

Geoff Boyce
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Title: Chaplaincy in the Secular God/Spiritual World

Abstract

In this workshop Geoff will continue his conversation about hospitality as the key motif for chaplaincy today by sharing his reflections of a study tour of university chaplaincy in Europe in June –July 2013.

In particular, his observations of the chaplaincy at Delft Technical University, which, over a thirty-year period, has transformed itself into *MoTiv – technology and spirituality*. A radical theological understanding of the relationship between God/the Spiritual, the church and the world underpins their metamorphosis.

MoTiv displays a unique style of chaplaincy, enacting hospitality within a business model of coaching.

Geoff will outline how aspects of the MoTiv model are being incorporated within Oasis at Flinders University, which in 2013 has been incorporated into the University.

Introduction

There is an accepted wisdom that one ought to be aware of where we have come *from* in order to understand where we are now.

I am reminded of the Irish wisdom: one traveller asks another traveller how he might get from where he is now to another place. The other traveller replies, 'Well, I wouldn't start here!'

So I will begin by quickly summarizing 'where I wouldn't start now' in chaplaincy today – the place I first began when I was appointed the Uniting Church chaplain to Flinders in 1997.

Then I will move on to quickly describe the multifaith model that emerged at that time, when universities were internationalizing. These stories are told in my book *An Improbable Feast*, published in 2010.

But in late 2012 our situation changed again as our chaplaincy suddenly collapsed and the University unexpectedly stepped in to provide support.

This workshop outlines some of the philosophical and structural shifts of this most recent stage of our journey this year. In this movement I will incorporate relevant insights from the experience of MoTiv, our colleagues in Delft, Holland, which I have found helpful.

1. From Insider to Outsider

The traditional model of chaplaincy is that of the church creating a pastoral presence outside the accessibility of the local parish. Chaplains do the work of

the parish priest among those adherents not able to access their local parish church – in the armed services, hospitals, aged care institutions and prisons.

In appointing me chaplain to the University as a whole, the Uniting Church was unconsciously departing from this model, since most Uniting Church adherents at the university had ready access to local Uniting Churches in the vicinity of the university. But the other denominational Christian chaplains were more 'traditional', appointed to transmit the culture of their denominational institutions to their adherents within the Religious Centre on campus.

Soon after I commenced as chaplain in 1997, I realized it wasn't working. And rather than re-imagine tertiary chaplaincy, the two biggest Christian denominations withdrew, bit-by-bit.

Listen in to the feelings of Ton Meijknecht, Catholic chaplain to Delft Technical University, when he finally came to terms with the fact that 'it wasn't working' – thirty years ago in Holland.

Ton's story.

1982, Faculty Civil Engineering in Delft

A hallway in a building of armored concrete. A building that, in all of its peace and quiet, is evidence of the strength and value of this material. This is the building for civil engineering in Delft. Sunlight pours through the windows and displays the construction at its best. A sign on the rough concrete wall proudly states how many kilos each square meter floor can bear. In the hallway, there is an oak bench. On it sits Ton Meijknecht, alone. Ton is a pastor, appointed by the bishop of Rotterdam to aid these students. He has become aware of the fact that his position has become untenable. He has been here for a few years now. It is 1982, and he has worked in this profession since 1975. Initially, everything was still very traditional. Students were drawn to his conversational groups because with him, they found what they had found in their parents' church: a sense of direction in their life. The old pillar was still erect, if only just. Students still had faith in him as an official. But that soon deteriorated. Every year, the interest waned. Each year, he made an even greater effort with even fancier brochures and catchy titles. To no avail; he is and will always remain an outsider.

My first point is to ask whether you identify with Ton, that simply trying harder misses the point; and that if we want to get from 'here' to 'there', we probably shouldn't start 'here'!

2. Hospitality as a means of encountering difference

In the late 90's, we at Flinders were experiencing the same loss of confidence in chaplaincy. At first we joined forces and became ecumenical but this did not avert the decline. However internationalisation was taking us in a different direction to Delft. As different faith groups announced themselves on campus,

the possibility of ministry among these students by their faith leaders led to a multifaith chaplaincy, a move in tune with the university's new policies on inclusion and valuing of diversity.

Resistance by the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) group to the emerging religious diversity propelled the chaplains together. And the hospitality they experienced with each other, in contrast to the exclusionary tactics of the AFES leadership, led to a new collaborative model of multifaith chaplaincy, in which each chaplain maintained their identity, yet recognized the common ground on which they might together serve the university. The focus of life of the collegial group was a weekly lunch together.

