

CHAPLAINCY: a ministry of presence



INTRODUCTION

Through chaplaincy, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland extends its reach into a wide variety of places where a local congregation often cannot. Whether in hospitals, prisons, universities, the armed forces or the rural community, chaplains embody Christ's care and presence in the midst of everyday life.

This is a ministry of significant value. Those engaged in chaplaincy come alongside people in times of need, offering pastoral support, spiritual guidance and a visible reminder of God's love. Chaplains help maintain connection with church members who may be displaced from congregational life for a season and they provide a compassionate presence for all – regardless of background – in some of life's most challenging settings.

This report, entitled 'Chaplaincy – A Ministry of Presence' seeks to clarify a vision for chaplaincy and capture the essence of a chaplain's role in clear and helpful ways. Initially compiled by the Council for Mission in Ireland and approved by PCI's General Assembly, this report is now offered as an encouragement to those currently engaged in chaplaincy and a guide to those stepping into such roles. It seeks to highlight the calling of chaplains to be ambassadors of Christ and his church, while serving in a professional, collaborative and Spirit-led way that builds bridges between faith and society.

A VISION FOR CHAPLAINCY: CARE, PRESENCE & HOPE

Chaplaincy is best understood as being both pastoral and missional. It offers **care for the church**, a **presence in society** and a **missional intention** to offer a reason for the hope professed in Jesus Christ.

1/ Care for the church:

Continuing connection with displaced people

Chaplaincy offers an opportunity to engage with people in acute life circumstances and unique seasons of life. Whether a hospital bed, university campus or prison cell, many chaplaincy settings are temporary landing places rather than long-term destinations. This means that chaplaincy can often be fluid, transient and temporary, with at times only fleeting conversations with those passing through.

In such settings, a chaplain's role will be to provide spiritual support to all who seek it, but there is also a significant opportunity for the church to maintain connection with its own people, particularly those who have been displaced or removed from their congregational involvement for a season due to illness, education, war or other factors.

While there is a recognition that many institutions may be less likely to request denominational chaplaincy and an understanding that almost all chaplains work within multi-disciplinary and inter-denominational teams, it should be noted that many chaplains are engaging with both current and lapsed members of congregations in their various settings. This is one reason why the sending of chaplains to minister at a bedside, connect with a student or be present in a military unit is a vital part of a lifelong journey with people from the cradle to the grave.

It is also important to recognise that chaplaincy plays an important role in supporting both staff and families, often to support Christians within their workplace or draw alongside anxious or hurting families at specific points of struggle.



2/ Presence in society:

Pastoral presence and care to all who seek it

The most common description of chaplaincy that emerged is that of it being 'a ministry of presence'. Eugene Peterson's rendering of John 1:14 points to how "the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood" and reminds the church of its need to be present in places where it may find it more difficult to be. While the public profile of religion is downplayed and the place of the institutional church in society has declined, chaplaincy presents an opportunity for the church to 'move into the neighbourhood', engage in the public square and connect with a broad spectrum of people around us.

With the majority of chaplaincy ministry taking place in institutional or secular settings, it offers a way for the church to provide a pastoral presence in places that seem more out of the reach of local congregations. Such incarnational ministry is not for the faint-hearted as chaplains are visible representatives of the gospel, in non-church-like situations. This is a ministry of presence, as chaplains seek to draw alongside people in a pastoral way, take time to identify and be with people. They facilitate people being able to talk about Jesus, know his presence and sense his strength.

One retired military chaplain remarks that "more than anything else, chaplaincy is being present among those you serve: crying, laughing, worshipping, celebrating, mourning, storytelling and comforting." It is vital the church continues to grasp the opportunity to be present in the public sphere in such ways, while it is still invited to do so.

