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Chaplaincy and Practical Theology

Researching a Pioneering Ministry

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Historical Perspectives: Insights from the *Contact* Archive

Stephen B. Roberts

Chaplaincy has been hugely significant for the development of practical theology as a discipline, and this is clearly reflected in the history of the journal that is now called *Practical Theology*. Launched as *Contact* in 1960 the journal initially served the newly formed Scottish Pastoral Association (SPA). In its early days the focus was not on publishing academic research articles but facilitating conversations among those involved in pastoral care from a range of different professions. Over time it developed into the more academic journal that it is today. In the Introduction we have shown how the symbiotic relationship between chaplaincy and practical theology is evidenced by the articles spanning the last 20 years that are presented in this volume. These all come from the period when the journal had become firmly established as an academic publication. But these articles build on the firm foundations of pastoral conversation, theological reflection and research into chaplaincy that formed an important strand in the history of the journal from its inception. An article in the very first issue of *Contact*, reflecting on a conference of the SPA, described it as 'a movement whose primary concern was the deeper understanding of personality and the needs of persons' (*Contact* 1, 1960, p. 24). It is this pastoral theological focus of the early years of *Contact* that provides both a foundation and ongoing resource for chaplaincy studies.

In this chapter I draw on an earlier piece of research into the history of the journal (Roberts 2020) to explore those foundations and highlight some of the resources for thinking theologically about chaplaincy today. In that study I observed that six out the first seven editors of *Contact* had experience of chaplaincy – in fact I have learned that it was seven out of the first eight. I noted how Edinburgh University chaplaincy provided points of contact for interdisciplinary conversations in the early days of *Contact*, and that healthcare chaplaincy provided fertile ground for the pastoral theology being developed by later editors. Here I examine some specific

examples of the chaplaincy presence in the *Contact* archive, prior to the papers presented in this book. The early issues of *Contact* tended to be focused on a particular theme, and special issues continued to be a regular feature. Much of the work on chaplaincy appears in these issues, which are therefore the primary focus of this chapter.

The first issue where chaplaincy comes clearly into focus is *Contact* 16 (1966), simply entitled 'The Hospital Chaplain'. Here the discussion of hospital chaplaincy is set in the context of a 'de-christianised society' (p. 1) which immediately invokes what we see to be a prevalent theme in chaplaincy studies: the question of the chaplain's identity amidst shifting understandings of the place of religion in society, a question that remains significant for chaplains of different faiths today (e.g. Gilliat-Ray, Ali and Pattison, 2013, pp. 108–114; Swift 2014). R. A. Lambourne's opening article considers this question tangentially by exploring the relationship between medicine and theology, suggesting that in a context where hospitals are 'in danger of becoming factories for the repair of things rather than hospices for the care of souls' (p. 6), theology has a role to play in contributing to a more adequate anthropology underpinning clinical medicine. This is significant in a situation where the 'hospital is one of several institutions which can be regarded for good or ill as creators of standards and values', the church having previously occupied pride of place among such institutions (p. 3). There is a very early indicator here of the public theological significance of chaplaincy, something that I explore in my own contribution to this volume. *Contact* 16 also has contributions from a consultant and a parish priest on improving communications in the hospital environment in which the consultant calls for the 'de-deification' of consultants (pp. 12–13). One of the chaplains writing in this issue speaks of the way many think of the chaplain 'as a benevolent outsider who dispenses religious comfort and provides the religious rites which the remnant of the faithful require' (p. 25). It is against this kind of background, and the increasing distance between the clerical and medical professions, that Alfred Barton's article (pp. 20–24) argues for increased training opportunities in chaplaincy – chaplains need to better understand the contexts in which they work in order to function effectively. Other brief contributions come from a ward sister and a patient, indicating the breadth and interdisciplinary nature of the conversation. The patient's view comes from 'a scientist teaching at a Scottish university' (p. 24) and reads more like an opinion piece by someone who happens to have been a patient at some point than any kind of auto-ethnographic account. It certainly lacks the 'thick

description' of patient experience that practical theologians have come to expect in the discipline. The development of more rigorous forms of qualitative research, as seen in studies in this volume, has significantly strengthened the contribution of this type of voice. It is seen, for example, in a study of cancer patients receiving care from a Marie Curie Home (*Contact* 130, 1999, pp. 27–33). The attention to real-life experience that was there from the earliest period is thus foundational for the later development of empirical research.

