

Reflections on chaplaincy¹

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INTRODUCTION

Be careful what you accept in a moment of weakness!

It was just such a moment when I agreed to reflect on chaplaincy – in a room where there are other chaplains who have served for much longer than I! To date I have clocked up about five and a half years at Melbourne Uni.

So I cast about for clues. What shaped my role and understanding of chaplaincy? And the more I dug around, the more I came up with. I thought I'd be talking to you about my time here – and I will get to that, but first there were unplanned experiences with chaplains in a whole range of places.

UNPLANNED FORMATION

My first contact with chaplains was at the University of WA, 1968-1972.

Heady days: I was a fresh faced 20 year old (actually experimenting with facial hair), faced with the prospect of conscription into the army for the Vietnam War. Three chaplains worked in a weatherboard shack on the edge of campus: two of the chaplains had recently completed their postgraduate studies, and taught part time in theological college. They offered support to the small Student Christian Movement and were available to have long conversations over instant coffee with a young student trying to make sense of God-talk and politics and – well – life.

There was a third chaplain – Jesuit John Harte – who also gave lunchtime talks as part of the SCM program, was active in resistance to the Vietnam War, and offered friendship to me, a Methodist theological student, who was trying to make sense of being in a relationship with a Catholic girl – a practical exercise of ecumenism! Typically on a Sunday evening, 20 or so students sat in a circle in the chaplaincy meeting room, discussed texts from the Gospel according to Mark (assisted by a Penguin commentary), then celebrated the Eucharist, handing bread and cup around the circle. There was another chaplain, an Anglican brother, who became a good friend, Jonathan Ewer SSM.

Moving to Melbourne and Queen's college, in 1973, I experienced another chaplain in an intercollegiate chapel group, Deaconess Bev Bellinger. Students from Queen's and St Hilda's Colleges met – Sunday morning at 8.30am communion service, and on Sunday evening for a chapel

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service, where preachers were the professors of the United Faculty of Theology. Following the service was discussion with the preacher. Midyear a group went on a camp. In the following year I was chaplain at Queen's College. Those were times of small congregations, and we asked whether we might replace the formal Sunday evening service with a discussion group. Fortunately, the Master Owen Parnaby's resistance held out against such a notion!

In 1979 I found myself, a postgraduate student, with wife Beverley and one year old son, in Germany. I had several years' parish experience, and was now a foreign student with relatively poor German language ability. We lived in a student village, near a local congregation (now called the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Congregation). We were a bit of an oddity, as Australians. The student chaplain, Wolfgang Wagner, a year older than I, was a sharp theologian, and a good pastor. He invited me onto the parish council to observe the functioning of the congregation there. He prompted discussion in his living room, and in the high rise apartments. There we heard Ernst Käsemann talk of the New Testament and Christian political engagement: we had an evening with a local community who supported intellectually challenged young people; we ate together, of course (bratwurst and baked potatoes). Those were the days of the nuclear missile crisis. Wolfgang initiated a weekly 'Shalom Gottesdienst' (a Peace Service) in a local church.

I am noticing in these recollections the way in which chaplains were opening up Bible investigation, theological discussion and political activity together. Eating, of course, and the formation of a group or 'congregation' was a key.

I returned to Melbourne in 1983, as the director of our synod (Victorian) social justice unit. It involved a mix of responding to public issues such as nuclear issues, Aboriginal justice, prisons, domestic violence, and so on. It involved not only working from an office in the city, but also working ecumenically with other social justice groups and 'Christians for peace', negotiating how Palm Sunday peace marches and liturgies would work, and engaging people in congregations around Victoria, in worship and discussion.

Little did I know that this Minister of the Word, whose formation had been largely directed toward Sunday worship and ministry with a congregation, was being equipped for a wider task. One much less structured, and one more lonely.

During the 1990s I was Minister in North Melbourne. Somewhere in the middle of that decade I received a call from John Bodycomb, chaplain at Melbourne Uni. John was concerned to ensure that the Uniting Church continued its commitment to chaplaincy in this university. We met, at his invitation, in University House and discussed the challenge of finding a way of ensuring that ministry here. It led to a church committee (you are surprised?) including the Master of Queen's College, the presbytery (our regional council) and the congregation of North Melbourne. The chaplain would be appointed as an associate Minister of the Congregation (to deal in part with the isolation of chaplaincy), a house would be provided near the campus as a residence, and the chaplain would be free to develop the chaplain's work as needed.

