

Conference of European University Chaplains  
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Workshop



**ABSTRACT:**

**How many chaplains does it take to change a light bulb?**

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CEUC 2007 presented a landscape of challenges: secularisation, religious pluralism, the move to spirituality, the decline of religious institutions, the corporatisation of universities and our own personal struggles with the complexity of post-modernity.

The chaplains at Flinders University were also struggling with these challenges. In 2000, radical hospitality gave birth to a communal model of multifaith chaplaincy. In 2007 “Religious Centre” became “Oasis” – and the chaplains of various faiths then enjoyed five golden years, as described in my book “An Improbable Feast”.

But in late 2012, everything looked like falling apart! Could these threats to hard won achievements actually be opportunities?

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Firstly, thank you for coming to this workshop.

I intend to tell some light bulb jokes, talk about what's happening at Flinders and show a couple of video's of students responding to the question: *What has Oasis meant for you?* and then, hopefully we will have discussion about the issues all this may raise with you.

The title of my workshop -

Q: how many chaplains does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Well apparently, less and less!

Perhaps you know -

Q: how many Anglicans or Catholics it takes to change a light bulb?

A: none! They always use candles!

Of course, the light-bulb joke some of you may be waiting for –

Q: how many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?

A: CHANGE???????

Q: How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb?

(We should ask Alan from the UK!)

A: We choose not to make a statement of either in favour of, or against, the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship to your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-lived, and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence through Jesus Christ.

Of course, I got these light bulb jokes, apart from the title of my presentation, off the Web.

But they just happen to illustrate three responses to our situation of chaplaincy at Flinders University.

Some churches have said it's **too hard** – 'it's not increasing our membership numbers on Sunday'. So they have withdrawn, some by gradually cutting funding - a death by a thousand cuts - or others by a decision to withdraw completely. This has been the case for the

Anglicans and Catholics in my state of South Australia. Regrettably, they say, university chaplaincy is not core business.

Others have said it's **too complex**, so we'll just keep doing what we've always done – it is as if they are saying 'they know where to find us if they need us. We know what we stand for and so do they, and we intend to keep it that way!' So the Lutherans have for years faithfully committed two salaries each year to conduct university chaplaincy on half a dozen campuses– but effectively to their own adherents.

In my own tradition – Uniting Church, which is a union of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist – we have always had a broad policy of chaplaincy *to the university*, like the salt in the soup or the yeast in the loaf. So the answer to the light bulb joke is actually very close to the truth! The Uniting Church in Australia seems to be adept at finding a way to include everyone!

At the 2007 Conference of European Chaplains in Utrecht we were presented with a landscape of challenges that were thought, at the time, to be the major issues confronting us in university chaplaincy: secularisation, the move to spirituality, the decline of religious and particularly Christian institutions and the resultant cutting back of chaplaincy services, the internationalisation and corporatisation of universities and their resultant commodification and emphasis on regulation and accountability. And our own personal struggles of ministry in a complex, post-modern, pluralist world.

I wonder whether these are still the main issues that confront us? If they are, and I suspect they are, I wonder whether we might continue to keep them on the agenda so that we continue to reflect on them, at least some of the time, when we meet for conferences such as this?

The challenges articulated by the Dutch in 2007 that I have listed, what I call the Dutch Agenda, were also the challenges at my university in Australia at that time. And I am indebted to the Dutch chaplains, in particular, for presenting them so clearly.

As a result, at Flinders we decided to change some light bulbs!

By the way...

Q: How many Australians does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Two! - one to say "She'll be right mate" as he changes the bulb, and the other to go place a bet on whether it's going to work or not.

Q: How many Irish people does it take to change a light bulb?

A: 257. One to hold it and 256 to turn the room.

What were the light bulbs that were working and what were the light bulbs that need to be changed at Flinders ?

1. We had a centre – a complex of meeting rooms and offices donated to the university at its inauguration in 1967 by the Christian Churches and Jewish community in Adelaide “for the religious and spiritual benefit of all”.

This was a time in history of the then outrageous musical “Hair”. It was the “Age of Aquarius” when hopes were high for a new world of love and peace!

Q: How many hippies does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Twenty five. One to change it, ten to put flowers in everyone’s hair, ten to distribute broadsheets for world peace, eight to give hugs and three to share out the marijuana.

“That’s not twenty five?”

Be cool man! We can work it out...

So we had a centre. Nobody was in charge and it provided a home for the various religious clubs and societies over the years.

2. In 2007 we had a good chaplaincy team, including Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Pagan - even if some of the Christian chaplains limited themselves to their own church agendas.
3. But we agreed that we were losing relevance. We thought that the word “Religious” in the name of the centre was off-putting. In the Australian context, “religion” is commonly perceived negatively, in a colonial sense, a self-serving imposition on individual liberty. I think that perception may be changing. But, at the time, the move to the secular was compelling.

