. Those of us who attended found our position of co-existence and mutual respect affirmed. The one chaplain who didn't attend the Conference continued to have difficulty with ministry in a pluralistic context and eventually resigned. He could not reconcile his ordination vows with providing support for non-Christians.

The Pagan Chaplain agreed with the Code of Conduct of the Christian-based Tertiary Chaplaincy Committee, which was responsible for the oversight of Christian Tertiary Chaplaincy at that time. So in 2001 after 18 months of dialogue and discussion, the Pagan Chaplain was appointed by the university and accepted as a member of the TCMA. A Buddhist Chaplain soon followed.

During this process in the late 1990's, Indonesian soldiers were slaughtering innocent civilian East Timorese in East Timor, intimidating their vote for independence. In Australia there was outrage. At Flinders this was naturally directed against Indonesian students, many of whom were Muslim. In the process of encouraging non-Christian groups to use the Religious Centre I had been in contact with the President of the Muslim Student Association. We decided to hold a public meeting as Christian and Muslim to denounce the violence in East Timor. This very moving event took place in the Religious Centre and resulted in an immediate decision to hold daily prayers together in the Religious Centre. So for the following week at 12 noon, each of the faith traditions took their turn leading "Prayers for Peace" in the Religious Centre. We were not conscious of it at the time, but this was our first example of multifaith in action! The AFES group reluctantly agreed to conduct one of the prayer meetings. Each day students from various faith traditions attended. I was struck by the dignity, respect and grace within the other faith traditions, stark contrast to the AFES Christian group. So, for example it was some members of the Pagan Association who helped me distribute about 500 tea light candles, with "Pray for Peace" attached, to students across the university. They also brought flowers and added creative, welcoming touches to the Religious Centre.

This willingness to serve and concern for aesthetics brought to us by the Pagans became important in refurbishing the Religious Centre, which hadn't had a coat of paint in 30 years! This makeover, funded by the University, was not only on the building but also in our relationship with the University, culminating in the University's Community Relations helping us organise a re-opening event. Representatives of nine faith traditions

blessed the Centre in their tradition; priority was given to the first blessing - a smoking ceremony conducted by an Indigenous representative. The Centre was then officially “re-opened” by the Chancellor. After the guests moved through the Centre, they gathered for refreshments in the main meeting room and were welcomed by the Vice Chancellor. A dinner followed, former chaplains were introduced and the Rev Dr David Millikan, Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, spoke about current religious movements in Australia. The interaction of chaplains, religious officials and university staff, as guests changed tables throughout the night, gave an opportunity for convivial interaction. A very memorable and significant evening!

When September 11 shocked the Western world I was on holidays. I immediately returned to give comfort to American students. This was greatly appreciated by staff of the American Studies Department, the Residential Hall and the International Office. Before long it became evident there was a backlash directed at Muslim students. Earlier in 2001 I had begun to attend Muslim Prayer on Fridays to express solidarity with Muslim students and to become more aware of their needs. I discovered, for example, that the prayer rooms had no ventilation, so we were able to have an opening window installed. Soon the relationship with some of the students grew to the extent that we had Friday lunch together on the basis of mutual friendship. When the backlash against Muslims began following September 11, I had a network to relate with. It was clear there was a need to provide a forum for Muslim students to voice their response to September 11, as well as Americans and Australians, to try to make sense of this new reality of terrorism. A forum was organised with a speaker from the Muslim Students Association, a member of staff from International Politics whose Masters thesis was in “Terrorism” (and she was an American Australian) and a Vietnam veteran who spoke personally about the effects of war and violence. A broad cross section of students attended including some from the AEFS. Constructive discussions between Muslims and Christians continued for some time afterwards. Christians and Muslims were meeting on the basis of their faith for the first time. It was clear that the events of September 11 had created an imperative for dialogue. The chaplains responded to invitations from the wider community who wanted to understand more about Islam. We took Muslim students into schools, churches and community groups who wanted to broaden their understanding of the Islamic faith. This process continues and includes other faiths as well. The Multifaith Chaplaincy Service had become a point of contact for those concerned with interfaith relations. During 2003, we were contacted by Mitsubishi Motors to assist them in the appointment of their chaplain because they discovered on the Web that we were a *Multifaith* Chaplaincy Service – their workforce is certainly multifaith, and it was this aspect that attracted them to contact us.

