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University chaplaincy: A question of identity and relevance

Mark Cartledge and Dawn Colley

This article aims to explore, using empirical data, the identity and relevance of chaplains within a University setting. The material was gathered initially by students studying the ecumenical relations of chaplains and their respective churches. Three theoretical models of chaplaincy are explored: the parish model, the sacramental model and the denominational church gathering model. All three models are found to be located within the data from interviews with chaplains. However, they are found not to be mutually exclusive models. Students were interviewed randomly by means of a structured interview format. These data show that the majority of students know who their chaplain is, but never use him or her. They are regarded as an important feature of student support with social, pastoral and spiritual roles having the highest appreciation. On the basis of this data, questions concerning the nature and viability of University chaplaincy are discussed in relation to the three theoretical models. It is suggested that the power of a given ecclesiastical tradition is significant in shaping the role and practice of chaplaincy within the Higher Education sector.

Key Words: *Higher Education, University, chaplains, models of chaplaincy, empirical data.*

Introduction

The institutions of Cranmer Hall and the Wesley Studies Centre as part of St. John's College, Durham together with the Roman Catholic College at Ushaw provide a jointly taught route for ministerial education in the north east of England. As part of the BA degree course in Theology and Ministry, a module is undertaken by students called 'Church and Ministry in an Ecumenical Setting'. The module is team taught by Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic members of staff. Within this module, students are asked to investigate an aspect of contemporary ministry from an ecumenical perspective. One such project was the investigation of chaplaincy ministry provided in the University of

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Durham. Mark Cartledge was the member of staff supervising this project and Dawn Colley was a postgraduate member of the ecumenical student group involved in the project. Together we wish to share some aspects of our findings that focus on the identity and relevance of chaplaincy work in the University of Durham. It should be made clear at the outset that we regard this project as a pilot study, which aims to explore questions and open up the possibility for future research on the subject, rather than being definitive.

1. Models of University Chaplaincy

There are a number of theoretical models of University chaplaincy espoused by reflective practitioners in the field of Higher Education.¹ Within this range, there are three main models of chaplaincy commonly understood by chaplains.

First, there is the parish model of chaplaincy. In this model the whole University or College is regarded in a similar way to the parish. All the people, regardless of whether they believe in the Christian faith or not, are regarded as part of the cure of souls of the chaplain. Therefore the chaplain attempts to visit all members of the University or College in the same way as an industrial chaplain might visit people 'on the job'. It is commonly called the 'go model' in chaplaincy parlance.² The chaplain may or may not attempt to gather a worshipping community. If that does form part of the chaplain's function it is seen as secondary to the visiting and networking side of the work. The strengths of the model are that it does not demand very much from people. It is usually open and outward looking with a real engagement with people where they are at within the institution. The weakness of the model is that it assumes an establishment (state church) ecclesiology which can no longer be assumed to be acceptable within a post-Christian society. In many universities chaplains function as welcome guests rather than as parsons with the property rights associated with the cure of souls. The demand of very little from people, while attractive at one level, may also marginalise the role of discipleship making. It is typically associated with the Anglican mode of chaplaincy.³

Second, there is the sacramental model of chaplaincy. This model stresses the importance of the priest or minister to gather within the chaplaincy centre, chapel or church building those who wish to avail themselves of the sacraments. Sacramental worship therefore forms the heart of this model. All other aspects of the chaplain's or centre's activity are secondary in comparison. This is commonly called the 'come model': staff and students are required to make the necessary effort to come to the point of ministry. The priest or minister may at times go out to the University but it is in order to draw people to another geographical location where they might receive the sacrament. This model is

especially associated with the Roman Catholic tradition. The strength of this model is the clarity and coherence of ministry. The focus is upon sacramental worship. The weakness is that it is not set up in a way to engage with students or staff except on its own territory, or at an 'outpost'. It can be too 'churchy' for students who do not have any prior allegiance to its denominational structures. It also fails to engage with the institution at any significant level.

Third, there is the denominational church gathering model. In this model of operation, students and staff of the University are invited to attend various meetings or gatherings as a means of encouraging them to attend a particular church on Sunday. It is normally associated with the Free Church gathered model of ecclesiology. It does not intrude into departments but offers opportunity for students and staff to gather voluntarily according to taste or disposition. This model of operation is particularly associated with the Methodist Church and its University society 'Methsoc'. It is another form of the 'come model'. Instead of a sacramental focus there is a fellowship one instead. The strength of this model, like the sacramental model, is that it provides a denominational base for gathering groups of students who may wander from the faith if left to their own devices. It also uses as the key resource for this task the local congregation and thus integrates students within the congregational life of the church. The weakness of this mode is that it targets students exclusively via church affiliated groups and provides nothing comparable for staff. Resources focused in this way mean that broader institutional issues are often neglected.

The project aimed (1) to discover which model(s) the chaplains felt they were adopting and what had influenced their choice; and (2) to explore what the students felt was the role of their College chaplains. The students involved in this project conducted interviews with a selected number of chaplains, visited a chaplains' meeting and surveyed at random a number of students outside the Student's Union building. The chaplains were asked with which model they most associated themselves. Implicitly, students were asked how relevant they thought that chaplains were in the University. Thus, in the results, the identity of chaplains (as measured in terms of the three models: 'parochial', 'sacramental' and 'gathered'), was compared to the relevance of chaplains as perceived by a sample of students.

