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A Theology for Chaplaincy

Singing Songs in a Strange Land



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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	What is Chaplaincy?.....	5
3	Why Do Universities Need Chaplains?.....	10
4	Prophetic or Incarnational?.....	16
5	Chaplaincy as Active Accompaniment	19
6	Chaplaincy, Mission and the Church.....	23
7	Conclusion	27
	Notes	28

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1

Introduction

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? (Ps 137.4)

The question of belonging and identity is crucial to the understanding of chaplaincy—both the theology which underpins it, and how to go about it. During the Babylonian exile following the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the people of Israel were forced to ask themselves where God was to be found in what was happening. That is still the chaplain's main task today: to articulate the search for meaning and for the presence of God, in what may often feel like an alien environment.

While parish ministry offers a model of pastoral care centred on a sense of *place*, the key issue in chaplaincy is the exploration of *identity*. What happens to our relationship with God when that identity is placed in question? My own thinking about what it means to exercise ministry as a chaplain today (currently in a university and previously in a large hospital) has been profoundly influenced by the theology of the exile. In 2013, I gave a paper entitled, 'Singing in a Strange Land,' to a group of university chaplains engaged in theological research. I wanted to reflect on the relevance of the biblical narrative of the Babylonian exile for modern university chaplaincy.¹ Today's fragmented society has a need for chaplains who bring the Christian story into the places where our identity as individuals and citizens is formed. Ministry in any secular institution (hospitals, universities, prisons, shopping centres, schools...) means learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land where that story, so central to us, is unfamiliar to those we serve.

The experience of exile fundamentally shapes the identity of the people of Israel. As they face uncertainty, dislocation and loss, they ask searching questions of God and of themselves. It is to the experience of exile that they return, both within and beyond the pages of Scripture, as they seek to understand what it means to be the people of God. The students I work with face similar questions as they explore their own emerging identity in a confusing world: 'Who am I?'; 'Where do I truly belong?' Adolescence (the stage of life at which most people study at university) is a liminal time: a period of uncertainty, flexibility and transition, of looking for security and answers; a time for self-discovery, self-questioning and the exploration of boundaries. All of this means

that the biblical narrative of exile makes a particularly appropriate theological framework for understanding chaplaincy.

The existing literature on chaplaincy suggests a number of models, of which two predominate.² One is the *prophetic voice*, in which the chaplain speaks into their context from the margins: their primary identity is not rooted in the host institution but in God. The other is that of *incarnational presence*: the chaplain represents Jesus, and therefore the church, as actively involved in the life of the host institution, engaged with ensuring its well-being. Both these models accurately reflect the experience of chaplaincy, but they each raise an important question: to whom does the Christian chaplain really belong—the church, or the context in which they serve?

The answer, of course, is both. Effective chaplaincy means being able to face both ways and inhabit dual identities. Finding your central identity in God means belonging everywhere and nowhere: ‘My kingdom is not from this world’ (John 18.36). But in this regard, chaplains face the same challenge as

There is nowhere God cannot be found

every other Christian: how best to represent the world to the church, and the church to the world? There will be times that chaplains will feel that they do not belong fully either to the church or to the world; the prophets of the exile would have sympathized. The prophetic model of ministry often calls us to leave our comfort zones in order to find God, but the promise of incarnational presence is that there is nowhere God cannot be found.

The essential questions for theological reflection are ‘*Where is God?*’; ‘*What is God saying to this context and this experience?*’ We will use some of the existing models for chaplaincy, from Scripture to the latest academic research, to think theologically about what chaplaincy *is*, and what it *does*. I have chosen to concentrate particularly on higher education chaplaincy, because that is what I know best, but in any context where human beings are emotionally, spiritually and physically tested, there will be chaplains standing alongside them, accompanying them in their search for meaning and for the presence of God.

2

What is Chaplaincy?

Chaplaincy is notoriously difficult to define. The Theos think tank's report, *A Very Modern Ministry: Chaplaincy in the UK*, identifies a vast range of chaplaincy ministries: full- and part-time, lay and ordained, paid and voluntary, undertaken on behalf of many Christian denominations, plus other faiths and worldviews.³

The word 'chaplain' derives from the Latin *capellanus* (cloak). In the Middle Ages, the life stories of saints were often modelled on that of St Martin of Tours, a fourth-century bishop who famously cut his cloak in half in order to share it with a beggar. St Martin's example of practical service to those in need became the blueprint for Christian holiness, intended to inspire ordinary Christians to emulate him. So chaplains, *capellani*, were those who put into action the call to serve others in practical contexts. Chaplaincy today is a strand of Christian ministry which concentrates on practical service, to people of all faiths and none, at their point of need. It also reflects the essence of *all* Christian ministry, lay or ordained: to meet people where they are, to see in them the face of Christ, and to respond with compassion to their needs.

Chaplaincy today concentrates on practical service

But chaplaincy in the twenty-first century faces challenges which did not exist in St Martin's day. In the UK today, the majority of people between 18–25 do not go to church, and have little contact with organized religion. But almost half of that age group go to university, and almost all universities, even those which are avowedly secular, have chaplains. Chaplains also reach prisoners, hospital patients, school pupils, and employees in a range of contexts, who would not think of going to church but who nonetheless have questions about meaning, purpose and faith. The missionary potential of chaplains therefore has enormous importance for the wider church, and deserves further exploration, to which we will return in the final chapter.

Chaplaincy is profoundly contextual. Both parish ministry and chaplaincy ask how faith can engage with the reality of daily life and the question of where exactly God is to be found in it. Because chaplaincy tends to work with a population which is passing through, it relates to its context in a more transient and contingent way than in a parish setting. The imagery of exile speaks powerfully to this reality.

