

## **Being a University Chaplain in the 21st Century**

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Chaplaincy has been an institution from time immemorial. Caring for humanity has been part of the life time mission of all Messengers of God. Is there a role for Chaplains in this century, where religion is being push aside in public spheres? I strongly believe that the need for the spiritual and religious care is becoming very valuable in today's fast paced, stress yielding competitive world. But the challenges are different and we need to tailor our response facing new realities of life in order to remain useful and competitive. In this paper, I will attempt to highlight the changing role of Chaplains and some of the new challenges that will be encountered. The 21st century has just began with only 9 years passed, so I can only speak of experience based on the last three decades and possible challenges anticipated in the coming years.

Let me start with definition of Chaplaincy. What is Chaplaincy? A Chaplain is a Faith leader, responsible for:

- Conducting religious and spiritual rituals in response to identified needs on the Campus, Hospitals, Jails, Senior Homes, and Workplaces and at community level.

- Facilitate spiritual care for faiths other than his/her own faith/denomination.
- Provides Counselling and if qualified, psychotherapy
- Oversee selection of volunteers, training and placements
- Provide In-service information sessions for staff.

The concept of Chaplains is alien to most of non Christian faiths, although such a service is built in to the training of Faith leaders, but the delivery is not on an organized basis as it exists in the western world. For this reason, the role of Chaplaincy is perceived to be a proselytizing under the guise of religious and spiritual care. It has changed in number of countries, including Canada to the role of a Facilitator for ensuring access to spiritual and religious care. The World has become a global village and the demography of population is changing in the Western World. Numbers of other faiths are to be found in many countries. Often there is a greater mix of faiths on the campus than in the City itself. Therefore, the challenges for the Chaplaincy are numerous and different. I would suggest three ideal qualities in a Chaplain should be:

- Knowledgeable of and respectful of all traditions
- socially and environmentally proactive
- Knowledgeable of and engaged in networking technologies

### **KNOWLEDGEABLE OF AND RESPECTFUL OF ALL TRADITIONS**

Because of the presence of different faiths, it becomes necessary to learn about the practices and traditions of the faiths. This knowledge is to be acquired from original sources of written materials and through in person contacts and forums. If the knowledge is correct, then the respect will be developed for the various faith practices and traditions.

### **SOCIALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY PROACTIVE:**

Chaplains can not stay in a cocoon. He/she has to move beyond dialogue. Interaction with students, staff and other service providers will be an important duty of Chaplains. Attend and help organize events that can increase promote awareness of other faith practices.

### **KNOWLEDGEABLE OF AND ENGAGED IN NETWORKING TECHNOLOGIES**

It means being aware of our present context of environmental degradation and social injustice. It means taking action on a daily basis, being aware of the social and environmental outcomes of all one's actions and inactions, effectively being a role model and exemplar in combating these concerns.

### **NEW CHALLENGES:**

However, bigger challenges for this century are just beginning to surface in Canada and may be in other countries. I can recall times when Muslim or Hindu or Sikh students were in such a small number on Campuses in US and Canada, that it was a question of finding a cultural link to remain connected with their respective faiths. There used to be greater interaction among South Asian students of all faiths. Students in the sixties and seventies were coming from societies that were so institutionalized in religious traditions that created a reaction to drift to secular culture. Today in many parts of the World, there is a sudden revival of religious fervour, due to political crisis and natural disasters that have affected lives of thousands of people, often created displacement of people in mammoth proportions. This turmoil has created a paradigm shift of moving the people to seek spiritual relief for mental and physical comfort. It has gone further to nurture extremism or radicalism among certain faiths and tribes as a means to either take revenge or to justify their actions. Terrorism was borne and is very much alive. The new challenge for Chaplaincy is to steer the thought process of students from developing radicalism. It calls for monitoring activities and providing the resources necessary for delivering the message of pluralism and harmony amidst growing intolerance, prejudice and discord. The grieving heart of the people needs spiritual comfort for the discontent of its own Government's policies and the silence of international community on the sufferings of the people.

In Africa and Asia, youngsters grown up in the last twenty years have a different outlook to religion than generations of the past. Whereas, in the West, the cycle is opposite. People fed up with institutional religion are drifting away from religion. I recall, Professor David Tacey of Melbourne University in his speech in 2004 at Griffith University at a conference of International Campus Chaplains said: "People want to be spiritual and not religious and he created a department of Spirituality to attract people of all faiths. This is innovative and may not be acceptable to establish faiths, but it keeps people connected with a spiritual being.

This year at University of Toronto, our Campus Chaplains Association which has 25 faith Chaplains, were startled to receive a request for an Atheist Chaplain. The students asked, that no service for counselling or spiritual care is available to them. They do not believe in God, but they require counselling from a purely human perspective and they are spiritual as well. They nominated a Humanist Chaplain. At first I had great reservation about this request, but on talking to the Humanist candidate, I discovered that this request was legitimate as it conforms to the provision of spiritual and religious care, minus God as it may be. So we now have a Humanist Chaplain.



What are other challenges for Campus Chaplain? Dealing with increasing rate of, mental health, Suicides, Distress, Anxiety and inter religious and inter cultural conflicts particularly for marriage. Chaplains need to be equipped with adequate training to provide counselling in these areas as well as Psychotherapy, mediation and conflict resolution.

One other area that poses a problem is to be politically correct in languages and activities. In the past two decades, campuses lost its traditional platform for free expressions of speech and religious symbols for political correctness. Symbol of faiths can no longer be displayed in public in some parts of the world. Academics are muzzled that they can no longer offer criticism of faith or policies of countries for fearing a backlash.

This is where public education has become more desirable. If tolerance is built in feature of all religions, then why we are offended by the religious symbol or observations by faith communities. Twenty first century Chaplain's biggest challenge will be to find ways to enhance and promote diversity of faiths and culture for learning to co-exist with each other on and off campuses. We need to commit ourselves to this task.