What did we do with the light bulbs we had?

We decided to reframe the context of chaplaincy in our university. We did this by making a change - from our centre being called '*The Religious Centre*' to being called '*Oasis-faith spirit community*'. We had a committee representing all the stakeholders who worked through the process of re-thinking and re-branding; and we were assisted in the process by Flinders Campus Community Services, who were responsible for food and catering at the university, the Uni Gym and various student support services. Their Manager agreed that we provided a student service - so they would support us.

In terms of the Dutch Agenda we were making a move towards embracing the secular. We were also making a move toward recognising and embracing students who had given up on religion but saw themselves as spiritual. Such students might access a place called Oasis, but not a Religious Centre.

The change toward a secular but metaphorical name for the centre also fitted with the secular nature of the university itself and its desire for social inclusion and its impatience with the sectarianism of a regime of church denominations concerned for their own. Perhaps there was also a hint of recognition that the university itself was in need of an Oasis, as it struggled with increasing financial, compliance and competitive pressures!

We wanted to get away from the negative connotations of religion, particularly any suggestion of proselytisation and the exercise of power over others. Just as the multifaith chaplaincy had formed because we were hospitable to each other, so we wanted a centre that reflected unconditional hospitality to anyone who entered.

From a Christian point of view, this move was based on a theology of hospitality to the stranger - one of the most persistent themes in the Hebrew Scriptures. And hospitality is also understood by most world religions and indigenous cultures. It means generous welcome of the other as other - creating space for the other to be themselves - not to change the other to be like us, but to allow any change, if at all, to take place in its own way and in its own time. We chaplains shared a common vision - *nurture spirit and build community*.

In this way we were responding to the Dutch Agenda regarding the secular and the move to spirituality.

We were also responding to the internationalisation of the university and the religio-cultural pluralism that went with it.

The move to Oasis allowed us to be open to culture as well as religion and spirituality. National groups began to access the centre for cultural festivals and the pursuit of their own cultural interests. Any activity that nurtured spirit or built community could find a home in Oasis.

So any group, religious or cultural, who wanted to use the centre was welcome; any students who wanted to form a new group that was spiritually encouraging were encouraged; and any stranger who wandered into the space was greeted with a cup of tea or coffee and a comfortable seat to sit and chat, meet other fellow travellers on their journey and make new friends.

And all the while, the Evangelical Christians were still holding their Bible Studies, the Buddhists their meditations, the Muslims their Friday Prayer and so on. But the foreground became hospitality.

I realise that some of you may have seen the video which I am about to show. I hope you don't mind me showing it again. It was put together 3 years on from the launch of Oasis in 2007, the year of the Dutch Agenda. I think it shows the impact of our strategy of welcome and hospitality.

Video: Oasis 2010

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZSPD9pyESU>

In 2010 I also launched my book *An Improbable Feast*, written during this time of the introduction of Oasis as a centre with its concept of hospitality at the heart of pastoral care. These were the golden years- a group of about 8 chaplains of different faiths, working collaboratively, as each was able, for the common good.

Now I would like to show some short videos of stories from students who were there during this time. I think they illustrate the effect of Oasis in transforming lives through hospitality. I hope you will get the sense of how this hospitality works in the creation of space to allow a person to explore their own sense of self and their own spiritual values.

In the first video, Dr Sheila James tells her Oasis story. Unbeknown to us, she had been slipping into the room we call the Quiet Space to pray, particularly when she found her Ph.D. overwhelming. Sheila and I had had some conversations over this time but I didn't know about her praying. I discovered that she was receiving little support from her husband to follow her dream of completing a Ph.D. while also taking care of her family. As you know, it can be very difficult for a wife and mother, when there are other expectations on her.

Finally, she came into Oasis with a copy of her Ph.D. and proudly showed me what she had written in the *Acknowledgements* - that without Oasis she could not have completed her Ph.D.! Shiela is now on staff at Flinders.

This is Sheila's Oasis story.

Video: Shiela's Oasis Story

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Stn2CBkTaUM>

During this period I invited international students who came into Oasis, that I sensed were isolated, lonely or homesick, to an afternoon tea in our home. I started doing this after a particular request. Two Christian women students asked how they might meet some Muslim women students - they knew that there were Muslim students on campus but could not find an easy way to make a connection with them. So I invited the President of the Muslim Students Association to find two or three Muslim women who might come to our home to meet these two Christian women. We met over a meal one evening. It was such a great success that everyone wanted to meet again. So we did!