In a university context, the majority of the population will move on within one to four years. While the same may be true of some parishes (particularly perhaps those in urban areas), the year-in-year-out stability of parish life, centred on a building, creates different expectations. At the same time, universities work hard to create a sense of community, through friendships made and opportunities explored, which outlasts the actual period of study.

Although the chaplain (particularly the ordained chaplain) will have many of the same skills, training and experience as those in parish ministry, the church's expectations and understanding of chaplaincy is much less clear. It is not merely parish ministry transposed to a secular environment. It is not always easy for chaplains, trained to 'proclaim [the faith of Christ] afresh in every generation,' to work out how to express their Christian identity and vocation with integrity within their particular context, but the challenge of doing so is endlessly exciting.

Christian chaplains in secular settings are not there to force Christian views or values on the unwilling, but to represent and embody a living faith in an attractive, accessible and convincing way. The presence of chaplains in secular institutions provides a visible and clearly identifiable place where faith can speak to and engage with the core business of the environment to which they minister. Through their relationships, especially in their openness to questions and challenges, chaplains can point to the life-giving possibilities of faith in a God who transcends human understanding.

Through their relationships, chaplains can point to the life-giving possibilities of faith in God

Until recently, the classic text on chaplaincy ministry was Legood, which provided a valuable guide to the breadth of possibilities for ministry in a range of contexts.⁴ However, Legood's assumption that chaplaincy is primarily undertaken on a full-time basis by ordained male Anglicans now appears very outdated. In contrast, the Theos report takes into account that much chaplaincy is provided by volunteers, and is certainly not limited to the Church of England or even the Christian faith.

Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt set out to address some of the changes in chaplaincy across all sectors since Legood was published.⁵ It contains some useful insights, not least into the growing importance of multi-denominational and multi-faith working. The final four chapters begin to articulate a theology of chaplaincy.

Swift, Cobb and Todd chart the rise of chaplaincy studies as a distinct discipline within practical theology.⁶ Chaplains themselves are reflecting, in a systematic way, on the theology underpinning their practice, resourcing the

church to understand what is being done in its name through the growing variety of ministries which are called chaplaincy.

How Does Chaplaincy Differ from Parish Ministry?

Despite an increase in chaplaincy placements during formation, most training pathways still treat parish ministry as normative. There is a persistent and damaging perception that chaplaincy is somehow a soft option, fit only for those unable to cope with the demands of parochial life. In a recent book review, Stephen Venner commented that 'It is a very rare occurrence to hear of a church really wanting to hear and learn from those who have experience and expertise ministering in "secular" contexts.'⁷ Why this should be is unclear: perhaps it is, as Venner remarks, that chaplaincy necessarily operates 'on the margins' of the institutional church (a point to which we will return in chapter six) so that its contribution is less well understood.

Having had experience of working in both parish and chaplaincy ministry, I want to argue that, on the contrary, chaplains have something to teach the contemporary church about ways of doing mission. Strategies for mission with young people especially would be enriched by the expertise of university chaplains, whose everyday working life is spent with precisely that age group, which is least likely to engage with the institutional church. This perception is shared by Slater, who emphasizes the ecclesiological value of chaplaincy as an *extension* of the work of the church into new areas, rather than as a rival to the parochial norm.⁸

Strategies for mission with young people would be enriched by the expertise of university chaplains

Chaplaincy is fast-moving and fluid in a way which parish ministry may not always be. While Benedictine spirituality, with its emphasis on stability, is often held up as an ideal model for twenty-first-century Christian leadership, Slater argues for chaplaincy as an itinerant, mendicant ministry which offers something valuable to those in transition.⁹ She contrasts the parish church with its Benedictine model of hospitality, which expects people to come to it, with chaplaincy which goes out to meet the people where they are. This model is not necessarily reflective of every church or every chaplaincy, but it reflects an understanding of chaplaincy as intrinsically missional.

Slater argues that the concern of mendicant communities such as the Franciscans for the least in society represents a gospel imperative for mission with integrity in a twenty-first-century world (and sometimes, it seems, a twenty-first-century church) where power, success and results are all too seductive. The chaplain is always a guest, invited onto other people's home ground, never quite belonging, yet never fully able to relinquish a sense that

their primary identity is rooted in Christ, rather than in geography; in this sense the chaplain is the recipient of hospitality from the host institution. At the same time, as every university chaplain knows, the *provision* of hospitality (in the form of free food) is essential to student ministry. The Benedictine emphasis on hospitality, and the Franciscan imperative to active service, each offer something vital to human flourishing.

The task facing chaplains is as acute as that facing parish priests, but within different parameters. Chaplains in the majority of secular contexts, including most universities, do not face the same level of responsibility as a parish priest for whatever buildings they use. If chaplains have a designated space at all, it will probably be owned and managed by the host institution. This brings issues of its own (perhaps when the chapel is commandeered for exams or

meetings, sometimes without consultation), but chaplains also have to do without the visibility and sense of identity associated with a worship space.

The lack of a building can force chaplains to go out and engage with their community

The lack of a building can force chaplains to go out and engage with their community in various ways, so it is not necessarily a negative, but it underlines the different sense in which chaplaincy is *located*, as compared with parish ministry. While many non-churchgoers do not understand how the parish system works, they do know about church buildings. The sense of pain and bewilderment as Ezekiel describes God leaving the temple in Jerusalem, and the people's confusion as they were forced to accept that God was no longer located where they had always assumed they would find him, are echoed in chaplaincy, where belonging is explored not so much through geography as through relationship.

meetings, sometimes without consultation), but chaplains also have to do without the visibility and sense of identity associated with a worship space.