In September 1970, chaplaincy again comes into view with an issue entitled 'Prisons: Custody and Care of the Offender' (*Contact* 32), based on a conference of English prison chaplains. Only one of the articles is specifically focused on the role of the chaplain, John Cooper's 'The Pastoral Approach in Prison Chaplaincy' (pp. 20–27). There is less of a concern here with the identity of the chaplain; rather, prison chaplains are engaged in reflection on the nature of the penal process and locating their own ministry within that wider context. Sydney Evans, Dean of King's College London, provided a theological basis for the issue by looking at what difference it might make to our understanding of the penal process when we consider a human being to be 'in the final definition a being who has to do with God' (p. 2). He observes that the English legal process has in fact developed in a context that is shaped by Christian tradition and so, in theory at least, reflects a high doctrine of human nature, for example, in the possession of rights. Evans argues that this high doctrine also entails a necessary retributive element in punishment (p. 6) as a consequence of human responsibility for action. But it is in the reformative dimension of the penal process that he sees the chaplain's role as most significant. Cooper's discussion of the pastoral approach of the prison chaplain uses the language of 'wholeness' (p. 20) to talk about this reformative role that is both individual – personal pastoral counselling – and corporate – involving both the Christian community and chaplaincy team in the prison and the Church outside. Two features of the article invite particular comment. First, it is thoroughly theological, as exemplified in the conclusion:

I have described being pastoral as living out the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. To be obsessed with role is to doubt these. Live these and our whole is fulfilled in the crying need of men [*sic*] in society. (p. 27)

Second, whilst his observations doubtless draw on his experience as Chaplain to H.M.Prison, Bristol, he is not referencing that

experience in any specific way. Rather he speaks in broad terms about the nature of the pastoral task in prison chaplaincy. This is notably different from some of the studies in this volume where chaplains, either through theological reflection or through more methodologically grounded qualitative research, draw insights from detailed engagement with their own context and practice. Close attention to the particularities of practice has been one of the great contributions that an evolving discipline of practical theology has brought to our understanding of chaplaincy. What we do see here that is foundational for chaplaincy research is the intentional theological engagement with the agendas of the institutional context, in this case the penal system.

But the question of *how* chaplains should engage with their institutional context is far from straightforward. This question comes to the fore ten years on from the prisons issue, when hospital chaplaincy again takes centre stage in *Contact* 69 (1980). Entitled 'Hospital Chaplaincy', the issue contains five essays, three of which are by hospital chaplains. Roger Grainger, in his opening article 'The Chaplain: Adept or Exorcist?', picks up from the discussion in the 1966 issue referred to above, observing that the emphases of two key articles from that issue had dominated the chaplaincy conversation in the intervening years – the question of training that Barton had discussed, in which chaplains are initiated 'into the thought world of medicine' (p. 2) and Lambourne's concern with a more costly dialogue between those involved in healing. Grainger's reflection on these two streams sees something of a polarisation between a kind of 'technical' training on the one hand, and a greater emphasis on the distinctiveness of what chaplains might bring to the table on the other. Against the background of professional codes, he suggests that 'the chaplain's profession is to be anti-Professional' (p. 4), an understanding that is developed in dialogue with Heije Faber's image of the chaplain as clown and Victor Turner's social anthropology (the latter being a resource surprisingly underrepresented in the studies of chaplaincy in the journal). Faber's chaplain is critiqued, however, in Stephen Pattison's contribution to the issue, along with Norman Autton's chaplain who being so 'relaxed and confident in his sacramental role ... knows what he is doing and why' but at what cost? With characteristically acerbic wit, Pattison asks: 'has he opted out of the human race?' (p. 7). It is almost as if the chaplain has been deified to compete with the consultant as described in *Contact* 16! The problem with both Faber and Autton, Pattison suggests, is that they

pay no attention to the social context of the hospital, a deficit which is addressed in a study by Michael Wilson that he then discusses. This recognition of the wider social context of chaplaincy was there already, as noted above, in *Contact* 16. Here it is brought back into view in critiquing approaches that too readily take for granted the established social order in which the hospital is situated. In light of the need to engage structures and the range of models available to chaplains, Pattison argues for flexibility in the roles chaplains adopt so 'they may respond appropriately to God and to human need in particular situations' (p. 13). The remainder of the article attempts to give a theological grounding for this kind of approach and the attendant variety of chaplaincy models. It remains a valuable reflection on models of chaplaincy that is well worth reading by anyone thinking about questions of the chaplain's identity.