2. Interviews with Chaplains

Three main questions were asked of chaplains during interviews that explored their roles. These questions were:

- What models of chaplaincy do you use?
- Why do you use this/these model(s)?
- What do you perceive to be the most important role?

The key Anglican, Free Church and Roman Catholic interviews are reported in this section.

The Anglican chaplain interviewed was a full-time employee of the College where he works. The student interviewer conducted two interviews with the chaplain and learned that he attempted to work the parochial model with a specific gathered focus around key Chapel services in the week. This chaplain was convinced of the importance of the presence of the chaplain in all aspects of College life, including its institutional structures. The parochial model was used due to the Anglican heritage of the College and the job description. This stated that: 'Above all else, the chaplain is the pastor working not simply among a section of the College but among all members of the College community.' Thus a particular ecclesiastical tradition is enshrined within the job description.

One of the Free Church chaplains was interviewed. He is based at a church and attracts some students to his church for Sunday worship. After the 6.30 pm service there is a student society meeting on the church premises. Many of the students would attend the service prior to their own meeting. This chaplain reflected that he combined some aspects of the parochial/institutional model with a gathered pastoral model. However, his priority is the gathering of students to offer pastoral support and nurture. This included a sacramental ministry with a strong emphasis upon worship and fellowship. He uses these models because he feels that this is an important stage in the students' lives that demand spiritual input. He felt that he was also serving the staff of the College of which he was also chaplain.

The Roman Catholic chaplain was also interviewed. He is the Roman Catholic chaplain to University and also the parish priest for the city and some of the surrounding area. He describes his style as varied but with a sacramental focus. Most student activities are based at the Roman Catholic church with services on Sunday morning and especially in the evening at 6.30 pm. In addition there are daily prayer times for students in the church, with one service of the week especially used by students (approximately 200 students attend). He reaches students in Colleges twice a term by arranging services in College chapels through the Cathsoc representatives. In addition to these duties the chaplain also conducts regular confessions, receives and counsels new converts and encourages a ministry to the poor and marginalised.

The outline of the approach of the chaplains described above basically supported the models proposed earlier in this paper, although there is some recognition that these models are preferred modes of working rather than being mutually exclusive. The students conducting this qualitative research also asked the question: Why do chaplains operate in the way that they do? After a search of ecumenical and denominational directives and constitutions, it became clear that it was not these documents that influenced chaplains. The directive from the

National Conference of Bishops spoke of the focus of University chaplaincy as being apostolic and evangelistic. The Durham University Ecumenical Christian Council spoke about providing services. However, the only people, during the time of this study, speaking about evangelism were the Christian Union and none of the chaplains prioritised services over pastoral care. Two main answers emerged to this most basic of questions. First, College expectations are usually enshrined in job descriptions, e.g. the prioritising of the pastoral role for the Anglican chaplain mentioned above. Such job descriptions not only effect the ministry of chaplains once they are in post but they also have an impact on those wishing to apply for the post in the first place. Second, time constraints have an enormous impact upon the job. The Roman Catholic chaplain is a parish priest, University chaplain and a part-time postgraduate student! Therefore he cannot but prioritise his time to the self-selecting group of students who gather for the sacraments and pastoral care. It was clear that the only person who was able to make the parochial model work was the full-time Anglican chaplain.

If this is the perception of three chaplains concerning their identity and mission, how relevant does the average student in the University find it?

3. Survey of Students

A survey of random students entering the Students' Union building was conducted by a group of project students using a structured interview. In the time available 133 students completed the structured interview. The key questions asked included:

- Do you know who your College chaplain is?
- Have you ever used a chaplain?
- Would you say that chaplains are an important part of student support?
- What do you think are the main roles of a chaplain?
- Do you have a religious affiliation? If yes, what is it?

Table 1 indicates that the majority of students know who their College chaplain actually is. Thus the collegiate system facilitates a good knowledge of the identity of chaplains.

Table 1: Knowledge of College Chaplain

	No (%)	Yes (%)
Knowledge	38.3	61.7

Table 2 indicates that the vast majority of students never use their chaplains in any capacity whatsoever. This probably refers to pastoral care rather than the attendance of services which the chaplain conducts.

Table 2: Use of a Chaplain

	No (%)	Yes (%)
Use	80.5	19.5

Table 3 indicates that chaplains are considered to be an important feature of student support.

Table 3: Important Part of Student Support

	No (%)	Yes (%)
Important	18	82

Table 4 indicates that social, pastoral and spiritual roles have the highest appreciation. Other roles are less important to those interviewed. The combinations of roles are also interesting with pastoral ministry appreciated most.