I was the Minister of the congregation, and had some contact with students but, in fact, the campus remained a closed book to me.

Leap forward to 2007. I was appointed to be the 'Uniting Church Chaplain' within the University of Melbourne.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I experienced a loss. The drive toward Sunday, with the need to prepare the liturgy, arrange music, deal with pastoral events, write the sermon, check on preparation for baptism, conduct the planned wedding, prepare to speak to the children, discuss with the choir, etc, was stripped away.

It was like being on annual leave - a sudden halt of activities - so I took the time to set up my office and to meet chaplaincy colleagues. I found the Potter Gallery and introduced myself. I went to the Student Union and introduced myself. I went to the after work drinks at the Counselling services. I hunted out my letter of appointment and visited the VC's office in order to prepare for security clearance. Then I went to assure my place of parking, and received my new proof of identity: as 'Contractor'! I was too slow to ask for the title 'chaplain', but I suspect it wasn't a current term.

(Sometime later, when I had found my feet, I thought it would be a good idea to introduce myself to the VC. Reply from his secretary: he had no available time.)

The home I now live in is in Gatehouse St. No riding or driving to work. I can walk! So each morning I walk across Royal Parade into Tin Alley, then through the Student Union House, diagonally across the campus, down to Grattan St, then into Cardigan St to the corner of Argyle Place North. I remembered, of course, the chaplains building in Swanston St, but that was long gone beneath the new blocks of apartments. As I walked across the campus, heading east up Monash Road to Swanston St, I was struck with the sea of young faces, and mostly SE Asian at that! Perversely, I recalled John Brack's painting, 'Collins Street at 5pm'; a yellow brown picture of Anglo workers cramped together in the city street. They were probably walking on the left hand side of the footpath. In the crowd I faced, I weaved my way along the footpath, avoiding those who walked on the right hand side of the footpath, watching for bikes, avoiding the numerous walkers who had a mobile phone up to their ear.

Our chaplaincy offices are well appointed. We have a computer and other stationery goods, printers and copiers. We also have a Community Room near our offices. We have space for meetings.

But where are the people?

Occasionally in my first semester here I would arrange a conversation with students, only to discover that the 10 minutes from the campus to my office, and return, made regular meetings in the Chaplaincy building impractical.

Then I discovered the value of the status as 'Honorary Staff'. I was able to book rooms on campus, and did so for midday Bible reading and Daily Prayer.

One of the important folders in the filing cabinet was entitled Multifaith Centre. There were substantial plans for a Prayer space, ablution facilities, meeting spaces and chaplains' rooms. When I arrived in 2007 there were serious discussions about the need for prayer space for Islamic students. A decision was made to provide such a space. But when a survey was conducted about the need for such a space for Christian and other traditions, there seemed to be little response. The Multifaith Centre came off the drawing board.

Shortly thereafter a couple of rooms were discovered in the Union House, access gained by stairs tucked away behind the Noodle Shop on the third floor.

These rooms have given chaplains a base on campus where we can gather for our regular chaplaincy meeting, hold group discussions and planning meetings. It sounds straightforward, but the offer of these rooms was quite exceptional. I am reliably informed by one of the security staff that in earlier years there was serious antagonism toward any Christian gathering in Union House. Now, much to our surprise, a staff member put his weight behind the proposal to tidy up the space for us.

Something else has emerged. Among the university staff – the admin staff, and the academic staff – are supporters of chaplaincy: they help us to find rooms for meetings, they attend one or other of our discussions and forums or prayers, some seek out private conversation, others accept the request to speak in a forum or a study group.

There is, you could say, a large, invisible crowd of people of faith – Christian, and also Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, among others. But this crowd is not easy to detect. Mostly, they belong to an invisible crowd. My own observation was sharpened when I had members in my suburban congregation, active as leaders, elders, committee members and leaders of worship; but entering the university world they were good and serious academics, but like most Australians, they did not bear their faith visibly. There is, as I have learned to describe it, a learned ‘invisibility’.

