

Reflections on the Fourth Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education, Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, June 25-29, 2012.

<http://www.globalchaplains2012.com/home>

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Conference theme:

Mosaics in Motion:

Spiritual Leadership in a Multifaith World –

explored by looking at the core values of:

- ***religious literacy***
- ***radical hospitality***
- ***service with thoughtful reflection***
- ***creating and sharing sacred space***

The Global Conference of Chaplains in Higher Education, Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, June 25-29, 2012ⁱ, was the fourth international conference of chaplains in higher education. It was convened by the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education, which was formally established in 2008 by associating the various national and continental university chaplains' associations.

Reflections

1. The challenges of religious pluralism have become the central concern of university chaplaincy.

The conference was conceived by members of an International Committee to reflect the perceived main fronts of university chaplaincy engagement today across international boundaries, with particular emphasis on those of the host nation (the USA). The selection of Keynote speakersⁱⁱ and also the topics offered by chaplains themselves in workshops, roundtables and forums created its own mosaic of exploration on the main theme, teased out by the four sub-themes of the conference, *religious literacy*ⁱⁱⁱ, *radical hospitality*^{iv}, *service with thoughtful reflection* and *creating and sharing sacred space*.

There is do doubt that responses from western governments and the communities they represent to the events of September 11, 2001 in the U.S. and subsequent bombings in London, Madrid and Bali, have placed a spotlight on Islam and subsequently the relationship of Christianity to Islam in the West. Ironically, the influx of refugees from the "War On Terror" has exacerbated the need to clarify this relationship, as the number of Muslims seeking refuge in those western countries which have engaged in this "war" has grown, and anxiety about Muslim extremism has impacted the Western landscape – security at airports and "border protection" to name only two more obvious effects. In the US and UK, in particular, universities have become important centres from which efforts to create social cohesion and stability are being driven.

In short, 'interfaith' has moved toward centre stage as 'religion' has found its way on to national agendas.

A secondary concern within the 2012 conference, related to the above renewed interest in religion in the public domain, but perhaps not as immediately obvious, was how the religious is engaging with the secular - not only with respect of the rightful place of the atheist or non-theist in the interfaith equation, but the ever-present debate about church and state and where the boundaries ought to be drawn.

So the 2012 Global Conference of University Chaplains reflected these movements:

(a) religion is back on the public agenda and a renegotiation of its place in society is underway. It is being recognised that for national social cohesion a multicultural framework is insufficient without a multifaith component; and that the voices of minority religions must be heard alongside majority (in the USA, Christian) voices, which in the past, were privileged.

(b) the change reflected in the period between the initial 2000 and the 2012 university chaplains global conferences is a shift in viewing chaplaincy as a Christian invention to a more universal, multifaith one. This has been driven by the effects of globalisation and, in particular, the internationalisation of universities, resulting in the appointment of Muslim chaplains, for example. Terrorist dramas and the global movement of people have accelerated these trends and highlighted the role of religion in society, for good or evil.

2. The theme: “Spiritual Leadership in a Multifaith World”

The opening dinner of the 450 delegates was addressed by **Eboo Patel**, member of President Barack Obama's inaugural *Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighbourhood Partnerships* and founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based international non-profit that aims to promote interfaith cooperation.

Central to Patel's thinking, and I suggest the main influence on emerging strategy in the USA, is a finding from social science: ^v

“We can show in a quite rigorous way that when you become friends with someone of a different faith, it not only makes you more open-minded to people of that faith, it makes you more open-minded about people of all other faiths. It makes you more tolerant generally... That's the fundamental premise of the Interfaith Youth Core's work.”^{vi}

This insight seems to underpin a move by some American universities to expect their chaplains to facilitate dialogue between religious groups as *a fundamental part of their job description*.

The American **Association of College and University Religious Affairs (ACURA)** has been proactive in this regard and has strongly adopted this principle.^{vii} Graduates of such universities and a growing number of Liberal Arts Colleges are expected to be *religiously literate* (conference sub-theme 1.), having

respect and “appreciative understanding” of faiths other than their own, as a mandatory outcome of their tertiary education.

The President’s Challenge

A key recommendation of Obama’s inaugural *Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighbourhood Partnerships*, adopted by the Obama Administration, is directed toward three national priorities – **social cohesion, social capital and civic responsibility**.

To address these national goals, a decision was made to ***focus on the universities in relation to their neighbouring communities***.

The strategy adopted was a simple one – a challenge by the President, directed to the leadership of universities, to undertake locally strategised service programs to bring students of diverse faiths together to address a community need, particularly poverty reduction.

Interfaith service involves people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds tackling community challenges together – for example, Protestants and Catholics, Hindus and Jews, and Muslims and non-believers,... building a Habitat for Humanity house together. Interfaith service impacts specific community challenges, from homelessness to mentoring to the environment, while building social capital and civility. American colleges, community colleges, and universities have often been at the forefront of solving our nation’s greatest challenges.

