

Spirituality and Multifaith Chaplaincy
Inclusive Ministry in Secular Settings
Geoff Boyce, May 2007

A Report to the UCA Synod of SA Chaplaincy Commission

The last ten years has seen significant changes in the context of ministry, at least on university campuses.

Context

The context of chaplaincy in universities has changed considerably since the time most of us 'Babyboomers' were undergraduates.

Universities have become multi-million dollar corporate 'businesses' vying competitively for students and research grants. Whereas universities were once a community of scholars with decision-making life shared among its staff, now an executive makes the major decisions. The Federal government calls the tune - accountability exercises have become a major pre-occupation. User pays and 'doing more with less' has increased class sizes to proportions that have de-personalised teaching and learning; Information Technology is now employed as a major medium in service delivery. Universities have become internationalised and financially dependent on intakes of foreign students and partnerships with selected overseas universities, which includes resource sharing and visiting lectureships.

Student life is a shadow of what we once knew. The student body has become a source of cheap, unskilled part-time labour in fast-food outlets, factories, cleaning and agriculture. Students are therefore studying full-time courses part-time. The slow death of clubs and societies providing extra-curricular development and social and sporting opportunities has been hastened by recent Federal government legislation to remove the provision of compulsory student fees. Welfare, legal and child-care facilities have been dramatically reduced, and/or become 'user pays'; 'outsourcing' is becoming the norm.

In this economically driven culture the University has lost much of the expertise that complemented its teaching- learning and research functions. In the process, learning has become more commodified.

Nevertheless, undergraduate university life is still a significant and exciting life development phase for the many who choose it; the post-secondary period is a time of transition to adulthood marked by important social and vocational choice. With informal opportunities for experimentation diminished some students will drop out of courses and try others. Universities have become increasingly flexible about these kind of changes (cynically, to maintain student numbers and hence Federal funding?). Incoming students are not ware of the cultural change that has taken place because they have no experience of the university as a place of liberal self-development. Many staff, on the other hand, do, and struggle to adjust to the new world.

Spirituality

In the last forty years the influence of the Church has waned considerably. Formal engagement with organised religion is low, both for staff and students, yet a reservoir of Christian consciousness remains.

However, "spirituality" is now on the agenda. As David Tacey has declared, we now live in a post-secular society, and that is very evident within the University. This dis-establishment of religion may be bad news for religious institutions, but the emergence of "spirituality" is good news for chaplaincy. It is at this point that this University chaplain is able to engage with staff and students alike, both with individuals but also with the university system as a whole, and with specific parts of it. So, for

example, chaplains are engaged in the encouragement of parts of the university seeking to ameliorate the demands and de-humanisation resulting from the contextual changes outlined above.

Recognising this, in 2000, the chaplains at Flinders adopted “nurturing spirit, building community” as their defining rubric.

The Relationship Between Religion and Spirituality.

My rule of thumb is that spirituality is what we all have within us that recognises that “there is something else”, the transcendent, if you like, and religion is the *expression* of our spirituality in rituals and so on.

Following the suicide of a staff member of one of the science schools, the Head of School “couldn’t think of anyone on the staff who was religious” yet wanted to change the culture within the school in response to it. I saw my role as encouraging the Head personally in this endeavour and any moves made that would “nurture spirit”. (This theology is explicated in a paper I presented to Parkin-Wesley students studying evangelism). So, for example, from a religious point of view, the Head’s move to upgrade the staff tea rooms and encourage staff to take time off together for morning tea was informed and encouraged by my understanding of “Sabbath”. But our point of connection was spiritual nurture of the staff. (Later, in reflection on the initiatives taken by the Head of School, I was able to share some of the religious sources of my insights).

No doubt, if I were the Buddhist chaplain in this situation, I still would have adopted the same approach, “nurturing spirit, building community” but I suspect (not being Buddhist) I might have drawn on other, but perhaps similar, *religious* understandings.

We can say then that, in ‘nurturing spirit, building community’ our religious sources may remain hidden; I suppose the chaplains become ‘religious’ when asked to explicate our sources.