To make it easier for women at night, and also to avoid problems with prayer times, we eventually shifted this gathering to a Sunday afternoon. Sometimes we had up to 30 international students coming into our home to enjoy swapping stories with each other. We never quite knew how many would turn up because we simply encouraged those who came to invite others who might benefit from it! There was no religious agenda, but we called it an *Interfaith Afternoon Tea*. When the Pope visited Australia there were questions about the Pope and the Catholic church. When it was Ramadan there were questions about the meaning of Ramadan. These topics came from the students themselves to satisfy their own interest in each other. But again, we had no agenda, apart from creating space, hospitable space, for these

students to meet and share their stories with each other and to develop friendship as a result.

Sari was one such PhD student who was invited to our home for an Interfaith Afternoon Tea by a fellow Indonesian student who had attended before. Sari's natural interest in other cultures and religions was stimulated. Unbeknown to us, Sari was also keeping a journal about her overseas experiences. So when she decided to publish her experiences as a book, we suggested that she should have a book launch at Flinders and Oasis would host it.

At the same time, a Christian family, who lived close to the University and wanted to help international students, had contacted me. I am normally guarded about such things because I do not want to be party to proselytising. So I invited the person who contacted me to come to Sari's book launch so that I might not only get to know him and decide if he was a suitable host, but also help him make his own judgements about connecting with any international students who might be at the launch. Fortunately it all turned out well. Sari was adopted by this family and had a wonderful experience with them, fulfilling a long time dream of Sari's to experience celebrating Christmas in a Christian home.

Oasis provided a place to connect, and hospitality brought transformation, resulting in the same desire to offer that same experience of hospitality to others. As I explain in my book, this is the spiritual dynamic of hospitality. Spiritual exploration is able to take its own shape in the native religion of the person, but is not confined in a sectarian way to that religion. It is creative and outgoing.

In another video, Oasis provided an environment in which interest in another religion was stimulated. Sean and his two friends Raz and Lee commute more than fifty kilometres to Flinders each day from another town. At first Oasis provided a place to rest, cook a simple lunch and have a free coffee. They brought their own sense of fun to Oasis. But gradually Sean became interested in Islam. He did not want to find out about Islam from a book – he wanted to experience it in its own cultural setting. So I connected him with an Indonesian Muslim PhD student who offered to help by providing an experience of a Madrassa in his home country of Indonesia during the long summer break. In the end, the likelihood of language difficulties prevented our first plan. But as you will see, this did not deter Sean!



This is Sean's Oasis story.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnIU46bwR8o>

So as you can see from these videos, this time last year the future of Oasis looked bright. All the Oasis light bulbs were shining.

But clouds had been forming on the horizon. My contract with the Uniting Church was coming to an end and the Global Financial Crisis had had an impact on the church's available funds. I began to warn the University that I might be retiring at the end of 2012. Similarly, the Lutheran Church was in the process of cutting back on its chaplaincy services, also influenced by the economic downturn.

On the other hand, the University had come into extra funds through the introduction of a new system of student fees. It restructured its student services; but Oasis was left out of that restructure.

By October 2012 things looked bleak. Oasis found itself with no ally in the university to support it.

However, unbeknown to us, a conversation took place among the Vice Chancellor's Executive. After some discussion the University decided to step in to assure the future of Oasis by funding an Oasis Coordinating Chaplain, a full-time Administrator to manage the centre, and a reasonable budget to allow Oasis to function efficiently. Oasis became a university entity within Student Services and within the portfolio of the Head of Health and Counselling and Disability Services.

As a result, I was appointed Oasis Chaplaincy Coordinator and commenced employment with the University at the beginning of March 2013.

This might have been cause for celebration, but over the long holiday break from December to February three chaplains left Oasis. Our model of chaplaincy depended on the services of volunteer chaplains from the different faiths. But now we were left with only 3 chaplains and a volunteer.

At first I was devastated. The good work of fifteen years of chaplaincy now seemed to be falling apart. However I was now employed by the

University to do what I could with what we had. So how could this threat become an opportunity?

Firstly we had to let go of the model of multifaith chaplaincy we had pioneered. It did not reflect our new reality and it was no use pretending it did.

Secondly we did not have the power to run the programs we would have liked. We were thrown back simply to our core practice of hospitality –welcoming, encouraging and empowering to foster spiritual growth. It was up to the students themselves to respond and create their own programs, supported by us. So our strategy of hospitality was being given a critical test – would our vision be compelling enough to attract new volunteers who might make their own contribution or not.

So what has happened in this new situation over this last three months?

Let me provide two case studies, one with the Muslim community and one with the Buddhists.

