

Reflections on Chaplaincy in Further Education (FE)

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This paper seeks to provide a general overview of chaplaincy in the Further Education sector (FE).² However, this is in no way a straightforward task. The range of chaplaincy provision currently on offer in the sector is enormous. FE chaplaincy is arguably the youngest, most consciously inclusive, least funded and organized of all educational chaplaincies. Moreover, it falls beyond simple categorization because of its need for sudden adaptation: fundamental changes to how a chaplaincy is staffed, funded and organized can literally occur overnight if it means it's still a presence in the college the next morning or term. So we must note from the outset FE chaplaincy's chief paradox; it is both effervescent and robust. The latter is usually a by-product of commitment from a diversity of local faith and belief communities. When all else may be provisional – not least government funding – the support for FE chaplaincy from Third Sector bodies is priceless. And so, since chaplaincy projects in FE are wont to rise and fall with great speed any map of the sector is practically out of date as soon as it is completed. In comparison to chaplains in education's 'neglected middle child',³ school (mostly independent) and university chaplains enjoy more stable employment conditions and a surer sense of where chaplaincy in their sector is headed. The creation in 1987, by the Methodist and Anglican churches, of a full-time national adviser in FE has gone some way to bringing a sense of coherence and greater professionalism to the work of chaplains in colleges. But as the term suggests the post is chiefly advisory in nature and colleges value greatly chaplains' ability not to be controlled by any centralizing or national power. Underlying all of this is a deeper truth. The genius and weakness of FE chaplaincy are consequences of the essentially ad hoc and reactive manner in which the entire sector has long had to operate.

The heart of the paper is structured around six key words: marginal, inclusive, pedagogical, pastoral, liturgical and youthful. Those with experience of other forms of chaplaincy will recognize much that is familiar to them. For those who desire further information about colleges (numbers, type, range of qualifications offered) and the specifics of chaplaincy (the use of quiet and prayer rooms, issues of funding, job descriptions and so on) should consult the websites and resources in the endnotes.

The gospel in the world

Though FE chaplaincy may be one of the more unusual forms of chaplaincy ministry, its theological foundations differ little from other forms of chaplaincy. Its cornerstone is the gospel imperative to share God's unconditional love through word and deed. It is to seek the transformation of the world by Christian *agape* alone. It is often claimed, therefore, that chaplaincy is, par excellence, the Church in the world. It is a form of ministry – lay and ordained in FE – where sacred and profane threads are tightly woven together. My own personal commitment to chaplaincy starts with the liturgy for the ordination of deacons. Deacons are called to

serve the community in which they are set, bringing to the Church the needs and hopes of all the people. They are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.⁴

This passage foregrounds some of the more surprising socio-economic realities of further education. Out of some 4.75 million learners 18 per cent come from black and minority ethnic communities in comparison to 12 per cent in the general population. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds form 13 per cent of learners in the sector. The number in school sixth forms is 8 per cent.⁵ Clearly, then, colleges and churches are partners in the business of social transformation through their concern for the excluded and forgotten. In the words of educationalist Alan Brown 'FE is about exploring possibilities and offering new starts, new directions, and changes of identity.'⁶

The nature of FE chaplaincy

The following six sketches describe some of the most important aspects of FE chaplaincy.

Marginal

FE chaplains occupy, it must be said, a marginal place in respect to both their college and church communities. But though being a dweller of the edges is seldom comfortable, the view afforded can be one of the most important to be had in any organization. This marginality is a result, in the main, of the relatively short periods of time the chaplain spends in college. The most common type of college chaplain remains the visiting clergy-person who soon discovers, upon arrival in his or her new parish,

Reflections on Chaplaincy in Further Education

a college nestling in one of its corners, and will start to wonder what, if any, responsibility they have to those who work and study there. On average, the weekly commitment is unlikely to stretch much beyond one day a week. This may be seasonally adjusted as dictated by the academic year. The issue of marginality does not disappear for full or half-time chaplains; it simply adopts more subtle and complex shapes.

Inclusive

Perhaps because of the relative youth of FE chaplaincy – in contrast to chaplaincy in Higher Education – colleges come with little ideological baggage as to what a ‘chaplaincy’ should look like. Indeed, wary of its Christian origins, some colleges do not relate to the word chaplaincy at all but to some equivalent such as Multi-faith Student Support. The emerging ideal is for the chaplaincy to have a co-ordinating chaplain who oversees a team of volunteers from other faith and belief traditions. As recent equalities legislation refers to ‘religion and belief’⁷ so humanist representation is now considered essential for any bona fide inclusive chaplaincy. The notion of a humanist chaplain is therefore a reality in some colleges. The Muslim or humanist chaplain will, to be sure, have their own faith or inherited wisdom to share. With chaplaincy the parts tend to enrich the whole.

