

A Multifaith Chaplaincy – Work In Progress: experimentation and cultural change at Flinders University.

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This paper was first presented for discussion at a workshop during the 3rd Global Conference of University and College Chaplains and Campus Ministers and Religious Professionals, Tampere, Finland in July 2008.

It is intended to explore implications of evolving from an individualistic Christian chaplaincy to a cooperative, collegial, multi-faith model, contextualised in a secular university.

How is *multifaith* chaplaincy possible, given that chaplaincy is a Christian concept¹ and has traditionally always been individualistic?

Last year a Student Counsellor from a Sydney university and I had a conversation about this. We both work in secular universities.

As we talked I began mind mapping what I thought might describe the present situation in many Australian secular universities.

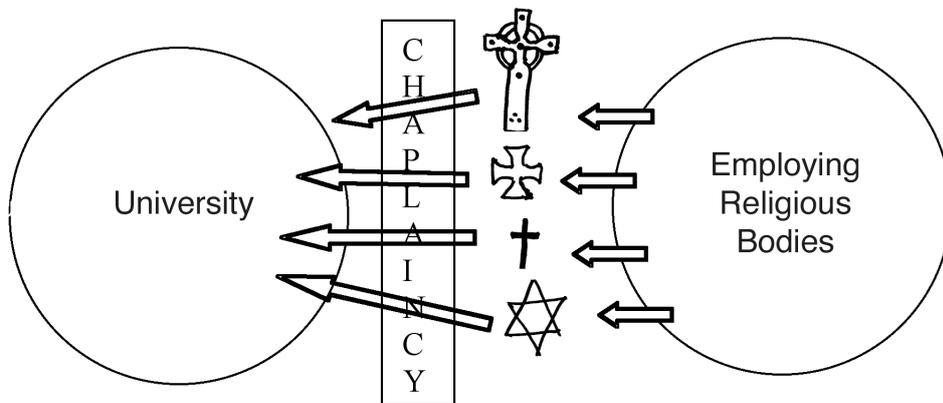


fig. 1

Traditionally, religious bodies (invariably Christian) commission their religious to represent them within the university. Each carries the religious culture and agenda of their commissioning religious body and is accountable to that body.

The Counsellor responded with a diagram that described what he thought the university wants. And he wrote “spirituality” in the centre.

¹ For an account of the Christian origins of chaplaincy see Boyce, G. *Models of Chaplaincy*. Journal of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association, Vol 2 No 2 (2005)



fig.2

The Counsellor has intuitively drawn an amoeba-like shape, perhaps suggesting the flexibility and inclusive nature of such a chaplaincy.

What I took from this interchange is that the essential discrepancy between “what the churches provide” and “what the university wants” is that religious bodies see themselves providing "religion", while the university wants "spirituality".

Continuing the mind mapping, we wondered about the nodes of the ‘amoeba’. Could each node be a contributing chaplain? And what if each were of a different faith? We might get the following:

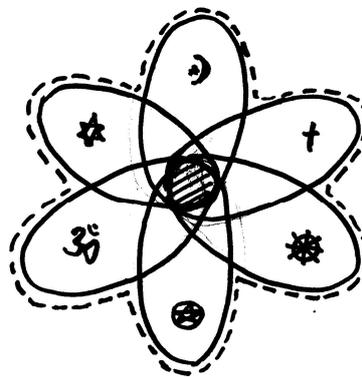


fig.3

The university gets the shape it wants (spirituality) –represented by the dotted outline - yet the religious integrity of each contributing chaplain is maintained.

I think such a diagram represents something of what we are trying to achieve at Flinders University.

Some Implications

In such a model, the understanding of university chaplaincy by commissioning religious bodies needs to accommodate acceptance of the rights of other religious traditions to chaplaincy and an acceptance of the need for mutuality, cooperation and teamwork. Holding such a chaplaincy together requires commitment to a common vision, genuine respect between participants and open communication built on trust.

The common mission of the chaplaincy at Flinders is to “nurture spirit, build community”.