Hospitality, as practiced within the traditions of each of the religions, and informed by Nouwen's conception of 'making space', became the prime *modus operandus* for multifaith chaplaincy at Flinders. The significance of hospitality as the central plank of a re-imagined chaplaincy is outlined in my book – hospitality to each other as colleagues, hospitality in one-to-one student encounters and hospitality to the institution; making more than social space – making emotional space, making physical space, making intellectual space, making spiritual space. This movement toward hospitality is not just a polite option, but has been the way that societies have survived and flourished over the centuries and is, in fact, the foundation of religion.

Out of this new collegiality at Flinders, a Charter for Multifaith Ministry and a Charter for Faith friendly Communities emerged.

In launching Oasis in 2008, we fare-welled an age of religious competitiveness, and signaled a culture of inclusion, openness and cooperation, enacting the practice of hospitality. This is the culture that has brought transformation in the lives of students.

The Fruits of Hospitality

One such student was Sari, a PhD candidate from Aceh in Indonesia. Sari was introduced to Oasis by a friend. She was keen to use her Australian experience to learn as much as possible about Australia, which also meant its religions. In fact, she was keeping a diary of her experiences. Toward the end of her four-year stay, she turned her notes into a book. Oasis invited all her new-found friends to a special book-launch for her, before she returned home, somewhat anxious about how she would cope with Shariah Law. This is Sari's Oasis story.

Sari's Story

We fare-welled Sari in May this year, commissioning her as an Oasis Ambassador – we will keep in touch to support her as she extends hospitality in her home situation.

In fact, we want every student who enters Oasis to have such an experience of hospitality they will never forget, wanting to offer the same hospitality to others.

Here is another story of someone who had been unobtrusively using Oasis as a place of prayer as she struggled through hard times with her PhD.

Sheila's Story

Oasis provides spaces for all kind of religious and cultural activities, but it is most obviously a drop-in centre. Sean saw the sign for free coffee and started to drop in with his mates. Everyone who comes in is welcomed by our Administrator and put in contact with others who happen to be there. This is Sean's Oasis story.

Sean's Story

These stories illustrate my second point – if traditional chaplaincy based on pastoral care to one's own adherents has become defunct, unconditional hospitality may give a clue to a way forward. The evidence of the transformative power of hospitality in the lives of these student stories seems to confirm this direction.

3. Collapse and Recovery

Toward the end of 2012, it appeared that the Uniting Church was not going to continue funding tertiary chaplaincy, the Lutherans cut their chaplaincy budget in half, resulting in the loss of our two Lutheran chaplains, one dedicated to ministry among Indonesians; and for various reasons, the Buddhists decided to withdraw from all interfaith activities; our Oasis Administrator abruptly resigned; and Oasis was cut adrift from its administrative support base in the Union as the University restructured student services to account for the new influx of student fees. From the glory days of 2008 to 2012, when we had a full complement of chaplains and associate chaplains, and an Administrator funded through the Union, we were reduced to such an extent that Oasis could hardly boast a multifaith chaplaincy at all and its very existence looked doubtful. I began preparations for my retirement.

However some senior university staff were aware of this predicament, and unbeknown to us, a decision was made at the highest level, for the university to formally incorporate Oasis into itself. The messenger of this news, the Head of Health and Counselling and Disability Services, asked me what I thought was needed from the University. An assurance of full funding was given and it was not long before job descriptions were being prepared, advertised and the two staff positions filled – a full-time Oasis Coordinating Chaplain, a full-time Oasis Administrative Officer to manage the centre; and enough 'play money' to continue and develop the life of Oasis.

Oasis was structurally placed alongside the various student services and under the line management of the Head of Health and Counselling and Disability Services, though it was recognized that we didn't fit easily into university structures, particularly because we had had a role with staff and the wider community.

The Head of Health and Counselling and Disability Services and I made some initial decisions:

- Oasis would continue to play an informal role supporting students, particularly in its role as a drop-in centre, complementing the formal role of Health and Counselling, working within a medical model.
- We would establish an *Oasis Team* of volunteers, beyond but including chaplains appointed by religious communities.
- We would form a relationship with Volunteering Australia and adopt their codes of best practice in support of the Oasis Team.
- We would create opportunities for training and professional development for our volunteers, perhaps some aspects also transferrable to staff and student leadership.
- Oasis would have an interfaith focus – fostering relationships *between* faiths groups. For the sake of simplicity, Oasis would be described as the university's interfaith centre. Oasis would continue to host and encourage the various religious and cultural clubs and societies (a multifaith function), but the task ahead of us would be to foster appreciative relationships between people of difference.
- My role would be developmental in the first instance and we agreed on a three-year timeline to re-imagine Oasis and transition to new leadership.