3/ Missional intent:

Offering a reason for the hope professed

The missional God sends his people into the world to go and make disciples. Given that a Christian chaplain will encounter people at different stages of faith awareness or growth, this could involve planting seeds as pastoral evangelists to create awareness of God and the value of His Word, or ministering to those who may have a mature faith but need specific care or support in a particular season or stage of life. One report on chaplaincy suggested that the "proverbial man in the street [is] more likely to meet a chaplain in his daily life... as he is to meet any formal religious figure." In spending a day with a Prison Chaplain, for example, one might be surprised by the amount of spiritually-based conversations that come their way.

The book of Acts shows how the Apostles consistently found fresh ways to share the story of Christ in different contexts. In Athens, Paul both roamed the marketplace and reasoned in the synagogue, referencing Greek poetry and the gods they worshipped while arguing persuasively. He used various settings for ministry, such as a river bank in Philippi and a home in Corinth. In each place, he incorporated his ministry in culturally appropriate ways, remaining fixed on the message but flexible in his methods. This missional flexibility is seen in chaplaincy today as at hospital bedsides, operational military units, busy farmers' marts, isolated prison cells, or eclectic university campuses, are a myriad of modern-day missionaries sent by the church to sensitively offer reason for the hope of Christ.

At a time where roles for non-religious chaplains are being developed within some institutions, it is of vital importance that the church maintains its vision of the spiritual dimension of chaplaincy. This is still understood in a healthcare setting for example, where alongside physical care, the provision of spiritual care is seen as vitally important, offering strong impetus for the church's involvement.



THE NATURE OF CHAPLAINCY

Given the range of settings chaplaincy is delivered in, there can be many differing understandings of its nature. Therefore, the following pictures are offered as a way to help capture the nature of chaplaincy.

A/ An away match: Playing on someone else's terms

The sporting analogy of a team playing an 'away match' describes the essence of chaplaincy. When a team plays away from home, it has to learn to operate and thrive on someone else's turf. It might be less familiar there, with much less control over the conditions or terms of engagement. Without the ability to set the parameters or lay out the pitch, one must adapt to the environment in order to perform well.

This is a helpful image for chaplaincy, as the church sends out those who will engage on terms laid out by others within secular institutions or organisations, and be able to cope well within such settings in winsome ways while also being true to both the faith they carry and the church they represent. While some questions might exist at senior decision-making levels of many of the institutions where chaplains are present, it appears that chaplains are well-received, on the whole, by those they are dealing with 'on the ground', be they patients, inmates, soldiers, students or farmers.

Many chaplains speak of being highly respected within their roles with even the reluctant being surprised by the care they receive in a time of crisis. This requires a sensitive approach and one that takes the long-view, seeking to be in the right place, at the right time, in the right manner, listening closely and offering kindness. Then trust may be earned to say the right thing, whether comfortable or unpalatable.



B/ A bridge: Creating connection

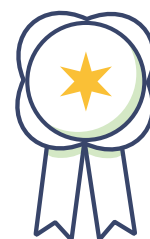
A bridge offers connection between two items that would be otherwise isolated. It provides a way for one to more easily make a journey from one to the other. At its best, chaplaincy offers a bridge between culture and faith, providing care at times when people are devoid of hope, lacking faith or absent from the church for a variety of reasons. While there is a recognition that a significant number of people a chaplain comes across will have little connection with faith, the starting point of Christian chaplaincy is connection with people, with the ultimate aim to help them connect with Christ. At a time when statistics show that there are less people in the pews of many congregations on Sundays, the ministry of chaplaincy offers a point of connection with a broad spectrum of people in the world around us. In the words of Victoria Slater, "at a cultural moment when the institutional church finds it hard to reach the majority of people who may be open to God... but closed to institutional belonging, chaplaincy seems to be flourishing through its ability to meet and minister with people where they are in the midst of their daily lives."

C/ An ambassador: Recognised representatives

The role of an ambassador is to act as an official representative of a government or organisation, often far away from where they know as home. Ambassadors work on the terms of the environment they are in, but must also represent well their sending body.

