School chaplaincy program: A review

Background
In 2006, the Australian Government introduced the *National school chaplaincy program* which provided, on application, funds to schools wishing to appoint a school chaplain. 2689 chaplains were appointed by 2008 and the majority of these were Christians.

The program was not without controversy. Some members of the community did not want people of religious conviction operating in government schools and some states raised administrative issues. From the beginning there would always be a complex curiosity in a program where chaplains could not do anything religious. From its inception, the focus was on the "pastoral care" role of the chaplains and the description from the Australian Government was *general personal and religious advice, comfort and support to all students and staff, regardless of their religious denominations, irrespective of their religious beliefs.*

Some states, including NSW, saw administrative problems because no funds were provided by the Australian Government to administer the program. In NSW there was already a policy that schools were not to have chaplains. This policy was based on the mid 1990s perceived threat to the provision of Special Religious Education (SRE) by some timetabled SRE teachers accepting other school duties and calling themselves chaplains. The possible undermining of the SRE provision was considered a real threat by the Director-General's Consultative Committee on SRE and the then chaplains gave up voluntarily their title resulting in the policy decision for schools not to have chaplains. The work of SRE teachers outside the provision of SRE was considered to be that of a volunteer who was directly responsible to the principal.

With the commencement of the program, NSW allowed its schools to apply directly to the Australian Government, but preferred them not to use the title "chaplain".

Research
National School Chaplaincy Association (NACA) commissioned Dr Phillip Hughes, Edith Cowans University, to survey schools and report on the program. The results were published and included in the Journal of Christian Education (JCE) Vol 51 No 3. In summary, the following are the key findings:
- a winning formula – Chaplains are making significant impact within the school and broader community
- pastoral care complements existing services within Government schools
- higher proportion of male chaplains when compared to teachers and social workers
- NSCA chaplaincies almost trebled
- Pastoral care is the major component of chaplain's work
- Chaplains are from many denominations with no single denomination dominating.

Some lingering questions
While the report is favourable, even enthusiastic, there are still some questions about this program. As Christians, one of the issues must be how do non-religious chaplains communicate the Gospel? For others, the relationship between the chaplaincy program and SRE remains an issue and linked to these concerns must be the place of religious education within the curriculum.

Presence
The first of these matters is addressed by Neil Holm in *Towards a theology of the ministry of presence in chaplaincy* JCE Vol 52 No 1. In this article Holm raises the issue of chaplaincy offered in a secular setting. Can the "faith presence" of the chaplain be a faith presence to others, able to express the presence of God and have the other person experience God? He acknowledges the different types of chaplaincies in our community and focuses on the school chaplain drawing heavily on chaplaincies in nursing and Covington 2003 *Caring presence: Delineation of a concept for holistic nursing.*

Covington describes presence as *self-giving, being available with all the self; listening, giving and receiving; closeness, perception, awareness and involvement; mutuality, trust and confidence.* Holm goes on to explain how the depth and quality of the relationship between the chaplain and the other person brings the presence of God into the relationship through the believing chaplain and possibly the other person depending on their beliefs. Believers and non-believers alike can find themselves in the presence of God, but non-believers may interpret this presence differently and in accordance with their own world-view, even though they may recognise the presence of God.

Holm concludes that there is a *deep connection based on mutuality and reciprocity and its potential for transforming both the chaplain and then the other person.*

Some concerns
While I acknowledge the potential for adult to adult chaplaincy to adopt this model, there are a few practical matters in relation to school chaplaincy that undermine this position. They include:

1. Chaplains and students are adult to child or teenager relationships and not adult to adult. Student and adult relationships in schools are not equal. Chaplains more than others need to be aware of this when working with students. Mutuality and reciprocity leading to transformation are much harder to achieve. While the chaplain may provide self-giving love towards the student the crucial test is what is expected in return. When teachers or other school personal expect any of their needs to be met in the relationship with a student, trouble usually follows.

    This is not to deny the work of the Holy Spirit in using the presence to communicate to the student the nature of God. It is nonetheless a reality, practical concern and difference that needs to be addressed within the model described by Holm.

2. Most referrals to chaplains will be students experiencing relationship difficulties at school, at home, with peers or with particular teachers or students. Although having a spiritual dimension they will not be seen as such by most students and adults within the school community and more immediate practical solutions will be expected.

3. Developing relationships to enter into the presence of another takes time. Schools rarely provide such time or contexts.

The Christian chaplain works to bring the presence of God to others in the school but without being able to teach about Christianity, without an equal relationship with the student and without the time or contexts to work towards the mutuality, reciprocity and transformation expressed by Holm. These matters need to be

addressed in any development of the model of "presence" for chaplaincy in schools.

While some students through the work of the Holy Spirit will become aware of the presence of God through relationships with Christian chaplains, they will also need additional knowledge about the God who reaches out to them and wants to have a relationship with them. In this respect, the chaplaincy program has little to offer as chaplains can not teach their religion. The current issues around general religious education within the curriculum, especially the national curriculum, again come to the surface.

In addition, NSW struggles to hold back the erosion of Special Religious Education (SRE), through secular ethics courses and similar provisions for religious education in some other states have all but disappeared. The chaplaincy program operates in a context where the churches have not fully taken up the opportunity to provide instruction in their faith.

These matters raise questions for all Christians, denominations, churches and the para-church organisations that have promoted the chaplaincy program. These questions include:

- Where in schools is learning to occur about Christianity and other world religions, about people of faith and about the religious motivation of key people and organisations in world and Australian history?

- What has happened to the teaching of SRE in each state and territory and should it be abandoned, maintained or expanded?

- Do churches see the chaplaincy program as an alternative to their provision of SRE thus allowing Government to fund and provide a "presence" in schools or is it an additional program?

- Is the chaplaincy program going to promote Christianity and church involvement in the community or will it become a further slide into a secular society that relegates Christians and people of faith to either social do-gooders or fundamentalists to be wary of?

Your thoughts or comment for publication in *TCFNews* would be appreciated.

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