In response to the first year of the President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, this year over 250 institutions of higher education are making the vision for interfaith cooperation and community service a reality on campuses across the country.

The White House invites all institutions of higher education to join this powerful movement for the coming year.^{viii}

By issuing this challenge, directed at university administrations, the President has offered his name to provide an incentive for locally contextualised interfaith voluntary service programs to be developed, reaching out from within the university. The premise is that in common service, relations between people of different faiths may occur, and religious tolerance built.

Many universities have risen to the challenge and naturally, chaplains have been at the centre of implementing many of their programs. (This may also have provided a subtle shift in the status of chaplaincy in universities and a nudge away from sectarian to toward interfaith conceptions of chaplaincy).

I went to a Roundtable in which selected participants who had been engaged in the *President’s Challenge* reported on their activities:

Rabbi Serena Fujita in NW Pennsylvania led an interfaith group who decided that in their neighbourhood, food justice was an issue. They have developed a community garden that supplies fresh produce to local non-profit soup kitchens. They are also researching food wastage and recycling in their community.

A chaplain at the Air Force Academy has been part of a team who have developed a three-year plan involving 1,655 cadets and 6,702 volunteers hours, addressing domestic poverty in their area. They have also devised a religious respect program – 6 hours for students and 3 hours for staff.

A Director of Spiritual Life at a music-focussed college set up an Interfaith Student Council and an Interfaith Staff Council, running seminars and establishing pathways for interfaith engagement with local non-profits. They also instituted an annual university award for interfaith leadership.

At Brown University they used the President's Challenge to catalyse conversations. One strategy was to invite prominent speakers to each provide a university seminar with an interfaith aspect. Students sign up for the seminar, get a copy of his/her book, meet the speaker, and attend a 'so what?' follow-up session.

At Amherst College, the chaplain focussed on faculty staff with the challenge of providing 10,000 pounds of food, \$10,000 and a 25% involvement among staff on alleviating poverty in their area. They met the goals! They also set up an interdisciplinary lecture series and an "Everybody Has a Story Week" in which participants had the opportunity to speak for 10 minutes on seven questions, which included beliefs. 3,600 students and 1,500 staff were involved last year!

This was a sample of hundreds of creative, locally contextualised initiatives that have been spawned simply by the President offering a challenge directed to university administrations. Nobody gets paid to run these programs by the White House. There are no *President's Challenge* grants to apply for. But the *President's Challenge* provides an incentive for the university, which indirectly empowers chaplaincy within the ambit of the university's own mission and values.

On the other hand, widespread change on the ground away from a religiously sectarian chaplaincy to a more open, multifaith model may still be far from reality.^{ix}. For example, the composition of the conference itself was overwhelmingly white, American and Christian.

But the direction seems clear and movement in that direction obvious.^x

As Patel says:

"The worst thing society can do is to continue what it's doing today: allowing attitudes to be shaped by the shrillest voices, the voices of intolerance, political expedience and xenophobia. If we don't talk openly

about faith and bring people from different traditions together, we forfeit the conversation to people who are happy to build barriers.”^{xi}

Implications

(a) Community Service

The American emphasis on a service (civic responsibility) model, the third sub-theme - *service with thoughtful reflection* - in which students volunteer for poverty reduction programs and “mission trips”, contain seeds of a more open engagement among people of different faiths and no faiths. In the conference discussion, emphasis was placed on how such engagements are strategised and reflected upon.

Australian university chaplaincy doesn’t seem to be big on this idea of university chaplains being key figures in promoting and organising volunteering in the community. It bears thinking about, because there seems to be good evidence that such activities may produce life-changing educational experiences.

(b) Common Concerns

It was also interesting to see chaplains from the armed services co-presenting with university chaplains at workshops, roundtables and forums - a clear demonstration that all of these issues, each of these four sub-themes, cross chaplaincy boundaries. This suggested to me that there could be benefit to collaborative exchange among chaplains from different domains in Australia.

(c) Invitational Inclusion

One of the challenges I see in Australia is for currently Christian Chaplaincy Boards and Agencies to invite participation from those of other faiths on to their Boards, with a view to facilitating a multifaith approach to chaplaincies in schools, hospitals, prisons and other agencies. That is, by invitation and the practice of hospitality, to include those of other faiths in the common mission of promoting human well-being. This invitation needs to come from the Christians, who are the gatekeepers of chaplaincy.

The task of such Boards might then be to create the corresponding educational vehicles in the domains delineated within the conference theme - *religious literacy, radical hospitality, service with thoughtful reflection* and *creating and sharing sacred space*, both with regard to the in-service education of present chaplains and the introduction of multifaith chaplaincy vocational training. Dialogue and collaboration with government and private sector agencies (the secular) in this process would also be vital.