That reflects to a degree the experience of many Christians who identify uni life with the century old student organisation called the Australian Student Christian Movement. When the history of the ASCM was published some years ago, Renate Howe described how influential the SCM had been on students of previous generations: they were introduced to serious theological study, they were opened up to the countries of our region – Indonesia, India, the Philippines, and so on; they learned that the Christian message involved political action for social justice. At the launches of Renate’s book I began to be aware that the hey-days of the SCM in the 1950s and early 1960s was a time when Melbourne University was the only university in Victoria: it had perhaps 3000 students, church schools had SCM groups, so that the transition from school to University was accompanied by SCM camps, regular study groups and justice activities on campus. Those links were severely challenged by the generational change of the late 1960s. SCM shrank. This development was also true for the Newman Society.

If you walk around the campus these days, you will see a fair degree of advertising by the Christian Union (CU) and other Christian groups, but not now the SCM. When I arrived on campus, it was clear to me that the model I had experienced, where the SCM was an independent student run group supported by the chaplain as needed, was no longer possible. True, other groups like CU, overseas fellowships and the like, do continue a pattern of this sort, as far as I can see, but not the students with whom a Uniting Church minister would normally work.

Again, the sense of being stripped bare was acute. I would arrive at my office at about 9am on a Monday ready for a week, and was acutely aware of being a small island in a sea of activity. After some time – weeks, perhaps – I asked my then Catholic colleague Teresa (who had been a chaplain for some years) how she survived.

Two things had helped her, she said. First, having been a nurse, she was used to walking quickly, close to running. Walk slowly, friends advised here. And, secondly, regard this as a contemplative ministry. Good advice but so challenging to an activist Minister. It was, in fact, crucial advice. It began to prepare me for a long haul.

As a supervisor of trainee Ministers, I had warned them that being a Ministry of the Church is a solitary task. I had experienced that to a degree within congregational life - now I had to swallow my own advice. I had been used to taking the preparation for Sunday as my daily Scripture and prayer life. The Lectionary gave shape to my week. Now I turned to the Daily Prayer of the US Presbyterian church, to begin the day in my chaplaincy office.

The solitary prayer in my office was a necessary discipline, where I began to pray for the university, in silence, on my own. I would have to trust what I had long held for ministry - it would involve a planting of seeds without being around long enough to see the growth of the plant.

It has been five and a half years. I have experimented with some patterns of activity. I have been the Coordinator of chaplains. And I am now doing my best to prepare a handover to my successor with significant continuity between what I have discovered here, and what that newcomer will do.

Out of these years I have tripped over some learnings, and offer them briefly to you now.

INVERTING THE SCM MODEL

I arrived on campus and was able to meet about five students with some connection to the SCM and/or the Uniting Church. They requested a Bible study, and daily prayer. Discovering that Tuesday was the only free lunch hour, and that rooms could be booked in the Old Physics conference centre, we began a pattern of Monday and Wednesday. I led a study on the Gospel set by the Lectionary and a brief daily prayer, including (dangerously) a Taizé sung prayer! I soon followed those lunchtime sessions with the beginnings of a Thursday Forum. The forum was designed to do what the SCM would have done: binding together theological and justice themes, faith and science, resurrection.

I discovered colleagues, such as Stephen Ames, on campus. I invited theological staff from the United Faculty of Theology to speak. I used my 'honorary staff' status in order to find meeting rooms. These groups were modest. By advertising through various networks (and local Uniting Church of Australia, UCA, congregations) we attracted sometimes 6 at other times 20 people to the forums – students and staff; mainly postgrad students. Over the years, a group has emerged to plan the forums with me: we have continued the attempt to respond to the current issues, such as 'Occupy' and 'Happiness and Struggle'. With Beverley, my wife, I invited people who met in these groups to gather at our home for an Agape Meal, where we met one another, talked of light-hearted and also deep things, then broke bread and ate together. These will be a most marked memory. Supported by local UCA congregations, we also developed an 'Orientation Picnic'. Twenty or so students (some of whom had just arrived in the country) were invited to a bus trip to the bay and a barbecue. Some who were on their own found their bearings, and companions. This activity did not lead to new attendees at Sunday services, but it was an act of hospitality to these new students.

An inversion of the SCM model? In the sense that the chaplain is a key organiser, sends and receives emails, and works with other local church folk. Students are not the organisers here.