Similarly, a chaplain has been sent by the Church to be its representative within an institution. This may involve holding the role of spiritual caregiver in tension with the need to act as representatives of the church more generally and a denomination more specifically. As well as helping people to navigate the challenges of life, this may also involve listening to the pain of their previous experiences, at times even with the church. With this comes both the responsibility of effectively representing the church, while listening to hurts or complaints of people's experiences of the church.

As ambassadors of Christ and his church, chaplains are not at liberty to do things that the church does not permit. Within some settings, there can be a pressure on chaplains to act independently and please people, but there is a responsibility to hold to the Reformed standards, while maintaining presence and relationship.



THE ETHOS OF CHAPLAINCY

Professional

The role of a Presbyterian chaplain involves conducting oneself in a professional and credible manner, including operating within the set parameters, working the expected hours of the post (particularly where remuneration is given), being a valued colleague, reporting to superiors effectively and generally contributing to making the environment they are in a better place.

Collaborative

In most settings, chaplains form part of inter-denominational and multi-disciplinary teams, which includes people of many faith backgrounds and worldviews, who collaborate together in their work. This requires an appreciation of ecclesiological breadth, while also being sure of the value of the Reformed tradition. It also requires humility, knowing that a chaplain won't seek to solve every problem but work alongside others to offer care and support in holistic ways.

Relational

Chaplaincy involves being present with people in significant seasons. One chaplain describes it as "the ministry of loitering with intent!" A chaplain at their best is a non-anxious presence; one who draws alongside patients, inmates, students or staff, discerning how best to provide appropriate support through the use of God's word and prayer. This requires taking time, rather than merely ticking off lists to visit, which may even create some tension both internally for a chaplain and externally for an institution.

Intentional

By nature, chaplaincy involves being invited in to counsel, to converse or to care. However, a chaplain should be intentional, seeking to show Christ-like care to people in their every-day situations, some of which may be challenging or complex. It will require intentionality on the part of the chaplain to point people to Jesus according to their circumstances from first encounter to last by presence, prayer and scripture.

Spirit-led

Chaplains should be aware that they carry the presence of God with them into every situation. One chaplain described their work as seeking to be "spirit-led, where there might be certain short-term, even opportunistic encounters, that means one must seek to 'strike when the iron is hot', while also building bridges and developing relationships in an ongoing way." These might be identified as "Kairos" moments – opportunities to make the most of (Ephesians 5:16).

Formal

Some chaplains are responsible for providing services of worship within a recognised chapel or at marked occasions. For example, one Presbyterian chaplain leads three services each Sunday for separate groups of people. Therefore, chaplaincy is about more than relationship, presence and pastoral care, but through services of worship, significant opportunities are available for God's word to be shared. While chaplains minister through deed, a significant aspect of their ministry is also through the Word, both formally and informally. However, while some chaplains hold denominational roles, they are available to those from every background, there to listen and earn the trust to share.

Culturally aware

While the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has helpfully categorised chaplaincy as missional and placed it within the remit of the Council for Mission in Ireland, there is a tension to be found in being overtly missional, while also understanding that chaplaincy is something more than evangelism. This will involve avoiding the dangers of overt proselytisation at inappropriate times or settings. In other words, it is vital that chaplains talk about Jesus, but also know how and when to do so. Chaplains will develop good cultural awareness, navigating their environment with wisdom and discernment.

All people

Chaplains must ensure they are available to all, regardless of faith or background, seeking to be accessible, approachable and respectful, in reaching out as 'good news people' to everyone they encounter.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN CHAPLAINCY

Due to changing circumstances, there is a sense that the church needs to consider its role in chaplaincy in aspects of involvement, training, endorsement, and support.