If Pattison's article addresses – to an extent – the second of the two issues raised by Grainger, David Lyall's article addresses the first, the question of training, in considering the extent to which pastoral care can be taught effectively to divinity students in the clinical environment of a hospital or whether there is a danger that a problem-solving medical model might be overly influential in that context. This article illustrates two key points about the developing relationship between chaplaincy and practical theology, the first being that experiments in training in pastoral theology and practice were seeking to engage chaplaincy contexts – specifically hospitals – as part of a concern with the professionalisation of pastoral care, and the second being an ongoing and sometimes uneasy conversation between pastoral theology and medicine. This is another instance of the tensions that often beset chaplaincy. In thinking about chaplaincy from a missiological perspective, as Slater and Dunlop do in their contributions to this volume, we might interpret this as the classic debate about the limits of inculturation. Is there a danger of the chaplain 'going native'? The final article in *Contact* 69 picks up the theological conversation with medicine. Kenneth Boyd, who as well as being editor of the journal was Scottish Director of the Society for the Study of Medical Ethics (p. 1), explores pain, sickness and suffering as understood in the realm of medicine before considering the role of friendship in ameliorating suffering and, finally, the place of religion.

Three years on from this special issue, in *Contact* 80 (1983), we find the first piece of empirical research relating to chaplaincy in the journal. Part of a larger study, this aspect of the research considered

responses to chaplaincy from patients in a large Scottish teaching hospital (p. 2). The rationale for the study arose from one of the authors, Audrey Russell, a fourth-year medical student, who encountered ambivalent attitudes to chaplaincy among staff she met on the wards. Although based on interviews with 128 patients using a semi-structured schedule, the results presented are primarily statistical, the most significant being that 89% of those visited by a chaplain were wholly positive about the experience, a statistic that served to challenge the apparent staff ambivalence. However, as Nigel Peynton, then chaplain at the hospital in question, points out in his response to the study, what was really needed was further research into the staff ambivalence as a basis for further conversations about the place of chaplaincy in the interdisciplinary team.

In fact, whilst this may be the first empirical chaplaincy research published in the journal, research of this nature had already been carried out by Michael Wilson, the doctor, priest and university teacher whose work is discussed in Pattison's *Contact* 69 article as observed above. Wilson's *The Hospital: A Place of Truth* was published in 1971 based on an in-depth study of hospital chaplaincy conducted in the late 1960s. The study included interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including medical staff (house officers and senior house officers from a teaching hospital), nursing staff, ward sisters (in four general hospitals) and ward clerks; and surveys of patients and 69 chaplains in 26 hospitals. Whilst the focus is on the role of the chaplain, a significant feature of the study is the way this focus is situated within a wide-ranging discussion of the hospital as source of certain understandings of human life and health: chaplaincy as a resource for public theology.

The significance of this study and of Wilson's life and work more widely is discussed and celebrated in *Contact* 131 (2000). In his contribution Pattison describes Wilson's influence on practical theology as 'seminal' (p. 3), a judgement based particularly on *The Hospital – A Place of Truth* which he describes as 'the first empirically based piece of practical theology to be undertaken in the UK' (p. 4). One of the guiding themes of Wilson's work, Pattison notes (p. 6), is community, and this is something that Emmanuel Lartey, in his contribution to the issue, attributes in part to Wilson's time in Ghana (p. 12). Not only is Wilson someone who led the field in bringing empirical methods into practical theology, but he was clearly someone whose

theology was deeply informed by lived experience in which he learned from different cultural contexts.

It is James Woodward's contribution to the issue that is most specifically focused on chaplaincy, being a discussion of Wilson's chaplaincy research and its contemporary relevance. After presenting some of the key themes of Wilson's study, Woodward notes two areas of ongoing relevance. First, Wilson's study had shaped practice with his proposed expansion of hospital chaplaincy to include lay volunteers within ecumenical teams. Second, some 30 years on, it still provided a significant foundation on which other chaplaincy research could build. There were three particular areas where Woodward saw the need for ongoing research: the growing role of lay chaplaincy and the need for training; the question of the location of chaplaincy in relation to the institution; and the nature of chaplaincy in an increasingly multi-faith society.

One of the areas where Wilson makes a very important contribution, as noted by Pattison in his earlier reflection on Wilson's work, is in asking the political questions that arise in relation to pastoral care. This is an important feature of his study of chaplaincy, although it is a dimension that he explores more widely in one of his own contributions to *Contact*, an article entitled 'Personal Care and Political Action' (*Contact* 87, 1985). Whilst chaplaincy is not primarily in Wilson's view here, the argument about the closely intertwined relationship between the personal and political in pastoral care is clearly rooted in the understandings developed in *The Hospital: A Place of Truth*. It is here that we see again the relationship between pastoral/practical theology and public theology.