Occasional Offices and Rites of Passage

For parochial ministers, the occasional offices (baptisms, weddings and funerals) can be opportunities for mission. In the parish where I was curate this was particularly true of funerals, which brought the church into contact with several lonely people who had spent long years as carers, and offered them hope and love at a time of vulnerability. In higher education chaplaincy, such opportunities do occur, but they have to be carefully handled.

Although they are thankfully rare, funerals do happen at university, and can be extremely poignant, not least as they may well be the first time many of those present have attended one. At such times, the need to express grief and search for meaning may be overwhelming; the chaplain's ability to respond sensitively and honestly is of paramount importance.

Baptisms, confirmations and marriages are likely to occur more frequently, and present a more straightforward opportunity for talking about faith without being seen as exploiting the circumstances. Questions around same-sex marriage present a dilemma for some chaplains in secular universities, who might find themselves caught in an awkward position between the church's current teaching and the university's equality policy. In hospitals and prisons, marriages are often moments of extreme poignancy, requiring liturgical as well as pastoral sensitivity. An ability to shape flexible liturgies, enabling the safe expression of shared emotion, is an important skill in chaplaincy.

Even if a university has its own chapel or worship space, not all members of the university will want to attend regularly. However, as well as the occasional offices which punctuate chaplaincy as they do parish life, there is an additional set of rites of passage marking the rhythm of the academic year in which chaplains may have a role, from formal services at the beginning and end of an academic year, or at graduation, to a less formal but still ritualized presence at some of the events of freshers' week where new students are welcomed and introduced to university life.

Other kinds of institution will have their own equivalents of the liturgical year, to which chaplains will need to respond imaginatively.

Chaplains in any context might also have an important role at moments of corporate crisis and celebration, finding words for the unspeakable and being present on days of significance for the community not only helps the individuals who take part, but also enables the institution as a whole to express its identity. Chaplains might be asked to lead such events out of recognition that they have specialist knowledge in how to manage ceremony, silence and reflection. Although such moments are likely to be predominantly secular in character, chaplains' presence as official representatives of faith, of Christianity and of the church nonetheless points to something beyond themselves which it might be difficult to articulate openly.

Chaplains in any context have an important role at moments of corporate crisis and celebration

3

Why Do Universities Need Chaplains?

In his Grove booklet, *What are Universities Good For?*, Stephen Heap addresses some essential questions about the values and purpose of modern universities.¹⁰ Although he does not specifically discuss the contribution of chaplaincy to higher education, Heap's analysis of the issues facing twenty-first-century universities allows us to examine ways in which chaplains contribute to their purpose.

The higher education sector in the UK is currently undergoing very rapid change. The policy shifts of successive governments have forced universities into a deep and often anxious process of self-questioning, not unlike that which afflicts the students themselves. Changes in funding and recruitment have

Changes in funding have had a profound effect on the way universities understand themselves

had a profound effect on the way universities understand themselves and their function in society.

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in June 2016 is also creating considerable uncertainty about issues such as research funding, the future of exchanges such as the Erasmus programme, implications for staffing and student recruitment. Many universities rely on international students for a large proportion of their income. Hardening attitudes to immigration also seem likely to have an effect. As yet, there are no obvious answers to any of these questions, but the mood across the sector is one of considerable anxiety, which is unlikely to dissipate in the foreseeable future.

The amount students have to pay for a university education has increased out of all recognition since I became a chaplain in 2010. The introduction and rapid increase of mandatory tuition fees has left most new graduates facing a debt of many thousands of pounds. It is still unclear what effect this will have on future generations of young people. Will they still choose to study at university, or will those from less affluent backgrounds be deterred from doing so?

In order to attract students, universities now have to market themselves in explicitly consumerist terms. League tables, research frameworks, the pressure to achieve and succeed in ways that can be measured and quantified, have reduced the 'idea of a university,' articulated by John Henry Newman in the 1850s, to a set of statistics rather than a broader human purpose. As Heap

warns, the risk is that education will be reduced to a purely financial transaction, measured in value for money, with students seen (and, increasingly, seeing themselves) as customers for a product, rather than as participants in a process of personal formation.

In his *Theology of Higher Education*, Mike Higton offers a passionate denunciation of this instrumental approach to higher education.¹¹ It is by no means *only* Christian theologians who are concerned by the seemingly inexorable shift towards the commodification of education, but it rings particularly urgent warning bells for the Christian, or indeed for any person of any faith, who believes that education should be about more than acquiring facts, skills or employability.

It was in response to concerns about the increasingly narrow approach to education evident in government policy that the Church of England's Education Division produced its 2016 *Vision for Education*, arguing for a more holistic approach rooted in the reality that every human being is made in the image of God.¹² Although the initial report focused principally on church schools, its conclusions hold true for universities too. It was always the intention that the *Vision* would apply to the whole of education; with this in mind, voices from within the Cathedrals Group (made up of UK universities with an Anglican foundation) are currently working on a proposal to extend the *Vision* in ways which specifically address the church's contribution to higher education. There has never been a more important time to ensure that voices of faith are heard in *all* educational environments, where not only minds and opinions, but personalities, are shaped.

The Tasks of University Chaplaincy

The *Vision for Education* calls for all those within the education sector, at every level, to work towards a vision of human fullness which relates full personhood to growing in Christlikeness, rather than equating success to academic or sporting achievement. Achieving and encouraging religious literacy is a key part of such a holistic vision, equipping successive generations to make informed, emotionally and intellectually satisfying choices about the place of faith in their lives and in wider society is an essential task of the educational chaplain.