Involvement

The growth in generic chaplaincy roles particularly within healthcare, means that appointments to chaplaincy are often made directly by health trusts rather than the church. It is now less common for chaplains to be employed simply on the basis of their status within the church, with formal qualifications and previous experience now being pre-requisites for many chaplaincy roles. In light of this changing trajectory, it may be necessary for the Council to consider how to signpost potential chaplains to appropriate training in order to enhance the opportunity to access chaplaincy roles as they arise. There is a danger that if the church fails to think upstream and ensure the equipping of its people, that the privileged access once enjoyed as a church to certain chaplaincy roles could gradually close, thus leaving a vacuum for non-Christian voices to fill. It is important to make the most of opportunities while a seat remains at the table.

Training

More specifically on training, a further step might be the development of specific pathways for those who have been suitably appointed and called to begin a journey towards chaplaincy, which may dovetail with a pathway to ordination, but could also be open to lay ministry, giving consideration to appropriate mechanisms of accountability. Also, given that many ministers serving in congregations take on additional part-time chaplaincy roles, ways in which the training process for ministry can include relevant material on this aspect of ministry is valued.

Endorsement

When it has involvement in such, the church should seek to ensure that those appointed have the necessary heart, gifts and skillset for chaplaincy. There is a specialism to this work that requires specific people skills and it is important that chaplaincy is viewed as a positive calling rather than a negative escape from other ministry responsibilities. As chaplains connect with others perhaps primarily through one-to-one encounters, they need to be emotionally intelligent and intuitive in observing body language, assessing a situation and offering an appropriate response. However, the essential quality by which a follower of Jesus is known is love: a Christian chaplain is a loving or comforting presence listening without prejudice, sharing helpful biblical truths, offering prayer or providing practical assistance to meet a particular need. A particular theological perspective isn't always the key defining factor of a chaplain, but a particular heart to care for people is the most important characteristic.

Support

In terms of support, it can at times seem that there is a lack of understanding and awareness within the church in regards to chaplaincy. Slater argues "it remains hidden within the institutional narratives of ministry", which may be true of the PCI where chaplains can at times feel forgotten, overlooked or out of touch. In contrast, it is important to recognise chaplaincy as a frontline ministry that requires the support and resourcing of the church. In fact, it could be argued that within the PCI, chaplains are amongst those working closest both at the frontlines and on the edges of society. Given this, the Council for Mission in Ireland will seek to ensure it stays connected with its chaplains, and with the institutional settings in which they serve, both by way of support and to find ways for the voices of chaplains to be heard. Perhaps more than any, they intrinsically understand best what it means to take their place as a minority within a dominant culture and yet maintain a missional presence.

However, chaplaincy is not a one-person ministry. It is rooted in the Church and local churches are vital in their role in supporting chaplains.

Furthermore, congregations and other Christian ministries would do well to join forces with chaplaincy to work together in this increasingly secular setting. This is happening within prison chaplaincy where regular volunteers support the running of an Alpha course. It is seen in rural chaplaincy, with carefully identified volunteers serving alongside the chaplain, and through supporting local congregations to be present at their local annual show. It has developed through university chaplains linking in with Christian students to support their on-campus outreach. It is demonstrated by a healthcare chaplain acting as a key conduit to help a patient re-connect with their local church.

Chaplains need to be able to work with local churches to receive support, as well as signpost people to Christian communities that challenge, nurture support and love them in an ongoing way.

CLOSE

The church is indebted to each of its chaplains who continue to exercise such a valuable and important ministry. In closing, we wish to pay tribute and offer thanks to each of our chaplains for their service, recognising their call to this special sphere of ministry that reaches into so many sectors of society for Christ. To that end, this report is offered as a vision for and ethos of chaplaincy within today's world, with the prayer that the church would continue to provide, place and support chaplains who effectively engage pastorally, prophetically and missionally in the public square.



Alan T. Baker, "Foundations of Chaplaincy: A Practical Guide"
Theos, Think Tank Report, 2015
Victoria Slater, "Chaplaincy Ministry and the Mission of the Church"



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