In December 2012 the Muslim students had invited a young radical preacher to offer a sermon at Friday prayers. I happened to be there to present a certificate of appreciation to the President of the Muslim Association, who was returning to Saudi Arabia. *Alaa* had done a wonderful job leading his community during 2012 and we had become close friends. The sermon preached by this young radical encouraged all the Muslims to boycott any celebration of Christmas and even suggested that parents remove their children from their Australian schools lest they be involved in celebrating Christmas. It was a strong anti-Christian message calling for separation.

At the end of prayers I offered the certificate to the President and we all shook hands. But it was very embarrassing for many of the Muslims who were present, appalled that this young man had preached against the Christians. Afterwards many of the Muslims came directly to me to apologise. But I needed to say to them that, although we enjoy harmony on the campus, I could take them to churches on Sunday where they would find equal discrimination against Muslims by Christian preachers. However, they were not consoled.

We had an unwritten agreement that the Muslim students would organise their own affairs and not invite outsiders on to the campus to preach. So this unpleasant incident created a fresh discussion about how the Muslim students might organise themselves. In this discussion it became clear to me that in their home countries these students were used to simply turning up at the mosque where the Imam would do everything, including the sermon. But at the University there was no Imam – deliberately, because an imam would bring particular cultural emphases from his country of origin; whereas the students came from all over the world, and so a more universal framework was needed. So how could we help the students undertake the duties and responsibilities of an Imam for their own student community?

One of the students suggested that support be given for public speaking skills, to raise the confidence of students who might deliver sermons. The sermons began to be video-ed and feedback given to the preacher to support improvement. One of the Muslim students sought out a public speaking coach from Toastmasters International who offered to run a public speaking skills seminar for them. Oasis assisted with afternoon tea, certificates of attendance and a gift for the guest. Over thirty students attended. Now the Muslim students want to offer the public speaking skills seminar for all students on campus.

So what began as a threat and a problem became an opportunity now extending itself into service to the University. This is another fruit of hospitality and its capacity to absorb harm and promote friendship with encouragement.

One of the big differences is that now, as part of the University, I am included in the communication network. So only now, after years of writing reports about the sad state of the Muslim Prayer Rooms, has the University taken notice and is contacting me. Plans for renovations have been drawn up and this has meant regular fortnightly meetings of the Muslim Association Committee to discuss them. It has also meant that a women's committee was now needed to look at the female prayer rooms. It turned out that one of the women is brilliant in design and has completely redesigned the architects drawings. Her design has been accepted by the architects and she has become the legitimate main representative of the Muslim

Association with respect of the renovations. So now we are making some progress on gender equity.

Notice – I am not running any programs – simply providing hospitality, encouragement and support.

When the Buddhist chaplain suddenly resigned in February, I was really shocked. It was like losing a limb, because the contribution of meditation to the University had been significant.

I arranged to have a quiet cup of tea with the Chair of the Buddhist Council of South Australia. I was hoping he would come up with a replacement, but this was not to be. Furthermore I made an important discovery. The procedures we had set up for the appointment of chaplains to the University by religious bodies did not suit the Buddhists – we had assumed that the Christian model of appointment that existed when chaplaincy was only Christian, would work for other faiths. So after thirteen years I discovered that the Buddhists had been quietly trying to do the best they could, but the model didn't work for them. Nor would it work for the Pagans, for they also had no infrastructure to take responsibility for the legal, financial and pastoral support of chaplains who ministered in their name.

So the resignation of the Buddhist chaplain led to the need to completely rethink the basis for the appointment of chaplains from religious communities to universities in South Australia. As a result, at Flinders we have begun to draw on the University's own protocols for volunteering, which are related to national standards.

So you can see that over the last three months we have been re-inventing Oasis. It continues as a centre of welcome, hospitality and support, but with a greater emphasis on empowering students to run their affairs; and we are shifting away from chaplains as the central body in Oasis toward a collaboration of volunteers making their contribution to the university on the basis of the Oasis mission statement:

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

We are in the process of developing some key documents – a statement about how Oasis contributes to the University’s Strategic Plan, a corresponding values statement to guide potential Oasis volunteers and a document that indicates how religious bodies and others may connect and make their contribution through volunteers. Reviewing these papers from various perspectives will be an initial task of an Oasis Reference Group that is currently being set up.

Oasis is also continuing to contribute to the wider community within the spirit of the Faith Friendly Communities Charter – in schools and other institutions as they pioneer multifaith approaches to chaplaincy and faithfriendliness within their communities, and with organisations seeking to conduct inclusive public ceremonies, like the Order of Australia *Australia Day Multifaith Celebration*.

As we recover from the loss of practical support from the churches, we expect, in the future, to collaborate with others who share our aspirations – to host a forum for religious leaders in Adelaide and to host seminars that cross religious and cultural boundaries.

Q: How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Three, but they're really only one.

Q. How many university chaplains does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Fewer and fewer. But it may only take one to turn on the light!