On the other hand, each chaplain seeks to maintain the religious life of their religious community on campus. For the Uniting Church this has long been unidentifiable among staff on campus; among students, the chaplain has traditionally encouraged adherents of the Uniting Church to join one of the Christian clubs on campus.

I suspect that as the influence of the Muslim community grows in Australia, there may be a shift from “spirituality” to religion, though Christianity will continue to be discounted.

Spirituality and Myth

The common ground on which the chaplain may universally engage is “spirituality”. The term is wonderfully ambiguous; so conversation is necessary.

Deeply embedded in the psyche of the institution are its myths. We know this because we understand religion. The myths of an institution are its powerful sub-conscious.

At Flinders the driving myth has to do with commitment to social justice and the ‘fair go’. This is ingrained in the history of Flinders and now part of its spirit. This myth is drawn upon and recognised in the kind of achievements Flinders recognises in its awards, the kind of people it invites to address significant functions, and so on.

Inasmuch as the chaplains value such a social justice commitment within their own religious traditions, they take opportunities to support the encouragement of the myth. In fact, the strong inclusivity polity of Flinders, which draws on the ‘fair go’, provides the very basis for a multifaith chaplaincy – a chaplaincy of mutual respect and empowerment of the minority, an inclusive “community of colleagues” who may work as a team, ‘nurturing spirit, building community’.

Understanding religion, the chaplains reinforce the common values reflected in the Flinders myth, and encourage those rituals that support it, those that ‘nurture spirit’ and ‘build community’.

Power

The way the chaplains have exercised, or not exercised, power has been critical to their successful ministry in the university.

The role of the chaplain is to nurture. A Christian understanding of chaplaincy, enunciated by the SA Heads of Christian churches Chaplaincy Committee, places the agenda of the other at the forefront of the chaplain’s concern; the chaplain ‘journeys’ with the other, trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a kind of “guided discovery” approach, quite similar to that employed by modern educators.

This concept may be extended to the relationship of chaplains to parts of the university.

So, in the first instance, the chaplain does not attempt to do what parts of the university may do. The chaplaincy does not see itself as “counselling”, for instance, because the university employs professional counsellors for students. However chaplains work with the counsellors when religious issues arise, and might employ the “guided discovery method” when students present to a chaplain rather than a counsellor. If the chaplain perceives that a student needs professional help, the chaplain would refer the student to the Counselling staff and seek to work closely with them.

On the other hand, there are limited counselling opportunities for staff (outsourced off campus), so the chaplain may find him or herself accompanying staff as they work their way through particular life situations.

The concept may be developed proactively to engage with a part of the university; ie to help a part of the university to better achieve its objectives, the chaplains being drawn upon for their particular expertise. An example might be the winning of a Cultural Diversity and Inclusivity grant by the International Student Services Unit (ISSU) in partnership with the chaplains, to provide religious information for new Muslim students. ISSU managed the project, Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy *did* the project, because we were easily able to provide the information required.

The chaplains have also been invited into the classroom to present aspects of religion. They try to do this in a corporate way, modelling the relationships they have with each other.

While the chaplains came up with the idea for conducting a public symposium on “Religion and Violence” following the Cronulla Riots, the Symposium was conducted by the Flinders Institute of International Education, in partnership with the chaplains, and therefore became a Flinders University function. The chaplains, through their networks, organised the speakers for the symposium and a meal after the event.

Religious Pluralism and the Uniting Church

The direction of the Uniting Church with respect to religious pluralism has been established by various Assembly resolutions. The booklet *Living with the Neighbour who is Different*, accepted by the 9th Assembly in July 2000, has provided a basis for our journey in this direction. The Assembly *Relations with Other Faiths Working Group*, of which I am a member, has posted various resources on its website for those interested in thinking through a theology that relates positively to the reality of religious pluralism. <http://nat.uca.org.au/relations/> A copy of an address I made, *Why I Care About People of Other Faiths* is on this website.

More recently, the DVD *Getting Started – why engage in interfaith relationships?* was made available at the last Assembly.