After September 11 the Commonwealth Government commissioned an inquiry into religious discrimination against Muslims. The Chaplains responded to this inquiry and held a meeting of interested people to gather and discuss their responses. The participants so appreciated the discussion they decided to continue to meet. This became *The Round Table* – a forum for invited speakers, seminars and workshops that promote understanding and respect amongst religiously diverse participants. The *Round Table* provided an excellent entry point for the co-ordinator of the Latter Day Saints Education

System who visited Flinders University weekly to meet with LDS students. Although not a formerly recognised chaplain he became a valued participant in TCMA meetings and a supportive encourager of the chaplains and their work at Flinders. He also became an enthusiastic contributor to the Adelaide TCMA Conference in 2003. Even though he has now transferred to Sydney, his successor continues to be a valued contributor among the chaplains and attends TCMA.

In planning for the 2003 TCMA Conference held in Adelaide it was imperative to the Chaplains that *multifaith* needed to be the primary consideration. So we invited Jessie Kaur Singh, a Sikh and Chairperson of the Multifaith Association of South Australia, to welcome participants to Adelaide and the Conference. She was so keen to do this that she asked to participate in the whole conference. This eventually led to her being appointed as a Chaplain to Flinders in 2004. Another interested person in the Conference was Rev Jude Noble who had recently been ordained as a Minister in the Metropolitan Community Church. She not only attended the conference but also was later appointed as a Chaplain to the gay community at Flinders University. I had met Rabbi Patti Kopstein at a multifaith prayer breakfast early in 2003 and was so impressed by her contribution I thought she would be an excellent keynote speaker. She had recently arrived in Adelaide and we discovered that she had been trained as a multifaith hospital chaplain in the US. We asked her to share that experience at the Conference. This had a double affect. Patti became keen to become a chaplain and a member of TCMA. She was later appointed to Adelaide University, the first non-Christian chaplain in its history. The second response was to her address. This was well received. The TCMA Executive agreed that we might investigate how multifaith chaplaincy training might be undertaken in Australia.

We began this process by conducting a workshop in November 2003 to which we invited a number of interested parties both from religious and educational perspectives. This conversation gave us a more realistic perspective of what might be involved in multifaith chaplaincy training. One significant aspect of this conversation was realising that a multifaith chaplaincy team was in a unique position to be agents of multifaith dialogue, to have a significant role in constructing and conducting “community liturgy”, to be a knowledge base that was able to define points of limitation and referral and to bring a sense of professionalism to this arena. Since then I have realised that probably the only tangible working model of explicit religious inclusivity that can be seen at work on a common project in SA is the Multifaith Chaplaincy Service at Flinders. There may be short-term multifaith projects or events, but we are probably the only multifaith community at work in SA.

It became clear that we had to start documenting our experiences at Flinders University. When Jude Noble and I began to meet to do this it became clear that the task was overwhelming. We decided we needed help. Could we find a research assistant? I rang Multicultural SA and the CEO was excited about the possibilities of helping us with this and the vision to provide multifaith chaplaincy training. Patti Kopstein and I then had a meeting with the Chairperson and the CEO of Multicultural SA to clarify our needs and to see whether Multicultural SA could facilitate such a project. This discussion is continuing. Unbeknown to us, Multicultural SA was in the process of bringing to

Adelaide Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a leading cleric from New York, at short notice. Though involved in interfaith dialogue for years, he came to prominence following September 11. We were in a position to help with their publicity and were able to arrange for the Imam to attend our TCMA meeting. The global perspective the Imam was able to convey to us was very encouraging.

As chaplaincy began to move from the Christian paradigm to the multifaith, the composition of our monthly TCMA meetings has been changing. This has not been without its awkward moments and misunderstandings. But as we are getting to know each other the bonds of affection are growing.

The broadsheet “Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy Services” provides a snapshot of where the Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy Services are today.

Some Issues for Discussion

Language - the word chaplain – can it be a multifaith word?

Defining and articulating the role of multifaith chaplain.

Theological Exclusivity – Theological Inclusivity –experience with the Christian (or other) hardliners – what insights help us?

What structure might be adopted given different time commitments – hierarchical – collegial –how might decisions be made, how are conflicts resolved or avoided?

How can religious diversity be separated from diverse personalities?