The final issue to consider in this review is *Contact* 138 (2002), which was a special issue 'On being a chaplain' edited by John Swinton, who was then the journal editor, one of the seven out of the first eight editors with chaplaincy experience. Although Swinton's editorial has hospital chaplaincy most clearly in view (reflecting his own background), he seeks to make more general comments about the significance of chaplaincy 'within a postmodern context marked by pluralism and deep ambiguity towards established religion' (p. 1). Against that background, the papers 'try to wrestle with the meaning of chaplaincy within such a changing social and professional context' (p. 1). The issue begins with Giles Legood, editor of *Chaplaincy: The Church's Sector Ministries* (1999), offering some historical perspective on the relationship between chaplaincy and

parochial-based models of ministry. Part of the significance of this issue is that it reflects a growing sense – already evidenced in Le-good's edited collection – that chaplaincy is a phenomenon of contemporary church and religious life that is worthy of investigation beyond the particularities of chaplaincy in specific sectors. Yet, however interesting chaplaincy might be as a broader phenomenon, it remains rooted in specific contexts and the other two contributions to the chaplaincy focus of the issue reflect this. Lorna Murray writes about spirituality in relation to mental health chaplaincy, which does raise implicitly – although it does not address explicitly – those wider questions about the place of religion in society more broadly. And Simon Robinson, writing as a university chaplain, explores the role of chaplains in relation to the death of a student. Again, whilst this is an article that reflects on the practice of a particular university chaplaincy, it seeks to draw implications about 'pastoral care in general in a postmodern era' (p. 16).

Both Murray and Robinson exemplify chaplains confidently exercising a significant ministry in their particular contexts. They are sharing and seeking to learn from good practice, something that is a common feature of the *Contact* archive more generally. Whilst some of the articles in the archive highlighted the ambiguity of chaplaincy, particularly hospital chaplaincy, it is worth noting that there are further examples of chaplains operating very effectively as part of an interdisciplinary team. Victoria Slater, for example, whose later study features in this volume, contributes movingly to a collection on 'Approaching Death' (*Contact* 129, 1999). Arising out of a conference at Sir Michael Sobell House and edited by a music therapist, the issue explores the place of creativity in care of the dying. Here the chaplaincy contribution is free from concerns about ambivalence and identity; Slater simply shares her experience of creative spiritual care drawing powerfully on the quality that Keats names 'negative capability' (p. 32). This kind of theological reflection based on the experience of chaplaincy practice that then contributes to wider conversations about care is a strong model that emerges at points like this in the archive. Arguably it is fundamental to the ethos of *Contact*.

So, what has been gleaned from this foray into the *Contact* archive? First, as exemplified by Slater's article just mentioned, we have seen the importance of the pastoral focus of chaplaincy ministry in distinctive settings, and the value for practical theology of careful

attention to the particularities of such pastoral practice. And we have seen the growth of empirical research as a way of achieving this kind of careful attention. In this brief survey we have encountered chaplains exercising a pastoral role in distinctive situations that raise important questions for pastoral practice and the theological reflection that arises from it. This is something that continues and develops in the articles collected in this volume. The rise of more disciplined approaches to the investigation of chaplaincy practice has put more detailed qualitative accounts centre stage.

Second, we have seen that questions about the identity of the chaplain go right back to the earliest days of the journal. Often this is related to the shifting place of religion in society, as for example in *Contact* 16 discussed above. Sometimes, though, it arises from a related but subtly different question about how the chaplain negotiates theologically a particular context such as healthcare with all its specialised knowledge. The question raised by Grainger is crucial here: does the chaplain try to master the context and become an expert? Does the chaplain 'go native'? Or does the chaplain master the art of standing for something different, if necessary challenging the institutional understanding of human being and human flourishing?

Third, and related to both these points, we have seen chaplaincy being a site for theological reflection on key contemporary questions about health, well-being, justice and the social order, including the place of religion in society. Specifically, as suggested in the Introduction to this volume, we have seen that it is precisely the tensions often associated with chaplaincy that make it such a fertile ground for theological reflection.

The practical theological engagement with chaplaincy that we see flourishing in this volume is built on the strong foundations outlined here. The symbiotic relationship between chaplaincy and practical theology is clearly well-established and shows no sign of waning: the ground is as fertile as it ever was.

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