Equipping successive generations to make choices about their faith is an essential task of the chaplain

Practice varies widely across the sector in terms of who employs chaplains, whether they are funded by universities or their respective denominations, and where they sit within the structures (academic departments, support or auxiliary services). Some chaplains,

particularly in universities with a Christian foundation, are integral to the university's identity and might even exercise senior leadership roles. Others feel more like guests, aware that the university's welcome could be withdrawn at any time if chaplains are not seen to be valuable. Universities might view chaplaincy primarily in functional terms—providing pastoral care, teaching, a certain number of hours of counselling, a formal role in crisis response or ceremonial—or more broadly, as contributing something distinctive to the university's aim to ensure students' well-being and build a sense of community.

Universities differ so greatly in founding ethos, in historic provision and in current strengths that no single model of chaplaincy will fit all. What works in an Oxbridge college will not translate to a post-2004 university in a predominantly multi-faith area; nor will it necessarily apply to life in a redbrick or a Cathedrals Group university.

In the bigger universities, two or three chaplains (who might not be full-time) are trying to minister to a population of perhaps 30,000 students. In my own moderately-sized university, a team of 2.8 (FTE) works with a community of approximately 20,000 students and staff. The majority of these people have no other contact with the church, so the representational presence of chaplains becomes even more important. Even in collegiate environments such as Oxbridge or Durham, where the student population is divided into smaller communities, served by more clergy *pro rata* and surrounded by more visible churches, many of them eager for active contact with students, the chaplain has a significant role in pastoral as well as spiritual and religious care.

Yet the stereotype still persists that higher education chaplaincy consists of sipping sherry in book-lined studies with a group of privileged students for a few hours a day, leaving the chaplain free to concentrate on his or her own academic work for the rest of the time. If this had ever been true, it would only have applied to a tiny percentage of chaplains in a handful of universities; perhaps, fortunately, it never was! However, the perception that the chaplain always has time, and can drop everything at a moment's notice to listen to a student in distress, is still *more* true of chaplains than it is for academics juggling teaching, administration and research, or, for that matter, student support professionals who are increasingly overburdened by the numbers of students reporting mental health difficulties.

Simon Robinson's *Ministry among Students* was published in 2004. Apart from one or two studies from American campus ministry, this was the first attempt at an overview of British university chaplaincy.¹³ Only a decade or so later, the culture in British universities has changed markedly. Some of the most important implications for chaplains include:

- The pressure to get your money's worth from university education appears to be having a dramatic impact on levels of participation in extracurricular activity.
- The impact of technology and social media, not just on academic learning but on the rest of the student's lifestyle and relationships. The relational character of chaplaincy is vital in an age of electronic communication. Chaplaincy can provide a safe space in which to form relationships with actual human beings, combatting the loneliness and isolation many students feel.
- Heavy increases in mental ill-health among students, and in numbers coming to university with existing mental health diagnoses.
- Widespread rejection among younger people of binary gender and sexual identities (male / female, heterosexual / homosexual), in favour of broader, more fluid categories.
- The perception that any kind of organized religion is to be avoided. Even though levels of belief *per se* may not have changed much since 2004, students now are considerably less likely to identify with a single denomination.

Adolescents are often accused of a tendency towards black-and-white thinking. Seeking certainty, not least in religion, is a very natural reaction to a rapidly evolving sense of self. The period of transition between home or school and the real world is beset with uncertainty. The challenge for chaplains is to make real to students a living God whose changelessness offers them stability without inflexibility as they navigate these changes.

One of the main tasks for chaplains is to promote religious literacy, both on the individual level and the institutional. Even in universities which teach theology, this is not an academic discipline or subject area to be studied alongside others, but an attitude of mind essential to the healthy function of the university as a whole. Chaplains can encourage students to make connections between their faith and areas of study. They can also advise university policy-makers on how practical issues, ethical decisions and choices might be affected by religious affiliation. The role of chaplaincy is not to proselytise, nor to inculcate narrow denominational identity, but to enable the whole university community to understand who and where God is—and, importantly, who God is *not*. As such, religious literacy contributes to chaplaincy's vocation to be equally open and accessible to all. By explaining the difference between dogma, opinion and truth, chaplains make it possible for people of *all* faiths and viewpoints to relate to them, rather than feeling they are only for Christians.

What Might be the Distinctive Contribution of Christian Chaplains to the Purpose of Universities?

The modern secular university would be almost unrecognizable to Newman, to whom education was inseparable from the quest for Christian truth.¹⁴ Universities today are much more diverse and complex environments than Newman could ever have imagined. Yet the key part of his idea of a university still holds true. Universities still exist to search for truth, and to equip their members to become good citizens, able to function as moral agents and decision-makers in society. In a world in which post-truth now appears to shape public discourse, it is even more urgent that universities are equipped to fulfil this role.

Chaplains are committed to helping students find the truth

If universities exist to search for truth, then it matters that chaplains, along with others working and studying in them, are ‘consecrated in the truth’ (John 17.17–19). Chaplains are committed to helping students find the truth—but that can sometimes involve helping them to enlarge their *vision* of truth, or even to discard previous truths which no longer allow them to flourish. In order to be genuinely effective in supporting students through that difficult process, chaplains need to have undertaken their own exploration of truth—what it is, and what it is not.

If universities exist to search for truth, they must hold every aspect of human experience open to critical enquiry. Faith cannot be immune from this process: a young person asking the key question ‘Who am I?’ will also need to reflect on ‘What do I believe?’ and ‘What do I stand for?’ As students question the values they inherited from family and culture, perhaps for the first time, they may find the process profoundly dislocating, even threatening, to their identity, but it can also prove liberating: ‘The truth shall set you free’ (John 8.32).

Chaplains contribute to the exploration of truth by encouraging newly-arrived students to engage with differing perspectives, to explore a range of views and practices they might never have encountered before and to become aware that views they might never have questioned might not be universally acceptable. Ecumenical and multi-faith chaplaincy teams who work well together can model something very important about good disagreement, learning to live with difference without losing distinctiveness.