FRIENDS OF THE ECUMENICAL CHAPLAIN

I am very aware that I have built up a bundle of knowledge and contacts in this university. My question is how to hand it on. I am currently planning a gathering of 15-20 people, if I can muster them, to associate with chaplaincy. As Friends they will be directly related to the role I hold as Ecumenical chaplain. I hope that other chaplains might also see the point of this group of supporters. I expect some are staff who recall the importance of the SCM. I hope there will be students who have benefited from this contact. (As I say this and prepare to leave, several students who have provided the core of support are themselves moving on to jobs or other universities – which makes the question of continuity even more pointed.)

A PUBLIC MINISTRY FOR THE UNIVERSITY

In my early years, I was repeatedly reminded that this is a 'secular university'. That 'warning' was issued in gentle ways as a reminder that 'religion' had been divisive and remains problematic on campus – especially when politics is also involved. However, when it came to the Bali Bombings, the Japanese earthquake, the Tsunami and the Victorian Bushfires, requests came for a public marking of these catastrophes. Here the chaplains were invited into an opportunity to offer public prayer and reflection within and on behalf of the whole campus. This does not happen at regular university events, such as Commencement. But here, in these times when death and grief needed expression we were invited in. It involved planning to ensure a Welcome to Country, psalms, prayers and poetry from various traditions, words offered by the chaplain, and appropriate ritual actions. The same happened recently with the Anatomy Faculty who offered a service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving for body donors. As chaplains we were invited in to offer prayer and a blessing.

We are aware that chaplains here are still predominantly Christian. In such events we seek to leave space for other voices to be heard.

And there are other ways we have been invited in; one remarkable for its unusual approach. Would we contribute to the unit on Sex, Science and Society by speaking about contraception? After a

searching discussion one of our chaplains spoke about the theology of the human person; and managed to suggest specialists in the area of IVF and bioethics.

PASTORAL CARE

Acts of personal care, conversation and private support for students and staff who are being bullied, anxious about exams, experiencing grief, and so on: these are the normal stuff of ministry. What to do when a process of restructuring is causing serious hurt and upset? When this did happen at Melbourne Uni, it was clear that chaplains needed to be present at the meetings where staff were learning of their future. When it was clear that questions were in the room but could not be asked by staff members, chaplains had the task of asking the questions aloud. In 2011, for most of the year, we lived through cuts to staffing, resignations, and significant trauma to the whole student services.

It was an unexpected role into which we were called, where some of us attended Union meetings, met with groups of managers trying to contribute to the process of change. As Coordinating Chaplain, I was asked to be there. In most meetings I have something to say. In these meetings I was reduced to silence. Once I offered an apology for not being able to contribute much other than presence, and the staff simply said that they were glad I was there!

RELIGION IN THE UNIVERSITY

I have said how people of faith are largely invisible on campus, and the warnings about being 'secular'! Note, however, that there is an Institute for Islamic Studies and Jewish studies, and a variety of other traditions studied within history or arts subjects. There is the course on 'God and Natural Science'. How do we make sense of this? In late 2011, about 20 interested people agreed to meet to begin to explore the theme of 'Religion in the University'. It led to a day conference in May this year (2012), then a further gathering in Newman College in October on the theme of a 'Secular University?'

A mapping of 'religion in the University' led to a substantial account of ways in which religion is present on campus – academically, and also socially, as in chaplaincy. These discussions have only just begun: they have raised the question of a chair of theology in Melbourne University, an e-list of people interested in the topic, and regular conversations will be held on the theme of 'A secular university?' These are early days, yet a substantial discussion, building on those that have gone before.

TO CONCLUDE

What a rich five-plus years. I have not said much of my chaplaincy colleagues who work together on this campus. Without them I would not have survived.

Add to that the opportunities for meeting and eating that CCTI provides, together with the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (TCMA), and you open up another strong network of support for the ministry of chaplaincy. We are on the cusp of learning more about working as chaplains amongst varieties of traditions, not only the smattering of Christian communities but also Islamic, Jewish and others.

And the role of coordinator? It is a surprisingly rich one. I am invited into the inner workings of the Student Services, with all the financial and institutional challenges faced here. And from that place, I have to learn how to represent my own tradition, and others, to listen carefully to what is going on in the university, and be ready to step into unfamiliar territory which sometimes feels a universe away from my role as Minister and Christian theologian! That is just one place where I am continuing to discover that chaplaincy as tertiary ministry is a very rich and provocative arena for ministry. That has been my experience of it. And it will be no different for chaplains who follow.