Pedagogical

For chaplains with an interest in teaching many opportunities exist within the formal and informal college curriculum – the latter through tutorial and enrichment programmes. Many of these take the form of faith and belief literacy courses. These can make significant contributions to government priorities, whether ‘community cohesion’ or ‘the Big Society’. A legal anomaly determines that whereas RE is compulsory in schools – including the sixth form – no such provision need be made for young people in colleges. A chaplain with a love of ideas, who is unafraid to be challenging can very quickly become a much sought-after resource across the college. Teaching of this sort can also help the college meet numerous Ofsted inspection criteria, including the duty to provide learners with opportunities for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. In a recent lecture to Anglican academy schools, Rowan Williams reflects on the links between education, social justice and liberation. His words are a clarion call to all Christians in education, but they hold especial interest for those who work in FE:

Reflections on Chaplaincy in Further Education

A situation in which some people are barred from the possibilities of growing in self-awareness and access to what they need to make sense of their lives is an unjust situation, as much in our own society as in a developing economy on the other side of the globe. And while we long since in this country agreed the principle of universal and free education, we are all painfully conscious of what our current practice does and doesn't manage to deliver . . . [education] is about helping to form a human culture that is just that bit more free from the aggression and unintelligent selfishness that imprisons us, individually and collectively.⁸

Pastoral

Alongside the role of educator lies the task of the college pastor. Pastoral care is surely *the* common factor linking the work of all chaplains. In FE it is urgently needed for staff and students alike. Recent research into the state of childhood well-being in the UK shows, in general terms, that all is not well with how we are bringing up our children.⁹ A recent paper on the importance of the teacher-student relationship argues that the task of emotional education for young learners is an important, if demanding, aspect of teaching. 'Teachers with vocational expertise can find that one of the most challenging aspects of teaching in FE concerns personal development in handling emotions, building and sustaining relationships, and the disposition to attend to other perspectives.'¹⁰ A chaplain can occupy a special place in regard to college provision for emotional and spiritual support because of his or her ability to dwell in unfamiliar spaces of the college system. The chaplain may look like just another adult in the college hierarchy, but he or she is neither a lecturer, nor a tutor, nor even a 'full' member of staff (though a few exceptions exist here!). The chaplain may be regarded by some as simply a last-minute 'Ofsted-proof' name in the college's pastoral support system, but when seen around the college day-to-day, he or she becomes accessible, approachable and available in ways the college counsellor or ordinary member of staff cannot be.

Liturgical

The sacramental and liturgical ministry of a college chaplain varies enormously. Much depends on how comfortable the college hierarchy is with aligning itself to an explicitly Christian year. However, even in the most diverse urban college, a ministry of prayer and healing invariably finds a welcome. The quiet and unseen work of praying with and praying for is yet another of those common elements linking the work of all chaplains.

Reflections on Chaplaincy in Further Education

College principals, somewhat surprisingly, can be very tradition-bound creatures when it comes to religion. It may elicit a groan from some but college affection for the carol service should be respected and used to the chaplain's advantage! Overall, post-Christian culture or not, the Christian chaplain continues to signify the transcendent, the existence of the good and the hope of human redemption. As Martyn Percy reminded a group of FE chaplains in Bristol in May 2010: 'We would do well to remember that the most absorbing dimension of chaplaincy is not the current crises in education, or the latest pastoral preoccupations and pedagogical programmes. No, it is God, pure and simple.'¹¹

Youthful

FE chaplains tend to work mostly within Monday to Friday, 9a.m. to 5p.m. boundaries. Therefore the main group to which the chaplain relates are 16–19-year-old learners. (Adult learners, though significant in number, study mostly during the evening and so are beyond the reach of most chaplains.) A genuine interest in, and love for, young people is – need it be said? – the beginning and end of the person specification for the position of college chaplain. Though providing pastoral support to staff should never be overlooked, the chaplain's chief tasks are nurturing and supporting young people in all their endeavours, not least in the potentially hazardous journey between childhood and adulthood.