Anticipating the end of my career, I had been planning a trip to Europe mid-year in 2013, thinking that by that time I would have retired. Having accepted the challenge of a university Oasis I decided to use the opportunity to reflect on the task before us, intent on not compromising the values and philosophy that had served us well. The University graciously granted me leave on full pay.

The trip began with a week with the Delft chaplains. Their team of three seemed to be thriving. What were the pivotal decisions that had led them to such a seemingly healthy position?

We take up the story of Ton thirty years ago, having emotionally put to rest his traditional chaplaincy role, to turn to an experiment in chaplaincy with students.

Ton's story continues.

He waits. It is a bench just outside the office of the study association Practical Study. Inside, the board has a meeting on a proposal. Two civil engineering students with whom he has put the proposal together, are in there as well, pleading. Will the board be willing to accept the proposal?

The proposal is a rather unusual one. In this building, tangible things like concrete and steel are usually highest on the agenda. Here, it is about the power of the water and the strength of the ground... (here) the world is a rational place... In the end, you can calculate anything and everything. Maybe not now, not yet, but ultimately, you will be able to. The study association works in this spirit. In a playful manner, students learn the game of the elders. (The study association is) busy with students'

interests where their studies are concerned, with internships and excursions, with future employers and with typical student pranks, such as stealing the totem pole of a rivaling association.

The proposal they are now discussing is new. Will the association cooperate with a plan to make professors talk to students about their choices? The proposal is: 'Look at your choices from the beginning of a career, from the middle of a career and from the end of a career'. What do you expect at the beginning of your life as an engineer, and what has come of that at the end? Or: what kind of career would you like to look back on?

Students adopt the proposal, and a new activity is born. The concept is simple. The professor shares his experiences with the students. Students do not expect him to have any doubts. After all, he made it! How strange it is to discover that this man acknowledges that he is becoming increasingly doubtful as he gets older. Not where his calculations are concerned - he masters that part of his profession. But he does doubt the usefulness of his designs, the political game surrounding them, or worries about the corruption in the building world. This has a deep impact on young people, hearing those things from someone of experience and distinction. It impresses them more than the words of any pastor could.

(Ton) is not a member (of the study association, himself) and has to wait outside for the outcome. He is left alone, surrounded by silence. They emerge again, and yes, the proposal has been accepted. A warm feeling of gratitude washes over him. Strange, how deep that emotion runs. Apparently, there is a lot at stake for him. That is what surprises him most. His identity as a pastor is on the line. That becomes perfectly clear in this experiment. The enthusiasm of the students means that his effort is deemed valuable and is not rejected. That experience affects him deeply.

At a personal level Ton had confronted the reality of his situation, named it, and was prepared to risk his own identity and vocation to animate his intuition – to take a big step from the secure 'known' into the tenuous unknown, from the familiarity of 'church', now crumbling, into the seeming dark 'secular' and a ministry grounded in being an outsider.

In this move, MoTiv have been encouraged by the work of the Dutch Catholic theologian Erik Borgman. He presented a paper at the Conference of European University Chaplains in 2007 entitled *Responsive Mission - The Art of Chaplaincy in a Secular and Pluralistic Context*.

At the risk of oversimplification, I sketch some of his thoughts, which provide some of the theological underpinning for MoTiv:

Figure 1: The churches have assumed themselves mediators of God to a secularized, un-churched society.

Figure 2: Quoting Borgman:

- ‘Theologically, it is the task of churches to respond to God’s salvific presence in *the midst of* our confusing world, not to preach their own presence as salvation *from* the confusing world. The pastoral task to be and stay close to people in their experiences, is based on the firm belief that it is there that God is kenotically present, as the Biblical traditions teach’.
- The implication is that we need to reframe our thinking about the Church. The Church should not be seen as the community of those firmly convinced of the truth of their tradition, but as the community of people seeking the support of the Christian tradition to discover God’s salvific presence in the world, and to walk — and to help others to walk - the path to true life God’s presence opens. In other words, there is no Christian message apart from the question of ‘how, then, should we live?’

If Borgman is right, the injunction in John’s gospel, to be ‘in the world but not of it’, takes on great significance for Christian chaplains. It cannot be reduced to some kind of call to religious purity, but rather to accept that God’s relationship to the world is secular, and in like manner, so is our relationship with the world.