As we have seen, chaplains do not have a monopoly on holistic thinking about the purpose of universities, but they do have something distinctive to offer. The language of faith, which sees human beings as so much more than a reductionist set of statistics, might provide a vocabulary to describe the real purpose of higher education. Reflecting on the purpose of human existence, the wider good of society and the transformation of unjust structures is a

theological—and missional—task. It is not only Christians who agree that helping students to fulfil their potential and become their fullest selves is a worthwhile aim, but secular academics who share this view may find, possibly to their surprise, that chaplains are their natural allies.

The climate of increased anxiety at all levels of university life does not necessarily foster holistic well-being in either students or staff. Student support departments tend to see chaplaincy as one more student-facing service, whose remit is spiritual well-being, but they do not necessarily make decisions about chaplaincy provision from a position of religious literacy, or of informed understanding of what religious needs might look like. Both student support professionals and chaplains want students to become whole, happy and functional members of society. But the particular concept of well-being which chaplains embody is one which identifies human flourishing not with academic success or employability, but in enabling each individual to realize their potential to reflect the *imago Dei*.

The very context of contemporary higher education chaplaincy is change and the negotiation of change. Prolonged change and instability inevitably raise questions about identity, belonging and values. In this context, a model of chaplaincy informed by the exilic narrative has much to offer. The continued presence of chaplains in universities is not a luxury but a missional imperative—not just to be where so many young people are, but to have an opportunity to show them how Christian thinking about the nature of human existence can transform the whole discussion about what education is for and what it can offer them.

The continued presence of chaplains in universities is a missional imperative

4

Prophetic or Incarnational?

Prophetic Chaplaincy: Speaking Truth to Power

The position of *prophetic voice* within an institution is a familiar model of chaplaincy which adapts particularly well to the university context. Chaplains spend a lot of time as constructive lurkers—watching and listening, picking up the prevailing mood, interpreting the university senior management’s thinking for students and *vice versa*. Sitting with a coffee in a student bar might not look much like work, but chaplains who take the time to listen and observe, to absorb the institution’s ethos and the views of its student body, will thus have the understanding to feed back into the shaping of that ethos in policy.

As the prophets of the exile found, speaking truth to power sometimes involves risk. Chaplains who feel their relationship to the university is insecure may be reluctant to challenge, if to do so will jeopardize their position. Yet prophetic chaplains can make being marginal into a point of strength; because they are *not* perceived as belonging fully to the university, as critical friends they can keep a measure of independence when difficult decisions have to be made. Students and staff can confide in chaplains without fearing repercussions; the voice which speaks to power does so humbly, on behalf of those who feel they have no effective voices of their own. Singing in a strange land is not necessarily a comfortable experience, but feeling comfortable tends to mitigate against the urge to ask difficult questions or try new things. From their position on the

margins, prophetic chaplains can explore with an open mind, and encourage others to do the same.

The prophetic voice which is most constructive in chaplaincy is the one which promises hope and renewal

The prophets of the exile did not all speak with the same voice. Sometimes, as in the Book of Lamentations, the mood changes

so rapidly that there *is* no one consistent voice. Prophetic chaplaincy must not fight shy of the need to say uncomfortable things, such as to call for repentance; it also needs to offer hope and renewal to those burdened by guilt. The literature of the exile is honest, even graphic, about the mess and pain which goes with being human, but it never lets go of the overall vision that, even when things are at their worst, God is present and to be trusted.

The *incarnational presence* model of chaplaincy is a practical expression of Christology. The chaplain expresses Jesus' presence to, and love for, all involved in the university, not just through pastoral encounters which embody Christlike acceptance and healing, but through active engagement with all aspects of its existence—teaching, research, ethics committees and policy development; participation in its creative, sporting and artistic life; social activities; volunteering; developing the university's relationship with the wider community. Chaplains who stay in their chapel or their office, supposing they have one, would remain completely invisible to the majority of the university population. So incarnational presence, embodying Jesus by being not just visible, but identifiably representative of Christian faith within the university, is particularly important for the university chaplain.

'Contact time' is the university's translation of 'incarnational presence.' Measuring the amount of contact hours between students and academics, in lectures, seminars, labs and tutorials, has become another way of quantifying education and reducing it to statistics. Chaplains, of course, provide a great deal of contact time, at no direct cost to the student; it is the church's gift to them. Contact time with chaplains varies from intense one-to-one support to random conversation with a group of students over tea and cake. This might not *feel* to the student like contact time, and it may not feel to the chaplain like work, but it is. A good chaplain will be listening, picking up signals from the conversation and the silences, alert to anything which might need to be fed back, however obliquely, to the institution.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which chaplaincy reflects the person and practice of Jesus is through pastoral care. The very term 'pastoral care,' which originated with Jesus' teaching and became intrinsic to the Christian tradition, has been adopted by many universities for the practical support they offer to students. Jesus, speaking to an agricultural community, used familiar images of sheep and shepherding as a way to explore God's relationship with his people. There are many images in the gospels of the minister as *shepherd*, which can stimulate reflection on what good, Christlike pastoral care should look like:

- 'I know my sheep and my sheep know me' (John 10.14). Chaplaincy is intrinsically relational. The Good Shepherd is able to lead and care for his sheep because he knows them and recognizes their needs; they know him, respond to him and recognize his authority. Good pastors are not afraid to be human, but relationships are kept within safe boundaries.
- 'He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matt 9.36). Although prompted by compassion, Jesus' immediate response is a mis-

sionary one, sending out disciples and encouraging them to enlist others, rather than trying to do it all himself. It is not healthy for chaplains to try and meet *every* need, or their sheep may become dependent and infantilized.

