

A Journey Towards Multifaith Chaplaincy

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Abstract:

Four years ago, chaplaincy at Flinders University was Christian. Now Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Pagan and Sikh chaplains work together as a Multifaith Chaplaincy Team. This is one person's story of that transition from Christendom to Multifaith. It was presented as part of a workshop at *Dreaming Landscapes*, the Second Global Conference of Tertiary Chaplains, Brisbane, July 2004, as stimulus for discussion.

The story presents a picture from which might be inferred some of the issues inherent in such a transition within a public, secular university, some of the new understandings, skills and structures that may be required, and some of the challenges that lie ahead.

From Denominational to Ecumenical

When I was first appointed as chaplain to Flinders University seven 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 "Chaplain to the University", but traditionally this had always meant ministry among Christians. At that time there were, and always had been, only Christian chaplains on campus, ministering among their own denominations.

But the culture of the university was changing and it was becoming 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 their chaplaincy. We began by deciding to be a chaplaincy team. This meant collegial support for and a transparency with each other. It also meant working together on common projects. This move away from sectarianism seemed to be welcomed by the wider university community.

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; the intention of its founders was that it was “for the spiritual benefit of all”. However, the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) group was by far the biggest religious group on campus and dominated use of the centre. Its approach was adversarial on issues or persons not within its own experience or control. Some groups did not feel safe within the Religious Centre and continued to use other facilities. Mindful of the donors’ intentions, the chaplains embarked on a process of inviting these other groups, Christian and non-Christian, into the Centre.

When a Pagan group was officially formed on the campus, the AFES group vigorously opposed it at official and unofficial levels. As someone brought up only within a Christian ethos, 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 their right, if they were a bona fide religious group, to use the Centre. So I rang their leader and was surprised to find an intelligent, thoughtful person – not at all as I had expected. This encouraged me to put on hold my own prejudices and listen to what she was proposing. It seemed to me they were a bona fide religious group and therefore had every right to use the Centre. As I got to know members of their group, I found among them a profound respect for the environment and

a deep understanding of ritual and the significance of the aesthetic. I got a sense that they were recovering religious elements that had been lost, colonised, or distorted by the Christian tradition. What impressed me most was a strong ethical sense, focussed on mutual respect. This seemed profoundly at odds with what I was experiencing within the leadership of the AFES Christian group, to which I would have been expected to ally myself. In fact the introduction of the completely “other” seemed to bring into focus the corruption of this dominant Christian group – the arrogance and controlling spirit instilled 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’.

From Ecumenical to Multifaith

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, the University would be hard pressed not to agree. There would have to be serious reasons for exclusion. With regard to any objections on the grounds of 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 Global Multifaith Conference of Tertiary Chaplains was held in Vancouver, Canada. Those of us who attended found our position of religious 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. He could not reconcile his ordination vows with a multifaith chaplaincy, which required us to support each other's ministry on campus. As a lay person, I had not expected this dilemma. He eventually resigned his chaplaincy.

The person to be appointed as Pagan Chaplain graciously agreed to abide by the Protocols and Guidelines developed by the Christian-based Tertiary Chaplaincy Council, which was responsible for the governance of Christian Tertiary Chaplaincy at that time. So in 2001, after two years of dialogue and discussion, the Pagan Chaplain was appointed

by her religious body and accepted by the University and the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (TCMA), the chaplains' national multifaith professional body. A Buddhist Chaplain soon followed. As chaplains, now from various faith traditions, it seemed logical for us to see ourselves as a Multifaith Chaplaincy Service and, since this was without precedent in Australia, we would work out the detail as we travelled along together.

Our First Steps in Multifaith Action

During this process in the late 1990's, we were hearing reports of Indonesian soldiers slaughtering innocent civilians 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 developing a relationship with the President of the Flinders Islamic Students Association. In the face of the events in East Timor, we decided to hold a public meeting, as Christian and Muslim, to denounce this violence. This very moving event, supported by staff from the Department of Asian Studies, took place in the Religious Centre and resulted in an immediate decision, encouraged by some members of the Students Association who were present, to hold daily prayers together in the Religious Centre the following week. So at 12 noon each day, each of the religious clubs/associations/societies, representing the major 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 would not participate in prayers led by anyone but themselves, but reluctantly agreed to lead one of the prayer meetings, so representing the Christian tradition. 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, members of the Pagan Association were the ones who volunteered to help 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 Public Affairs Office 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 packed the main meeting room and were welcomed by the Vice Chancellor. A dinner in the Union restaurant 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, enjoyable and significant evening, fulfilling all our hopes for what the Religious Centre could stand for in the future!

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 occasionally 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 Muslim Prayer Rooms had no ventilation! So we were able to have an opening window installed. Soon the relationship with some of the Muslim 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 already 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 Islamic Students Association, a member of staff from International Politics whose Masters thesis was on "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 group. Constructive discussions between Muslims and Christians continued in the Religious Centre long after the forum. Christians and Muslims were meeting for "inter-faith dialogue" at Flinders for the first time! It was clear that the events of September 11 had created this imperative; the chaplains had provided a safe place and an appropriate context for conversation leading to greater understanding that might otherwise not have taken place.

Following September 11, the chaplains also responded to invitations from the wider community, who wanted to understand more about Islam. I took Muslim students into schools, churches and community groups. We soon discovered that the story of Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy had leaked out to the wider community. We had become a point of contact for those concerned with interfaith relations. So, for example, 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 – it was this multifaith aspect, so important with respect to their workforce that attracted them to contact us. This process of community service continues.

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 promoting understanding and respect amongst religiously diverse participants.

So, for example, *The Round Table* provided an excellent entry point for the Co-ordinator of the Latter Day Saints Education System; he visited Flinders University weekly to meet with Mormon students – a group the chaplains had previously persuaded to come “in from the cold” to use the Religious Centre. Although not a formerly recognised chaplain, he became a valued participant at TCMA meetings and a supportive encourager of the chaplains and their work at Flinders. He also became an enthusiastic contributor to the

national TCMA Conference held in Adelaide in September 2003. Even though he transferred to Sydney, his successor continues to be a valued contributor among the chaplains and with TCMA.

In planning for the 2003 TCMA Conference held in Adelaide it was imperative to the chaplains that *multifaith* needed to be a primary consideration. So we invited Jessiie 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. Attending the conference also led to her being appointed as a Chaplain to the gay community at Flinders University. Yet another was Rabbi Dr Patti Kopstein. She had recently arrived in Adelaide with her husband, as joint Rabbis at the Progressive Jewish Synagogue. We discovered that she had been trained as a multifaith hospital chaplain in the US; so we asked her to share that experience at our Conference. This had a double effect. 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! Now she is also a chaplain at Flinders. The second effect was the response to her conference address which was well received. The TCMA Executive agreed that we chaplains in SA might investigate how multifaith chaplaincy training might be undertaken in Australia.

First Steps in Sharing Our Experience

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 the realisation that a multifaith chaplaincy team was in a unique position in the university and the wider community to

- be agents of multifaith dialogue,
- have a significant role in constructing and conducting “community liturgy”,

- be a knowledge base that was able to define points of limitation and referral
- bring a sense of professionalism to this arena.

Since then I have realised that arguably 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 explicit multifaith *community* at work in SA. And what we might share is our hard-won experience of being such a functioning community.

As chaplaincy began to move from the Christian paradigm to the multifaith, the composition of our monthly TCMA meetings began to change. This has not been without its awkward moments and misunderstandings. But as we have been getting to know each other, the bonds of affection have been growing; and the contributions being made to each other's lives and to the common ministry of service to others have been increasingly apparent and valued.