Secondly, Borgman opens up an imaginative exploration of the guest-host dynamic. We may consider ourselves guests of a world that is acting as host. What kind of guests are we? Are we abusive? Surely we approach our relationship with the world not with creeds, for that would be puerile, but with humility - listening and looking for the evidence of God’s activity, discerning it and cooperating with it. In this way we also host the world, making room in our minds and hearts for what God reveals to us through our interaction with the world. And we take that provisional evidence with us into worship, allowing the tradition to interact with this contemporary revelation.

MoTiv are witnesses to a struggle to unlearn centuries of religious conditioning - to pay attention to what God may be doing now in the world, yet at the same time, draw on the Christian tradition to make sense and find language to describe it.

I invite you to feel that struggle in this next moment from their formative history.

Renske’s Story

1997, campus of Delft University of Technology

Night has fallen on the Delft campus. The buildings look deserted in the dark. At this hour, no one is at work in the labs anymore. The library is closed. Only the streetlights are on. It is well past midnight. Through the night rides Renske Oldenboom, on her bicycle. She is on her way home, after a long and intensive conversation with a group of architecture students. She does not know exactly what time it is. It is late. But it was worth the effort. She goes home with a feeling of contentment.

This was The Night of the Philosophy. It was an initiative by students in architecture. They had come up with this plan out of dissatisfaction with the one-sided communication at their faculty. The distance between students and professors is enormous, most education is one-way traffic. The master speaks, while the pupil listens. He sometimes speaks in wonderful images, but he is the only one allowed to speak. The others have no role, other than listening. Students felt the need for a more equal and more personal conversation.

In the Night of the Philosophy, the wish for another form of communication found its way. No arrangement like that of a lecture room, with the standard division of roles, but a number of adjacent round tables. At each table, ten students and a renowned architect are seated. There is no set subordination within this format. Each student talks from his or her own anger and dreams. The great man at the round table suddenly turns out to be a human being with his own anger and dreams of his own, as well. A little further ahead in his career, but at his level, clearly occupied with the same questions. What a relief. Students are having a great time. The familiar signature color of the TU, clear blue, turns out to be the color of a thin surface layer: Within, there is a fiery red core of love for the profession and love for what you can accomplish with it for the people around you.

The idea had stemmed from a meeting of a group of students with an architectural critic. Renske Oldenboom had ended up in this flow. With pleasure, with her own approval, but still, she was overcome by it. On her bicycle on her way home, she tries to think of what was so fascinating about this night that it kept her up this late. The feeling is good. But how reliable is that feeling?

Coming from a church community, the work among students is a new challenge. When a spot became available in Delft for a Protestant student pastor, and a friend drew her attention to that, she saw it as the opportunity she had been waiting for.

She comes into contact with a group of students in architecture. With them, she feels at home, but at the same time, she senses a limitation. Her skills as a church pastor abandon her. Then, her role was still clearly defined by the tradition and the expectations of the people in her congregation. These students expect something from her as well. What that something is, they could not say. There were clear signs of their appreciation, but that was it. The rest is up to her.

That is what she was doing that night on her bicycle. Figuring out what her role was. Within the group, she had started with something practical and had begun to pour the coffee. Her intuition told her that she had to become part of the group and had to start operating in an 'embedded' way. She was no ordinary member. She was clearly older, but could not have been their mother yet, and that wasn't necessary either. So what was

her identity, the strength that would satisfy the other person, as well as herself? Not a pastor, like in her old work, no second mother, no fellow student, no famous architecture connoisseur.

Slowly it is beginning to dawn. A light shines in the night. She finds a new role. She discovers that she stands for intimacy and confidentiality in the conversations. Because of her, famous people can show their vulnerability. Students overcome their fear to speak freely. Students, professors and professionals meet at a personal level. They share their doubts, insights, worries and inspiration with each other. She has discovered her new identity: the pastor has become a coach and has at the same time remained a pastor. She is greatly enthused by the idea.

The move by Ton had been to observe that the university world, between Professor and student, was becoming de-humanised; and he used the existing university structure to make one decisive move – that Professors reveal their personal lives to their students.

Renske builds on this. Her newly discovered role is to empower students to speak freely and deeply.

These moves are completely in sympathy with the turn by Oasis to hospitality. Yet MoTiv have taken it further. For example, with this emphasis on deep conversation, they have replaced meetings with meals.