I have published *Towards a Christian Theology of Multifaith Tertiary Chaplaincy* in the Journal of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association Vol 1 No 4, 2002, and *Models of Chaplaincy: Traditional, Professional, Surrogate, Multifaith* Vol 2. No2 2005

I would be pleased to provide these, and any other papers, to members of the Commission on request.

It has become quite evident that there seem to be few people in the church in SA who are experienced in interfaith matters. The SA Uniting Church Relations with Other Faiths network I set up to feed into the Assembly Working Group at least provides a tangible focus for those who are engaging with these issues within their ministry.

In late 2006 the SA Heads of Christian Churches Committee appointed me, as one of two Christian representatives, to the Project Abraham Board.

In 2006 I was elected President of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association, the national professional body for tertiary chaplains. It is a multifaith organization, though most chaplains continue to be Christian. Both of these challenging appointments can be quite demanding at various times, but their influence is considerable.

Midwiving the Paradigm Shift

The recognition that a multicultural society now implies a multifaith society presents our nation with a significant challenge.

How is chaplaincy, born within Christian assumptions, to cope with institutions that are demanding religious inclusivity? What might be the peace-making role of the Uniting Church as our religious assumptions of the past are questioned by increasing numbers of people of other faiths. What might those of 'no-faith' contribute in this paradigm shift? Is there a need to change our understanding of Church and State in our new situation?

Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy is well placed to help facilitate this transition in SA as an education and training resource and a point of contact for these concerns.

Multi-Faith Ministry Charter

In August, 2006, Prof. Norman Habel developed the following principles to assist Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy:

A multi-faith ministry is informed by the following principles:

1. Principle of Mutual Recognition

A multi-faith ministry recognises the right of all faiths to meet the needs of their respective members in any given community.

2. Principle of Mutual Concern

A multi-faith ministry intends to meet the pastoral concerns of, rather than convert, members of the various faiths.

3. Principle of Mutual Understanding

A multi-faith ministry seeks to understand the values and beliefs of each faith in a given community rather than to pass judgement on them.

4. Principle of Mutual Service

A multi-faith ministry is committed to serving the spiritual and personal needs of each member of each faith tradition in the community.

The Flinders chaplains have adopted these principles and are working toward establishing additional principles to guide their cooperative ministry.

Review Outcomes

The Review Report documents some of the responses the Uniting Church chaplain at Flinders University has made over the years, in consultation with the Executive Officer of the Uniting Care Commission (or equivalent).

In summary, it has been a journey from a model of chaplaincy derived from long-held expectations of parish ministry to a model of ministry incarnationally immersed within a large, complex, culturally and religiously diverse constituency engaged in intellectual pursuit, as our society's thought leader, and the transmission of cultural values.

Such a chaplaincy does not seem to be immediately relevant to a church prioritising on the assumption that congregational life is central to its concern - the Uniting Church chaplain servicing Uniting Church staff and students and, through evangelism, adding to its numbers.

Rather, the emerging chaplaincy might be described as the Church engaged in its own intellectual pursuit and transmission of its values, quite analogous to the university itself. It might better be described as *mission*. But however described, it is holistically and incarnationally engaged within the university, serving the university community with the gifts it bears.

The Review therefore rightly perceives that the UCA university chaplain has a changed obligation to the UCA compared to the traditional chaplain; or put the other way, the UCA ought to be creating pathways for the university chaplain to communicate the cutting edge information and experience of the university mission within its life. This might only be practicable if the Commission facilitates the setting up of such structures within the Synod.

Members of the review panel, having investigated and, having caught a glimpse of such possibilities for the church, have indicated their willingness to pursue this vision with the chaplain.

The present central concerns include the emergence of "spirituality" and its relationship with religion, increasing disfunctionality brought on by economic rationalism (put simplistically), and religion and globalisation, particularly interfaith issues, including "living with the neighbour who is different".

Building interfaith and intercultural bridges is considered by many to be the task of this century. We have made a great start at Flinders, but it can't be left to the chaplain alone.