

Oasis – Directions and Aspirations

Geoff Boyce, Coordinating Chaplain, Oasis, March 2013

From the beginning of the positioning of Oasis within the University¹, it seems appropriate for Oasis to seek affirmation from the University of its direction and aspirations into the future. This paper provides a snapshot of the continuing evolution of Oasis, its potential role in the university and in the community at large, and points to ongoing developmental tasks in its evolution as a world-class centre for student support and community engagement with respect to faith and culture.

Oasis aims to provide a faith friendly, welcoming and supportive environment in the university for the promotion of friendship and wellbeing. As a unique interfaith collaborative, Oasis promotes peace and understanding among people of diverse cultures, faiths and backgrounds who form the tapestry of campus life in Australia today.

From Religious Centre to Oasis

From the inauguration of Flinders University, the role of its Religious Centre has been to support the University's commitment to the spiritual welfare of its students and to contribute to social cohesion on the campus, based on mutual respect and understanding.²

Until the late nineteen nineties the dominant culture within the Religious Centre was Christian, but conflict situations intensified³ as various minority faith groups began to proliferate, a direct consequence of increasing student enrolments and particularly those of international students. This demonstrated that simply catering to the diverse religious needs of different groups with disparate interests was insufficient to achieve harmony and cohesion. The building of mutually respectful and harmonious relationships *between* the groups would also need attention and support. This realization was affirmed by theoretical underpinnings provided by the Pluralism Project at Harvard⁴ and Miroslav Volf at Yale⁵ and supported by understandings about spirituality among students, in particular, by David Tacey.⁶

In the face of a dominant exclusionary group, collaborative relationships developed among the chaplains of diverse faiths at Flinders. The trend in other universities was to establish *Multifaith* Centres to cater for increasing diversity. However this 'community of colleagues' not only ministered to their own faith groups, but aspired to serve the university together, and hence to envision an *Interfaith* Centre, which became *Oasis*⁷. This aspiration advanced Flinders to the leading edge of a movement toward fostering religious inclusion in institutions and the community.

In formulating and implementing the concept of Oasis, the intertwining of spiritual, religious and cultural interests and needs was also recognised.

¹ Since its inception in 2007, Oasis was generously championed by Flinders One, who saw Oasis as an important contributor to student support and freely undertook its administrative functions

² <http://www.flinders.edu.au/ppmanual/equal-opportunity/principles-religious-and-spiritual.cfm>

³ The University responded at the request of the chaplains by establishing the Religious Centre Committee and a Religious Centre Document of Rules and Operating Procedures:

<http://www.flinders.edu.au/ppmanual/equal-opportunity/religious-centre-rules.cfm>

⁴ http://www.pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_to_pluralism

⁵ <http://www.yale.edu/faith/index.htm>

⁶ David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution* (Harper Collins 2003)

⁷ Documented in Geoff Boyce *An Improbable Feast*, self-published 2010

Hospitality as the Operating Principle

Hospitality, as understood by many major world religions and by many indigenous peoples, became an essential ingredient in resolving conflict in the Religious Centre and the harmonious inclusion of diverse faiths and cultures. Radical hospitality therefore became the principle motif that led to the conception of Oasis and became a core value in inclusive chaplaincy practice at Flinders University.

Hospitality means not only welcoming others, but respecting and seeking to learn from them:

- a **Faith Friendly Charter**⁸ was developed to express these aspirations and as a means of empowering inclusivity in communities.
- a **Multifaith Ministry Charter**, as a code for ministry in multifaith environments was also developed.⁹

Oasis within the Flinders Community

Oasis

- is located centrally in the Mall and offers a variety of spaces for informal and formal meetings.
- provides an appropriate context and venue for service providers and student groups.
- provides a context and venue for the celebrating of festivals and significant events.
- provides a home for a collaborative of chaplains and volunteers engendering the ethos of Oasis.
- complements Health and Counselling as an informal, holistic, well-being centre.
- offers support for faculties, schools and departments and for other service providers across institutional structural boundaries.¹⁰

Oasis as a continually evolving centre of innovation

The underlying questions at the heart of the evolution of Oasis have been,

- How are we to support human flourishing?
- How are we to live harmoniously together, particularly across religious divides?

The strength of the Flinders contribution has arisen from the holistic melding of pastoral, religious, cultural and social justice perspectives among a voluntary collaboration of members of participating faith bodies.¹¹ Recognition of these achievements has led to requests from various organisations for consultation and support - locally, nationally and internationally.¹² Such invitations confirm that there are ongoing opportunities for community engagement as institutions and the wider

⁸ Inspired by the work of David Miller at Princeton University and influenced by the Ford Interfaith Network practices at the Ford Motor Company in the US.

⁹ Both charters were developed in conjunction with Prof. Norman Habel, Professorial Fellow, Flinders University. The Faith Friendly Charter has been particularly helpful at Woodville High School. It was launched by Hieu Van Le in October, 2010 and is available at <http://www.multifaithsa.org.au/>

¹⁰ Particularly, for example, international postgraduates in the Schools of Education, Social and Policy Studies and more widely with ISSU, Yunggoorendi, Flinders Housing and the Students Association.

¹¹ In contrast to the establishing of "National Centre(s) of Excellence for Islamic Studies Australia" and other centres such as the Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding at UniSA, Oasis has developed distinctively from among practitioners of pastoral care, rather than as a political response to Islamic terrorism, typically focussed on academic research.