Conclusion

The current economic climate has inevitably checked the growth of FE chaplaincy. In response to the recession both Church and State are turning increasingly to the slogan 'do more with less'. However, the Church must never allow economics alone to decide its direction of travel. Nothing should be allowed to trump Christian commitment to the *missio Dei*. How comprehensive can a theology of gift and servanthood – those enduring theological foundations of chaplaincy – be during times of austerity? If it comes down to deciding for *this* rather than *that* chaplaincy service do we simply go with the flow of tradition or with the question of whose needs are greatest? No easy question this. The child, the sick, the prisoner, the adolescent and mature student – as well as the shop assistant and businessman or woman – would all, one hopes, find themselves enriched by the services of a well-trained chaplain. But tough choices are being made now so particular fights remain to be fought. Advocates for FE chaplaincy will need to go on making the case as to why their work is of first-order importance. There is no shortage of hard sociological data around to help them

Reflections on Chaplaincy in Further Education

make their case. The fact that FE is currently funded well below schools and universities makes the task of advocacy doubly important; inequalities like this ensure that paid chaplains in particular remain vulnerable to short-term planning. But however chaplains in this frequently overlooked and always under-resourced sector are to be trained and paid for, a way must be found. The role matters deeply. Chaplains are charged with protecting and nurturing the spiritual well-being of the entire learning community; this is irreplaceable, life-enhancing ministry. Colleges, which educate and train the workers of today and tomorrow, deserve this service as much as our universities, prisons and hospitals do. A comprehensive theological and missiological perspective on chaplaincy is long overdue. The spiritual, moral and emotional needs of some 4.75 million FE learners and their teachers must not be overlooked when this important work comes to be written.

FURTHER READING AND GUIDANCE

For further information relating to the sector go to the Association of Colleges website, www.aoc.co.uk and click on 'About Colleges'.

For up-to-date information on all aspects of values, beliefs and faiths in FE – including all government-sponsored chaplaincy handbooks and training programmes – go to fbfe's website (the National Council for Faiths and Beliefs in FE), www.fbfe.org.uk.

The importance of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development for learners in FE has recently been recognized by LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement Service), FE's improvement body. The recently published SMSC Report can be accessed at <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Services/Publications/Pages/SMSC-Report.aspx>

For more general enquiries regarding FE chaplaincy or simply how to get involved with your local college, contact the Churches' National Adviser in FE at the Education Division, Church House (Anglican – john.breadon@c-of-e.org.uk), or Chaplaincies Coordinator at Methodist Church House (JonesR@methodistchurch.org.uk)

NOTES

- 1 The Revd Dr John Breadon is the Churches' National Adviser in FE.
- 2 There exists, to the outsider at least, a degree of confusion around descriptive terminology for the sector commonly known as further education (FE). It forms part of the wider learning network known as the Learning and Skills Sector which also includes prison education and work-based learning programmes. A typical FE college will be large, serving many thousands of learners, and offering a wide range of vocational and academic qualifications at post-16 level. This paper is concerned with chaplaincy initiatives in general FE colleges and SFCs (Sixth Form Colleges), smaller institutions focussing on the teaching of A levels.

Reflections on Chaplaincy in Further Education

- 3 Sir Andrew Foster's metaphor for FE in *Colleges 2020*, London, ippr/ Institute for Public Policy Research, 2010, p. 24.
- 4 See <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/texts/ordinal/deacons.html>
- 5 For more key college facts and figures see the Association of College's website at <http://www.aoc.co.uk/> 'About Colleges'.
- 6 Alan Brown, 'Fresh directions for teaching and learning in further education' in *Colleges 2020*, ippr, 2010, p. 75.
- 7 See *Equality and Diversity in Self-Assessment: Guidance for Colleges and Providers*, LSC, October 2009.
- 8 Rowan Williams, 'Christian Distinctiveness in our Academies', October 2009. See <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/91>.
- 9 UNICEF 2007 Report Card 7, Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries. The report found the United Kingdom to be in the bottom third in 5 out of 6 indicators of children's well-being – and lowest overall – against 21 other industrialised countries. www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf. See also Richard Layard and Judy Dunn, *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*, London: The Children's Society, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2009.
- 10 Alan Brown, *Colleges 2020*, p. 73.
- 11 Martyn Percy, 'Quo Vadis?', in the *Journal of Chaplaincy in Further Education*, Vol. 6 No.1, Spring 2010, p. 24.