Table 4: Roles of Chaplain

Category	%
social	8.3
pastoral	26.3
worship services	6.8
spiritual guidance	20.3
social and spiritual	2.3
social and pastoral	2.3
pastoral and spiritual	6.0
pastoral and counselling	2.3
counsellor	3.8
spiritual and services	2.3
student loans	1.5
don't know	3.8

Table 5 indicates that the Church of England is the most represented by those who describe themselves in terms of religious affiliation. However, only slightly more than half of those interviewed regarded themselves as religious.

Table 5: Religious Affiliation

<i>Category</i>	<i>%</i>
Roman Catholic	9.8
Methodist	3.0
Church of England	27.8
Other Christian	9.8
Other Faith	0.8
Total	51.1
Missing	48.9

4. Discussion

These data suggest that chaplains are reasonably well known by students within the University of Durham. Just over 60% know who their College chaplain actually is and yet most of these people have never actually used him/her (80%). It was interesting to note that many students felt that chaplains were important for Christians and that secular help could be sought for non-Christians. Despite this detail, they regard chaplains as an important feature of student support (82%) and would define this support largely in social, pastoral, spiritual guidance and counselling roles. Just under half of those interviewed did not regard themselves as having a Christian or religious faith of any kind.

It is interesting that the students interviewed at random regard the chaplains positively but they do not really know why they regard them so. They have some vague ideas and are positively predisposed to chaplains but they do not use them at the personal level. Most of the College chaplains are Anglicans who are part-time. Is it possible to suggest that the parochial model seems to generate a feel-good factor but probably not much more? The gathered approaches of either the Roman Catholic sacramental model or the Free Church gathered fellowship model really only minister to a very small number of students. However, that ministry is apparently regarded highly by the few who attend and are nurtured by the chaplains from their church bases.

This material raises some important questions concerning the nature and viability of University chaplaincy. The Anglican ideal of the priest available and open to ministering to everyone, while worthwhile, only really works well when the chaplain is full-time and has the time to be able to work that model. If that is the case, why do part-time chaplaincy posts insist on this model when the time factor militates against this? In an increasingly postmodern society, time is an important resource for chaplains to cultivate face-to-face relationships so important for human social and psychological wellbeing. Why, therefore, are universities and churches content with the limitations and questionable relevance of part-time chaplaincy provision?

In contrast, the church based model has the advantage of encouraging students to be rooted in a local congregation. It also focuses the attentions of the minister as chaplain with the work of the students. It means that the pastoral work among members of staff is largely ignored. However, with the limitation on resources should this be a priority? Those who work with members of staff, and whose views are not represented here, will no doubt defend the importance of such a pastoral role.

All the models, as noted by the students on the project, failed to engage seriously with the question of evangelism. Either the main role was construed in pastoral terms or in worship terms. None of the chaplains, apart from the Roman Catholic chaplain, talked in terms of new converts. Even then his assumption seemed to be that the initiative would be with the prospective convert rather than the chaplain. Does this mean that chaplaincy in this context has lost its cutting edge? Has it become so institutionalised that the radical call to Christian discipleship has been domesticated? Is this the reaction of the Colleges and the chaplains to a Christian Union with a strong emphasis on evangelism? In that case, is it a kind of social distancing mechanism designed to alleviate the possibility of being tarred with the same brush as the Christian Union?

We are not sure that all these questions can be answered, but we are convinced that they need to be asked.

5. Conclusion

Giles Legood, in his reflection upon University chaplaincy, suggests that there will always be a tension for chaplains between the work of gathering individuals and engaging with the structures of the institution and those people who work within them.⁴ He suggests that much will depend upon each chaplain's theology and gifts. However, while these are important factors, this research indicates that much actually depends upon the tradition of chaplaincy perpetuated by a given Church or University. The power of the tradition is significant in shaping the actual practice of the chaplain since inevitably the resources for the task are legitimated with reference to a particular tradition: the proponents of a given tradition are usually responsible for job descriptions. Ecumenical co-operation can militate against the dominance of one particular tradition over and against others, but only where difference is valued and affirmed. Such diversity of perspectives within ecumenical groups inevitably mean that tensions will surface from time to time within such groups. When such tensions arise, it seems to us, that one useful way forward is to identify the models of chaplaincy in use and to ask how relevant such models are in terms of engaging with students for the sake of the Gospel.

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Endnotes

1. See the useful discussion of chaplaincy models by J.S. Lochrie, 'Educational and Theological Aspects of University Chaplaincy Work', PhD dissertation, University of Strathclyde, 1986, pp130–155; also see: S. Robinson and M. Benwell, 'Christian Chaplaincy in the Postmodern University', *Modern Believing* 41.1, 2000, 31–43, for a postmodern approach.
2. For a discussion of the 'Come'/'Go' language in relation to chaplaincy buildings see: P.R. King, 'Abnormal Ministry? Charlie Chaplaincy?', unpublished paper, 1997, pp49–50.
3. This model was advocated strongly by Peter Wright, the former secretary for Higher Education responsible to the General Synod of the Church of England, see: P. Kingston, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', *Guardian Education*, 28 June, 1994, p4.
4. G. Legood, 'Universities' in G. Legood (ed.), *Chaplaincy: The Church's Sector Ministries*. Cassell, 1999, 132–140, p135.