I witnessed two such meals at their off-campus premises. One was a four-course lunch with the student leadership. The students, all dressed up in their going-out best, were sitting together around one end of the large square table setting. When the Head of Student Services arrived, a little late, he sat at the other side directly facing them, and Motiv, serving the food and wine took up their seats between. He began, apparently making demands in Dutch, when the students and MoTiv had agreed on English. But by the time the main course was nearly finished, so was he. If this had been a one-hour meeting we would only have heard his demands. But now the students, having politely listened, had their say. And as the chocolates circulated after dessert, they drew MoTiv into their conversation. MoTiv will facilitate the student's agenda, at the expense of the Student Service budget!

Before leaving Australia, I had been in the process of setting up an Oasis Advisory group. Now I emailed my boss and said 'no' – we will have a dinner with all that group instead! – equal numbers of the University Executive, religious leaders, the Oasis team and our mentors who have journeyed with us in setting up Oasis. Sitting around small tables in groups of four or five, our four course dinner will focus on the one question, shaped by the MoTiv philosophy: how might Oasis help your agency or program?

We are still unraveling the various ideas of a wonderful evening of conversation, and developing them into action plans for 2014.

So what has emerged for Oasis in this first six months as being part of the University?

1. We have developed a provisional vision statement that spells out our values and commitment to the practice of hospitality.

Oasis is a welcoming and enabling community, open to all, contributing to personal and communal spiritual enrichment, while promoting mutual respect and appreciative understanding of diverse religious paths and cultural traditions.

We are welcoming and open to all, we are enablers; we are concerned to foster personal and communal spiritual well-being; and in so doing, we foster mutual respect and appreciative understanding between peoples of difference.

2. We have developed a schema 'Elements of Hospitality' which spells out the processes involved in undertaking this mission. The schema also points to the elements that might be included in any training or professional development offered to volunteers.



3. We see ourselves primarily as hosts, empowering others in response to the listening we undertake. This may mean entering into collaborative partnerships with others to enable, complement or partner the accomplishment of agreed

goals. But like a good host, we are focused on generously offering that which may enrich the life of the other!

Groups Who Regularly Use Oasis

- Evangelical Students (FES)
- Seventh Day Adventists
- Overseas Christian Fellowship (OCF)
- Muslim Association (FUMA)
- East Timor Student Association
- STEW group (nutrition group)
- Bangladeshi Student Association
- Indonesian Student Association (PIIA)
- Indian Student Association
- Gnostic Society
- Bujinkin Club (Martial Arts)
- Chinese Scholar & Student Association
- Choral Society (FUCS)
- Pagan Association
- Malaysian Student Association

Oasis also hosts

- individual and group prayer and meditation (various traditions)
- Jummah (Friday) Prayer of the Muslim community
- social and orientation events of the *International Student Services Unit*
- monthly *Service Providers Forum* of *University Student Service* staff

Conclusion

It seems to me that hospitality is a counter-cultural practice in today's institutions.

Conscientious academics complain that there is no longer the space to have the kinds of discussions with their students they once had, and which gave them so much satisfaction. A diminishment of such space is by definition a diminishment of hospitality.

Enterprise bargaining results in employees having to do more with less – a story not unfamiliar to the Hebrew writers describing the oppression of a Pharaoh demanding workers to make more bricks with less straw in less time. And the oppressed people cried out to God for deliverance.

I don't think we're *there* yet, but I sense a yearning for more space to be human and to contribute to the common good within the institution.

The jury is probably still out as to whether on-line technologies are going to contribute to dehumanization or whether they may open new life-affirming opportunities. It may not be a case of either-or, but of new or different opportunities to open up to deeper human understanding and engagement. It is this quest for a deeper, more meaningful and compassionate life that MoTiv have been able to tap into and find ways to empower. It is a secular, human engagement. It does not start with religion. Such chaplaincies do their theology by reflection on this secular encounter with the world in the presence of religious tradition. This is the direction I think university chaplaincy should be going. It may even need to consider jettisoning the word 'chaplain' to free itself of the commonly held assumption that the primary role of chaplains is to promote or mediate religion.

Thirdly, this year I have noticed the difference in being a trusted and respected university employee. I have direct lines of communication across the university. I have always made it clear that Oasis is not interested in building its own kingdom, but to serve. I have generally found a genuine receptivity to offers of complementary help or collaboration, readily reciprocated when the common ground is the common good.

One way of making the break from the old paradigm is for a group of chaplains to form a company and re-brand, as MoTiv have done, contracting out their services to the university and the community.

Another is for universities to find ways of embracing a secular chaplaincy as an essential component of university life, as Flinders has done. That probably won't happen until the university itself sees that the chaplaincy has divested itself of religious promotion and self-interest.

In any case, such chaplaincies must run and pass the secular test if they are to get a guernsey to contribute as equal partners in the university world.