

Chaplaincy in Schools

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Having been a university chaplain for 11 years I was challenged on becoming a Chair of District to develop a relevant model of chaplaincy to the Methodist primary schools here within Lancashire. We initially had nine schools in the District; some Methodist, others Anglican/Methodist; some are community schools, others are Aided schools; and through the years they have slowly been drawn and claimed back into the Methodist faith community.

There are now 11 schools in the District and what a privilege and opportunity they represent. We have more children in our schools than meet in all our churches on a Sunday and we have access to thousands of families that we may otherwise never even meet. We have been committed within the District to the policy which states that if a minister has a Methodist School within their care it is the equivalent of a church . . . yet in reality it is even more so. I rejoice that the 2010 Methodist Conference affirmed that this should apply throughout the Connexion for the stationing of all our ministers.

The concept of chaplaincy is about the Church seeking to establish a ‘presence’ and is normally associated with the pastoral care of all people in the institution – a concern for the well-being of individuals in their personal, private and religious life. It is increasingly important for us clearly to state that there can be no separation of the ‘sacred’ from the ‘secular’. For if we believe in God as creator then our God has not only created all things but inhabits all things, and we are challenged to reveal the kingdom of God in our midst. Further, as a sign of the incarnational ministry to which we are all called, we must be present and active in the world in which people live and work.

The now outdated Conference report of 1999 stated:

The community life of schools conveys moral messages more powerful than any which can be taught by precept . . . This is why ethos is important . . . Schools are seen as places where society’s underlying values are on trial . . . Parents expect schools to teach children how to behave . . . to be part of the formation of morality.

One of the challenges we have faced, and will continue to face, is of developing a Christian ethos in our schools. What makes them any dif-

ferent, in a positive way, from all the other primary schools in the area? Sometimes this can be the simple things. So when you walk into one of our schools you will see the Methodist orb and cross and other Christian symbols. There is in most schools a 'worship focus area' which will be different in each, depending on space in halls and other communal areas. In more subtle ways it is in the 'added value' which a close partnership with the local congregation can bring. The focus for so much of 'making the difference' lies with the chaplain and the way in which they develop this Christian ethos.

Over the past few years a few lay people committed to our schools' ministry have been working with me to develop and promote chaplaincy across the District, and to offer a model that ministers and churches can offer to our schools.

The role of chaplaincy

Chaplaincy is developed in Methodist schools to support and develop the spiritual life and work of the school community and is part of the mission of the Church. We have neglected our schools for too long and this re-discovery of mission is essential. The chaplain becomes the visible presence of the Methodist Church in the school and this is demonstrated in a variety of ways:

- enhancing the life of the school through worship, care and contribution to learning
- helping to sustain and develop the distinctive Christian ethos of the school
- encouraging prayer support for the life and work of the school community and for the chaplaincy work
- building a bridge between the school and church and school and the wider community, including other denominations and faith communities.

Chaplains are appointed by the circuit meeting in partnership with the school and we encourage circuit meetings to monitor the work and to hear regularly of the joys and struggles of chaplaincy through items on their agendas.

The pattern of chaplaincy

As with all chaplaincy there is no one single model. For each chaplain brings their own gifts, skills, needs, relationships and more to the appointment. What is essential is that each chaplain should discuss and agree what

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is the appropriate model for the specific school. There must be time spent in the school each week – this may be sharing in collective worship during assembly, dropping into the staff room during a lunchtime break, offering to share in a class/school activity, giving time to the head teacher as a confidant and just being seen in the playground and at the school gate.

Some ministers spend longer than others in their schools. One gives a day a week and is happy to be a resource to the teachers in whatever way is helpful. Another spends time with year 6 children especially in the term leading up to their leaving and going to high school. In some of the schools there is a prayer board or prayer box for children, staff and parents to use. One chaplain has trained the school football team whilst others run or help out at a lunchtime Christian club.

Pastoral care lies at the heart of all the chaplaincy we offer. In most of our schools there has developed such a good relationship that when the head teacher is concerned about a child or family situation there will be a referral and the chaplain will be asked to care pastorally with a visit or phone call. Yet, as in so many areas of ministry, this privilege of care comes so much easier if the chaplain has learnt the art of ‘loitering with intent’ and being seen around the whole of the life of the school.

Governor or chaplain?

One of the constant conversations around ministers and schools is about whether to get even more involved by becoming a governor. We have tried to develop a simple policy across our 11 schools that the local minister is the chaplain and another member of staff can become a governor if there is that need, but firstly always encouraging lay people to take on this responsibility. The reason for this is to avoid conflicts of interest in the wider ministry we are seeking to offer. When a head teacher is under stress, criticism from staff or parents can they really confide in a ‘chaplain’ who is also a governor? When parents are chatting in the playground to the minister, or seeking help with admission or questioning some policy of the school, the same question arises. Of course, it doesn’t always work out so smoothly but where it does it offers an excellent model of school chaplaincy.

Chaplaincy support

It is important to establish prayer support for the school and chaplaincy work. Members of the circuit churches are encouraged to pray for the school, some put school events in their weekly notices and people are encouraged to support the special activities like the school play or numer-

ous fairs throughout the year. One church now regularly brings school displays into the church foyer/hall so the congregation can see some of the children's creative work.

I was deeply impressed, and still am, to find that one circuit puts its money where its mouth is and has a budget line of £1,000 a year in their circuit accounts. So when new curtains are needed, or Bibles for leavers, the circuit can make a gift and allow the increasingly stretched school budgets to be spent elsewhere.

Chaplaincy teams

One or two chaplains are beginning to develop 'chaplaincy teams' to work alongside them. These are drawn from people in the local church with a gift and passion for the wider school's ministry, retired teachers, those with a gift in leading worship, as well as staff members and parents. One church has found it easy to recruit people to 'sit and listen to children read' and this has deepened the already good relationship between the school and the church.

Mission-centred

There are many people who question the whole concept of faith schools but my simple philosophy has been that as we have them we want to make them the best they can be.

Around the Connexion there has been this reawakening to the mission potential of Methodist Primary Schools. In a nearby District one circuit has created an appointment where half of the time of the minister is as chaplain to the school. This has seen so many things blossom and presented countless opportunities for sharing the gospel.

Ministers are asked at the school gate if they 'will christen' a baby . . . the pain of sharing with a family and the school the death of a child . . . the countless opportunities to involve the school and thus their families in a variety of celebrations of worship and life . . . and what about making the simple links for our schools with an Action for Children appeal at Lent, MRDF at harvest, using JMA resources to widen world knowledge and make direct links with schools outside of the UK?

When I began this article my immediate thought was to use some of the images and ideas from those 11 years in HE chaplaincy, theologically reflecting on the role as creators of vision, celebrators of worship, counsellors, comforters, humanizers, prophets, bridge builders and more. These may be apt descriptions for many chaplains but in these early stages of developing anew this chaplaincy in our primary schools we are still find-

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ing our way. But we are convinced that we are being called to be a real presence among the children, staff and the wider school community, and to see where the Spirit leads us.

NOTE

- 1 Stephen Poxon is a Chair of the Lancashire District and Past President of the Methodist Conference.