- ‘Feed my sheep’: the importance both of loving practical action, and of responding to spiritual hunger (John 21). Some chaplains will want to express their ministry sacramentally; even if this language is never used, the creation of community through sharing food and drink, which is at the heart of so much student work, operates as a kind of sacrament.

Chaplains who work in secular institutions are also called to be *translators and interpreters*, enabling genuine communication to take place between the concerns of the church and those of the world it exists to serve. The Theos report contains some disturbing quotations from university students who perceived the institutional church and its ministry negatively. Although they admit that the chaplains they had met did not confirm their assumptions, this underlines the importance of chaplains as interpreters of the church to those who only see it from outside.¹⁵

University chaplains might also like to see themselves as *midwives* of the developing identities of students, enabling something positive to be born out of the chaos of adolescence and young adulthood. The image of midwifery expresses something of the sense of privilege, intimacy and risk which accompanies the invitation to be present as the students embark upon the vulnerable process of becoming.

Chaplaincy as Active Accompaniment

5

Although Job's friends are known for their unhelpful interjections, their first action is to sit with him in silence for a week *before* they speak (Job 2.11–13). Their own distress is put aside as they absorb the magnitude of his suffering. Often the task of chaplaincy is to provide such an *accompanying presence*. It can be hugely important simply to be there, and not be scared away by pain, loss or questioning. While the paid professional support offered to students by counsellors, GPs and university staff is immensely valuable, chaplains offer something qualitatively different. They are there not merely because they are paid to be, but because they are in relationship both with the university, with the individual student, and with God.

Once they do speak, however, Job's friends raise a different but equally important aspect of chaplaincy. 'Is it all right *not* to have the answers?' or 'Is it all right to reject the prepackaged answers I have been given in the past?' are key questions for student ministry. The three friends put pressure on Job to accept a particular definition of his situation. The Book of Job ends in ambiguity; after Job's final speech, his friends are once again reduced to silence as it becomes clear that their simplistic solutions do not meet his case. Neither does God offer any clear-cut answers to replace them.

Jesus, too, frequently uses *questions* to get to the heart of an encounter:

What do you want me to do for you?
What are you looking for?

Such questions require those who come to Jesus to articulate their needs; his response demonstrates open-ended listening, rather than assuming he *knows* what they want. It can be particularly important to adopt this approach with students, who are still in the process of formulating their identity and may not yet be in touch with their deepest needs.

Jesus' question to Bartimaeus, 'What do you want me to do for you?' sounds redundant (Mark 10.46–52). We have already been told of Bartimaeus' blindness, so we might reasonably expect him to ask for sight, and indeed he does, but his request raises profound issues of identity. Bartimaeus' position in society has been entirely shaped by his blindness, and finding a new place

without it will not be easy. Nonetheless, he *does* want to see, and it is to this desire that Jesus responds.

‘Who touched me?’ As the woman with the haemorrhage touched his cloak, Jesus felt power go out of him and knew that he, too, had been changed by this encounter (Mark 5.25–34). Although the woman got what she needed, Jesus’ reaction tells us that it was costly for him. Good pastoral care does entail a personal cost, and therefore necessitates good self-care.

Where Job’s friends accompany him by sitting in silence, the idea of *journey* is familiar in every religious tradition as a metaphor for spiritual progress, growth or enlightenment. The Bible contains a number of journey stories which are particularly pertinent to the transitional nature of chaplaincy ministry. They illustrate the importance of the *kairos* moment, an encounter with people at their point of vulnerability through which God is made known.

Philip’s meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch is an example of active accompaniment (Acts 8.26–39). Like Jesus, Philip begins with a question: ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Running alongside the eunuch’s chariot until he is invited to get in, he responds to a *request* to talk about faith, interpret Scripture and tell the story. Chaplains are similarly called to run alongside people on their journey, but to recognize that the journey is theirs to make, and to let the story itself do the work of transformation without getting in the way. With students, it is important to respond to the questions they actually have, rather than assuming what they need to hear; just as Philip then disappears from the scene, chaplains need to know when to leave them alone to get on with it.

A similar pattern is discernible in the story of the disciples who meet Jesus on the Emmaus road. The two disciples discuss together what they have seen and heard, what they had hoped for, and how they have been disappointed (Luke 24.13–35). Jesus becomes apparent to them in the act of sharing conversation, hospitality and food, all of which are central to effective chaplaincy ministry. Chaplains are frequently called to walk the road of accompaniment, going wherever the other person happens to be going, rather than seeking to direct the journey.

Sowing Seeds: The Open-endedness of Chaplaincy

These two journey stories together illustrate a common thread for chaplains in all sectors: we do not always know the *end* of the story. Not everyone has the temperament for this kind of ministry; those who want to see the results of their labours may well find the transient nature of chaplaincy frustrating. We never learn *why* the disciples were going to Emmaus, or what happened to them after they returned in excitement to Jerusalem; nor do we know what

became of the Ethiopian eunuch and his new-found faith. Yet it is clear that it is the moment of encounter itself which is transformational.

If this lack of resolution is sometimes a struggle for chaplains, the story of the ten lepers suggests that it is one with which Jesus might sympathize (Luke 17.11–19). When only one of the lepers returns to give thanks for his healing, Jesus wonders what has happened to the others. It is not insignificant that this particular episode involves a healing. Although hospital chaplaincy certainly involves active accompaniment through moments of profound encounter, it was rare in my experience for anyone to come back unless they had to. Students in crisis, too, may only come to see a chaplain precisely *because* they will have no ongoing contact; to continue the relationship would be an unwelcome reminder, perhaps tinged with shame or humiliation. At such moments, chaplaincy can be a safe place to leave their distress and move on with their lives without feeling judged. A great deal of energy and pastoral concern might be invested in these encounters, but chaplains have to be able to let go of the need to know if it has been useful or significant for the other person. H A Williams, reflecting on his experience as a Cambridge college chaplain in the 1960s, wisely remarks that chaplains do not need to feel they have only three years to save a student's soul; not only is that the process of an entire lifetime, but it is also God's job rather than theirs.¹⁶

Chaplains do not need to feel they have only three years to save a student's soul

In this sense, chaplaincy brings to mind the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4.1–20). The chaplain sows many seeds, knowing that only some of them will bear fruit, but may never discover which. The fruits may or may not be immediately obvious; the chaplain's job is still to sow, and to be there in the background with water and fertilizer at the ready *in case* it is needed.