¹² For example, in 2013, Geoff Boyce has provided consultancy to the ANU Chaplaincy Board and ANU chaplains, will be a key-note speaker in Sheffield, UK in July at a conference organised in response to his book, and speaker at the Conference of European University Chaplains in Sweden in June. Geoff consults with Chaplaincy Services SA, which liaises with hospitals, prisons, police and emergency services in SA.

community engage in shifts from mono-culture to diversity to pluralism, particularly in the religious and spiritual fields.¹³ To this point of time Flinders has had the opportunity to be at the forefront of that development.

Oasis will continue to evolve and facilitate:

- providing international students with experiences of interfaith harmony and leadership which may have long-term global implications,¹⁴
- innovation through the action-research of a community of practitioners, serving a need for new models of chaplaincy in pluralist settings,¹⁵
- ongoing and increasing consultancy to other universities and institutions, and
- development of a vision for religious literacy among all Flinders students, encompassing recognition, acceptance and valuing of difference.

Ongoing Developmental Tasks

- Continuation of the recognition and invitation of appropriate volunteers from among Adelaide's various religious communities to contribute collaboratively.
- Investigation of how a volunteering approach works together with the university's approach in effective governance and within government requirements.
- Exploration of a professional mode of accountability appropriate to innovation, the voluntary character of Oasis and the responsive, fluid nature of chaplaincy.¹⁶
- Establishment of appropriate support for guiding Oasis through the challenges of adapting to being formally part of the University while maintaining and living out its core values, particularly being hospitable to staff and students from diverse faiths and cultures.
- Review of religious policy and its positioning in the University.
- Contribution to the integration of understandings of radical hospitality into university practice, the provision of facilities and use of space.
- Exploration of the implications of Oasis as a teaching/learning centre, complementing Flinders Department of Theology.¹⁷
- Raise the profile of Oasis among students.
- Strategic promotion of the contribution of Oasis to the wider community, locally, nationally and internationally.

¹³ The new Adelaide Hospital, for example has challenged the Christian body responsible for the appointment of chaplains to hospitals that any chaplaincy within the hospital must be "visibly multifaith". Geoff Boyce has supported the Principal of Woodville High School in exploring a new model of chaplaincy appropriate to their diverse school community and the Order of Australia Committee (SA) in constructing inclusive ceremonies.

¹⁴ For example, an invitation in 2012 to contribute to a colloquium jointly sponsored by the Centre for Research and Development of Religious Education and Religion and the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, concerned with countering radicalisation in Islamic schools, arose from such positive experiences in an Indonesian postgraduate student in 1998-9.

¹⁵ Oasis, through its various chaplains, contributes books and papers within the religious and academic worlds, and seminars in the university and beyond. For example, Muslim chaplain Dr Abul Farooque recently presented a lecture at the Abraham Institute on the Mogul Dynasty, Pagan chaplain Kylie Davis has presented lectures in Women's Studies at Flinders on Women in Religion, and the Chaplains' Executive Secretary, Maureen Howland, through her studies in Indonesian language at Flinders, has supported Sari, a PhD candidate from Aceh, publishing a book relating her experiences of encountering diversity, the book-launch hosted by Oasis in 2010.

¹⁶ The further and successful development of Oasis may be contingent on the application of a flexible and situational management rather than a traditional bureaucratic and control-based approach and an hierarchical mode of accountability.

¹⁷ Geoff Boyce has been invited on to the Council of the Adelaide College of Divinity in 2012 with a brief to support the inclusion of aspects of interfaith into the curriculum.

Appendix 1

Diversity and Pluralism, Multifaith and Interfaith

Diversity is synonymous with difference and the right to difference.

In the religious sphere, diversity relates to multifaith – literally *many faiths* and the right for the integrity of those different faiths.

Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from diversity.

In the religious sphere, pluralism relates to interfaith engagement – literally *between faiths*, respecting the integrity of each diverse faith.

Diana Eck, Director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, makes the following points about Diversity and Pluralism¹⁸:

- Diversity can and often has meant isolation and the creation of virtual ghettos of religion and sub-culture with little traffic between them. The dynamic of pluralism, however, is one of meeting, exchange, and two-way traffic¹⁹.
- Clearly the pluralism that would engage people of different faiths and cultures in the creation of a common society is not a “given,” but an achievement.
- Tolerance does little to remove our ignorance of one another. Tolerance is definitely important, but it is probably too thin a foundation for a society as religiously diverse and complex as that of America.
- Pluralism does not require relinquishing the distinctiveness of one’s own tradition of faith to reach the “lowest common denominator.” Rather, pluralism invites people of every faith or of none to be themselves, with all their particularities, and yet to be engaged in creating a civil society, through the critical and self-critical encounter with one another. Pluralism is a process of creating a society by acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences.
- Pluralism is based on the common ground rules of the Constitution: “no establishment” of religion and the “free exercise” of religion.

There is a movement to establish “**Interfaith Ministry**”²⁰ in its own right. Such ministers see themselves as non-denominational, open to engagement with the wider community, with an appreciation of all religions, and fostering a spirituality derived from values common among religions.

At Flinders we understand “interfaith” as engagement within the context of maintaining difference and the integrity of each faith tradition, promoting and engaging in radical collaboration for the wider good.

¹⁸ http://www.pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/essays/from_diversity_to_pluralism

¹⁹ This insight is critical to understanding why the provision of Multifaith Centres, while supporting diversity, does not of itself guarantee a movement toward respect and understanding between those who may access such spaces. The support of Oasis, through the provision of a Coordinating Chaplain and Administrative Assistant by Flinders University provides a surer foundation for contributing to inter-religious harmony (pluralism).

²⁰ For example, in the US, the founding seminary, <http://www.new-seminary.com/>; in the UK, <http://www.interfaithfoundation.org/>. In Australia, the psychologist and writer Stephanie Dowrick is an Interfaith Minister, graduating from the Interfaith Seminary in New York (above).