How ‘spirituality’ works in this model could be illustrated by a recent comment to me by a Student Support Officer. He brings newly arrived students to me in my office and introduces them to me. But when he introduces me he doesn’t introduce me either as “the chaplain” or “the Christian chaplain” or

“the Uniting Church Chaplain” but simply as “Geoff”. His point is that we first meet at a human level, we share firstly what we have in common, not what we may hold differently.

As chaplains of different faiths, we engage with others first and foremost with what we have in common – what is at the centre in the diagram – our shared spirituality. Each contributor to this shared spirituality is nurtured by his or her own religious practice and experience; the integrity of their faith is maintained.

Difference may best be mutually explored only when trusting relationships and enjoyable friendships have been established. This exploration among the chaplains is contextualised by a shared vision and commitment to a common missional rubric, in our case “nurturing spirit, building community”. As we share with each other along the journey of serving the religious and spiritual needs of the university, we find that the common core of mutuality, our shared spirituality, expands.

The actual content of this core spirituality is yet to be fully articulated. Clearly those virtues that make for positive, loving, open relationships are valued, as is a commitment to justice and well being for the lives of others. However the following charter provides a point of departure for ministry undertaken within view of each other and together as a “community of colleagues”.

A Multi-Faith Ministry Charter²

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.

5. Principle of Mutual Advocacy

A multifaith ministry is committed to advocacy for people of other faith traditions in terms of what is known to be in the best spirit of each tradition.

² The first four points of this Charter were developed for the Flinders chaplaincy by Prof. Norm Habel, School of Theology, Flinders University nhabel@esc.net.au, 17 August, 2006) From their practice, the chaplains have added a further two points.

6. Principle of Mutual Deference

A multifaith ministry encourages direct contact with authentic sources of information rather than mediating in any investigation of one faith tradition by a member of another.

The question posed at the beginning of this paper was how *multifaith* chaplaincy is possible, given that chaplaincy is a Christian concept and has traditionally always been individualistic?

The re-invention of chaplaincy as a multi-faith enterprise will be a long process. There is an argument that the word “chaplain” be dropped altogether because it is a Christian word. But words can be filled with new meaning. My hope is that not just the word, but also the ministry of chaplaincy itself will be enriched as Christians are prepared to forgo their exclusive use of the word. This might be achieved by Christian chaplains inviting potential chaplains from other faiths into their chaplaincy world, and also being prepared to enter theirs, encouraging those of other faiths to make the word “chaplaincy” their own in keeping with common concepts within their faith tradition.

The struggle to make chaplaincy a communal enterprise goes against the prevailing current of western individualism that a traditional Christian model of chaplaincy too easily embraces. On the other hand, a globalised world demands an ability to get on with the other who is different, without trying to create the other in one’s own image.

There is a world of difference between a chaplaincy that claims to be multifaith because chaplains of different faiths turn up to serve the needs of their faith constituencies, and one that is strategised around being a multifaith *community* to serve the religious and spiritual needs of the whole university. The first such chaplaincy might be described within the rubric of diversity, the second within the rubric of pluralism.

Diana L. Eck, Director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, makes this distinction cogently.³

* First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.

* Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

* Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.

* Fourth, pluralism is based on dialogue. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue

³ http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism.php

does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table -- with one’s commitments.

Opening the spirituality space⁴

Over the last ten years I have observed the following movements in our chaplaincy at Flinders University:

FROM	TOWARDS	
individual	collegial team	
religion	spirituality	Religious needs often met off campus
“Counselling” technique	Mentoring/pastoral care “Being”/presence	‘journeying with’
Medical model (“come to me”) ‘professional’	Organic/networking Volunteers with special gifts	complexity
Organiser of programs	Hosting or being supportive partners in others’ programs	Supporting, critiquing, giving feedback, complementing what the university does
adversarial, “them and us”, closed set	Mutuality, collaborative, mutual support, open set	
Competitive/controlling	Compassionate/mutually empowering, interactivity	
Language of certainty, “answers”	flexibility, humility, faith, creative imagination	
Role security	Role insecurity	Seeming non-core business of society
centre	margins	