(d) A New Vision for University Chaplaincy

The interfaith movement among younger people today is as different from the conception of interfaith work as inter-religious dialogue as Twitter is from Email. Typically, conversations are led by students, not religious scholars; they intentionally include agnostics and atheists; and they are not focused on religious teachings per se but rather students’ relationship to their faith or their philosophical beliefs. They talk about their own faith rather than that of their religious institution and are not intent on hammering out agreement. Rather, the

aim is to develop relationships of understanding for the sake of a broader goal, typically, cooperative action to help others^{xii}.

The university's cosmopolitan character and tradition of exploration, learning and engagement has created a culture for the emergence of this movement. A new consensus that today's religious literacy means having respect and appreciative understanding of faiths (and no-faiths) other than one's own, as well as one's own, is emerging, in the process also redefining secularity.

University chaplains find themselves in situ, contributing to these conversations and nurturing this movement. At the same time, university chaplains are often the best placed to hold the many pieces of complexity together and provide a model of wholeness. Canadian university chaplain, Rev Ellie Hummel, found herself holding the various agencies of her university together to deal with the complexity arising from a murder on their campus. Who else could provide the focus to draw together the many values, prejudices and religious beliefs into meaning and, through public ritual, shepherd a road to reconciliation and healing?

I concluded from my experience of the 2012 conference that the work we have done at Flinders University is more important, and has much wider implications, than I had previously realised. The model adopted at Flinders, the building of a collaborative multifaith community^{xiii}, enables an approach to ministry that respects the integrity of each participating religious tradition while also modelling inter-religious respect and collaboration. The experience of the Flinders chaplains is potentially a rich resource that, if given opportunity, might provide a springboard for others on the journey of developing deeper and richer relations between people of faith and no-faith, who have a view to the flourishing of the human person and the human community.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.globalchaplains2012.com/home>

ⁱⁱ The three Keynotes were presented by Rev Gail Bowman (Christian), University Chaplain at Dillard, New Orleans, Dr David Ellenson (Jewish), President of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion and Dr Ingrid Mattson, (Muslim), Professor of Islamic Studies and founder of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford.

Their addresses may be seen here:

<http://new.livestream.com/accounts/551391/GlobalChaplains2012/videos>

ⁱⁱⁱ having respect and “appreciative understanding” of faiths other than one’s own.

^{iv} My roundtable, “Radical Hospitality as the Core Value of Chaplaincy in an Age of Pluralism” was oversubscribed and has resulted in an international writing project on this topic.

^v “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,” Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell

^{vi} Robert D. Putnam reported in:

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/a-better-way-to-talk-about-faith/>

^{vii} The following is the guiding statement of the Association, followed by an articulation of one of the Association’s four Principles:

Nurturing the religious and spiritual life of students is a critical part of the mission of higher education in the 21st century. Our colleges and universities are explicitly committed to developing the whole person, creating global citizens, and promoting civic engagement of students throughout their lives. Finding one’s own spiritual, religious and moral compass is a key component of personal well being in adult life. At this challenging time in history, it is clear that interfaith understanding is central to the life of the planet. Therefore, it is important to articulate certain principles for religious life in higher education. Specifically, we need to provide resources to promote healthy spiritual and religious development for students, which will keep pace with their intellectual and emotional development in our institutions.

...The institution is well served by an office established by the university or college, dedicated to religious, spiritual and ethical life. That office and its director will be strategically placed within the university structure so as to promote effectiveness and influence. The office will fulfill a coordinating and liaison function for religious professionals assigned to the campus. It will also create and sustain one or more student interfaith

bodies. This office will enlarge its impact on campus through a variety of partnerships. These activities will be funded by the institution at an appropriate level...

<http://www.site.acuraonline.net/About Us L0AH.html>

viii 'The President's Challenge' may be viewed at the White House website:
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ofbnp/interfaithservice>

ix On the other hand, **The National Campus Ministry Association (NCMA)** has maintained its Christian stance – these are chaplains employed by churches, presumably to represent them on campus.

<http://www.campusministry.net/purpose/>

A third American association, **The National Association of College and University Chaplains (NACUC)** seems to be trying to steer a path between or perhaps inclusive of these two. <http://www.campusministry.net/purpose/>
It adopts a similar stance to the **Tertiary Ministry Campus Association (TCMA)** in Australia. <http://www.tcma.org.au/about>

x For example, in July 2010, the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force opened a combined multifaith education centre for chaplaincy training. They expect to graduate about 2,800 chaplains and chaplain assistants each year. The training runs from six to eight weeks with about 44 hours of merged instruction.

Reported at <http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-05-07-chaplain-school N.htm>

Patel's own organisation runs 3-4 day intensive interfaith leadership programs among university students across the country. The uptake is growing rapidly.
<http://www.ifyc.org/>

xi <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/a-better-way-to-talk-about-faith/>

xii <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/a-better-way-to-talk-about-faith/>

xiii Compared with models that are programmatic or issue focussed.