Models of Inclusivity

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is also a story of transformational encounter on a journey, but its importance for a theology of chaplaincy is as an image of ministry to all faiths and none (Luke 10.29–37). The same message is found in John 6.35–40, a passage often used at funerals because of its emphasis on God's inclusive desire that everyone who wishes can find a home in him and that none should be lost. Chaplains are to be equally available to all, regardless of background, and willing to work across boundaries of denomination and faith if necessary.

To some, this expectation presents a challenge: does the chaplain's availability to members of all faiths imply that all religious paths are equally true, or equally valid? This is a thorny area for many. Jesus clearly commends the

despised Samaritan who transcends the cultural and religious taboos of his age to help a fellow human being in distress, but he remains a Samaritan. Chaplains who cannot in conscience accept the truth claims of other faiths can nonetheless agree to work together on the basis that all human beings are made in the image of God, and thus deserve empathy and compassion.

It is equally true that the Christian origins of chaplaincy make it a difficult word, and a difficult way of working, for some other faiths and viewpoints to adopt. Until relatively recently, it was common for chaplains of different faiths and denominations to work on parallel but separate lines, each ministering only to their own constituency. Although the search for an alternative word to replace the Christian connotations of chaplaincy still continues, there is a growing awareness of the value of inclusive models of relating. Chaplaincy is a relatively new concept within the Muslim community, for example, but there is an expanding literature on how the ideals of chaplaincy might be adopted within Islam, and other faiths are also developing similar ways of working. If chaplains cannot accompany people of different faiths and viewpoints *all* the way on their particular journey, it is at least possible to run alongside them for a short time—and for that encounter to make a difference.

6

Chaplaincy, Mission and the Church

The word mission derives from the Latin *missio*, to send. To be a missionary is to be sent out, not just by God, but by the gathered body of faithful Christians which we call the church. Chaplains are embedded within their own context, but they also have to be embedded within the church, in order to represent it authentically *to* that context.

It can be argued that the natural concern to reverse falling church attendance has led to an understanding of mission which disadvantages chaplains. It is not easy to demonstrate numerical growth when your entire congregation changes on a three-year cycle. I minister to a community of 20,000 people without a building, a regular pattern of worship or a usable office. Chaplaincy in such conditions is front line mission, in a context in which the givens of parochial ministry have no purchase. Like pioneer ministers, chaplains have to rethink everything they do in order to embody their message and purpose effectively in their own setting. Chaplains in places like this cannot be inward-looking, simply because there is no obvious centre towards which to look. Nonetheless, university chaplains contribute to the mission of the church in a range of ways—through catechetics, encouraging and developing young vocations, and continuing to make the Christian faith visibly present to a generation which is otherwise largely absent from church.

Towards an Ecclesiology of Chaplaincy

Chaplains speak out for the place of faith in the public square, challenging its invisibility by their very presence. Although they minister in secular environments, chaplains also have a relationship with the church they represent. In order to be nourished for their missionary task, they have to be fed and resourced by their own faith, which means belonging to a supportive faith community. They therefore have something distinctive to say about what a healthy ecclesiology might look like.

In the increasingly secular West, faith is increasingly seen as a matter of personal, private and individualized experience. Chaplains, who meet people where they work and study, are well placed to challenge that perception. Effective mission needs not just to *bring* people to faith, but to equip them to *live* their faith, and thereby transform the world. As representatives of the church, chaplains enable encounter with the church as a living community,

rather than a building. Its potential difference from the parochial model in this respect may stimulate useful theological reflection.

We need to develop a properly nuanced understanding of chaplaincy as a ministry which relates to the church as well as to its own context, which looks outwards as well as inwards, which is holistic in its approach rather than defensive of its own patch—in other words, a model of ministry which exactly mirrors that of the parish. Critiques of the fresh expressions movement, such as Millbank and Davison’s *For the Parish*, have rightly pointed to some weaknesses in the ecclesiology of mission among the examples they cite.¹⁷ Considering the potential of chaplaincy, as a missionary ministry firmly rooted within the church but transcending parish boundaries, might have offered them another model. It is not incidental that ‘parochial’ is often taken to denote a small-scale, narrow vision which does not relate to the bigger picture. Similarly, however, there are chaplains who use their role as an excuse not to engage with the minutiae of ordinary church life such as synods and faculties, too absorbed in the bubble of their own institution to embrace a wider perspective.

Universities, prisons and hospitals are seldom *entirely* detached from the communities in which they are set, if only because of the number of local people who work there in some capacity or other, but culturally and organizationally they can still be very separate. Chaplains are not immune from that separation, but increasingly the move in universities is towards developing links with the wider community, building social cohesion and demonstrating public benefit from their presence; chaplains can become an asset here, as a potential source of contact with faith groups and the community at large. The sense that

chaplains have dual nationality between their workplace and the church can help their host institution to make better links with its surroundings.