Adopting “nurturing spirit, building community” as the core mission of a chaplaincy team relativises the role of religion and reframes the role of the chaplain. Leonardo Boff’s statement on spirituality, below, illustrates the kind of movement sketched in the table above, and likely changes in mindset of the chaplain working within this paradigm.⁵

Spirituality is that attitude which puts life at the center, and defends and promotes life against all the mechanisms of death, desiccation, or stagnation. The opposite of spirit, in this sense, is not the body but death and everything associated with the system of death, understood in the widest sense of biological, social, and existential death (failure, humiliation, and oppression). Nourishing spirituality means cultivating the inward space, the basis on which all things can be brought together. It means overwhelming deadness and stagnation and living reality in terms of values, inspiration, and symbols of higher meaning. The spiritual person is one who is always in a position to see the other side of reality, and who is always capable of

⁴ The work of David Tacey with students at Latrobe has been inspirational and informative. He has been a keynote speaker at Australian, New Zealand and international conferences of University chaplains. See “The Spirituality Revolution” (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003)

⁵ Leonardo Boff. <http://www.leonardoboff.com>

perceiving that profundity by which we are referred to the Ultimate Reality that religions call God.

Spirituality does not start from power, or from the accumulative instinct, or from instrumental reason. It relies on the movements of sacramental and symbolic reason, on the gratuitousness of the world, on relationships, on deep stirrings within, on the sense of communion that all things possess, and on a vision of the vast cosmic organism, shot through and permeated with signs and allusions to a higher and fuller reality."

This movement toward spirituality has prompted the renaming of the Religious Centre at Flinders University as *OASIS – faith, spirit, community*.⁶

The renaming responds to the reality that many people in Australia see themselves as “spiritual, but not religious”. This might be analogous to the chaplains seeing themselves as first relating to others as fellow human beings, rather than first wanting to be seen as particular religious practitioners. It doesn’t mean that chaplains renounce their religion, or hide it.

So the renaming of the centre has not reduced religious activities within it, but expanded possibilities for spiritual nurture and building community, opening a space for cultural and cross-cultural pursuits. National festivals, gatherings of international students, musical and new social justice orientated groups now use the centre.⁷

This move coincides with the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism, which has dried up funding for student life. The formation and development of the new student body, amalgamating former student associations and the student union, has created an opportunity for a closer, cooperative relationship between the chaplains and Flinders One. The opening up of Oasis and the work of the chaplains is being seen as complementing their services. While remaining autonomous within the university, chaplaincy’s relationships seem to be growing closer to Flinders One than the university’s Student Services.

Concluding comments

The Flinders chaplaincy has a long way to go to fulfil the aspirations that the pluralistic model of fig. 3 promises. The reality is that the circles are of unequal size. All of the non-Christian chaplains, for example, are part-time volunteers. This Christian chaplain is full-time, funded by his church. This lack of equivalence is not an ideal situation. And it’s hard to see how six or seven full-time paid chaplains will be funded!

What I think keeps us together, in spite of these shortcomings, is a commitment to a vision - the kind of pluralism Eck espouses in her Pluralism Project at Harvard.

At a practical level, collegiality is fostered as the chaplains meet each week for a shared lunch, as far as they are able. This regular point of meeting allows a sharing of concerns with each other, a seeking

⁶ Oasis –faith, spirit, community is described as “a centre for faith development and spiritual refreshment, providing a forum and home environment for the development of genuine community.” <http://www.flinders.edu.au/oasis/>

⁷ See, for example, the short video produced to show who uses Oasis for the official launch of the centre on April 9, 2008. <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=v56lSm7DCzk>

of each other's insights, and a developing of ideas for mutual service. It also provides a point to which others may be invited to meet the group.

The chaplains are also able to present seminars within the university, and in the community, as a group, thus modelling the kind of mutuality to which we aspire.

In this way chaplaincy is being re-imagined as a multifaith enterprise with something to offer by way of its gifts and experience in both personal and corporate spheres.