Chaplains are missionaries to a world in which God’s purposes are often radically misunderstood

Chaplains are missionaries to a world in which God, and God’s purposes for his

creation, are often radically misunderstood. Organized religion is now marginal to the way the majority of people in the UK live their lives.¹⁸ Because chaplaincy occupies a sort of middle ground between traditional parish-based ministry and the strange land where religious practice, language and concepts are unknown to most of its inhabitants, chaplains are well-placed to help the church respond to this shift. Chaplains can use their ambiguous relationship with the church to do what true religion has, in fact, always done (and what people clearly still want it to be doing)—to show practical care for the most vulnerable, demonstrate love in action and build community, but without the toxic accretions frequently associated with organized religion.

Recognizing this, Dr Mike Clinton and a team undertook research comparing the experience of higher education chaplains with that of pioneer ministers.¹⁹ Chaplains' relative freedom from anxieties about buildings and ecclesiastical power struggles gives them scope to model a different way of understanding the relationship between church and people. In this sense, chaplaincy is not so much a fresh expression of church, as a *refreshed* expression of what the church everywhere could be. In a sense, *all* Christians should be pioneers, prospecting into new areas of life and experience which are as yet largely untouched by the church.

Is Chaplaincy Marginal or Central?

When I was at theological college, little over a decade ago, articulating a vocation to chaplaincy was viewed with some suspicion. It is still unhelpfully true that those who have spent an extended length of time in chaplaincy, in any sector, will find it difficult to return to parish ministry, still more so to progress (if that is the right word) to positions of senior responsibility in the church: the experience gained in chaplaincy, and the kind of leadership qualities it requires, does not map straightforwardly on to the expected criteria for such roles.

Perhaps this suspicion is because chaplains are often perceived (or wish to perceive themselves) as being on the edge of the institutional church, precisely because they look outwards to a world beyond the church. However, the church is *not* separate from the world, but intrinsically part of it. Chaplains, like other faith leaders, are essential voices speaking up for a place for faith *in* the world; not just in separate buildings set aside for that purpose, speaking to the relatively small number of people who choose to attend them, but enabling those who might never willingly enter such a building to make connections between the realities of their daily lives and the demands and obligations of a life of faith. Chaplains are therefore central to the church's mission, precisely because they exist at that intersection.

Chaplains are central to the church's mission

So, we return to the exile as a creative model for theological reflection on chaplaincy, as a form of ministry which takes place in the intersection between the church and the world, and opens to both the possibility of new understanding. In the exilic literature we find prophets speaking in the wilderness and in the city, from the edge and in the centre, of the ruin of institutional religion and its restoration, in sorrow and in hope. That multiplicity of voices is reflected in the sheer breadth of chaplaincy.

The people of Israel needed to sing the Lord's song in order to stay connected with their identity when it was most fragile: it was a song of belonging and of

hope, as well as of loss and nostalgia. The instability of life at the present time echoes the instability of the exile, a time of profound uncertainty for a people cut off from everything that had told them who they were. Yet the assurance which runs through exilic literature is still available to all of us, whatever our context: 'You will be my people, and I will be your God.'

7

Conclusion

Chaplaincy is not an isolated discipline. It seeks to build connections between the church and the world, rather than buying into the myth that they are separate. So the theology of chaplaincy is not distinct from that which applies to the rest of ministry, but helps us to develop a theology of the *whole* church as it is now—complete with the recognition that the parish model no longer reaches or includes everyone as it might once have done.

Because of its ability to face both church and world, chaplaincy can offer the church a new way of looking at its own mission. Chaplains are already present to the unchurched in a variety of contexts. University chaplains, by definition, have access to a generation where church affiliation is low and even basic knowledge of the Christian faith cannot be taken for granted, but who are still open to discovering and discussing big questions. In a post-truth world, chaplains are still consecrated in the truth through their sense of identity rooted in Jesus Christ.

The language of exile is particularly potent as a way of negotiating change. Those who returned from the exile were not the same as those who left; after seventy years, almost none of them would ever have seen Jerusalem before. But they still had the stories and songs which had, throughout their time in the strange land, reminded them who and whose they really were. Their foundational truth was their relationship with God, who would never abandon them wherever they were.

Chaplaincy, which likewise meets people wherever they are, is ministry shaped by context but not confined by it. Chaplains' concern for the soul of their secular institutions may put them at odds with those who define purpose in measurable or instrumental terms. They may feel equally uneasy in a church which reduces mission to numbers. The song chaplains sing does indeed sound alien in these strange lands, but that makes it all the more important that someone continues to sing it. Facing in two directions at once, towards God and towards the world, the chaplain sings with confidence in a land which is always strange but always familiar, because it is also home.

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Notes

- 1 Since published in slightly abridged form on the *Thinking Chaplaincy* blog (hecwriting.edublogs.org) 2 June 2014.
- 2 For example, M Threlfall-Holmes and M Newitt (eds), *Being a Chaplain* (London: SPCK, 2011) chapter 25.
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- 17 A Davison and A Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM, 2010).
- 18 L Woodhead, YouGov survey, 2016: for more information see <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/news/articles/2016/why-no-religion-is-the-new-religion/>
- 19 The study which began in 2015 can be found here: <http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/calling-far-and-wide>

Chaplaincy is the church's fastest-growing ministry, but it is still not well understood. Chaplains are at the front line of mission, bringing prophetic challenge and comfort to places where the institutional church cannot reach.

Rowan Clare Williams reflects on chaplaincy through the biblical story of the exile, 'singing the Lord's song in a strange land.' What does it mean to be God's people in an increasingly secular world? And what might the good news for universities look like?



Rowan Clare Williams has been Anglican Chaplain to the University of York since 2010. She was formerly chaplain to Leicester Royal Infirmary, and has a professional background in residential care for adults with severe disabilities. She has written extensively on Franciscan spirituality and chaplaincy.

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