

## Toward a Theology of Chaplaincy

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<Opening comments and Acknowledgement of Country>

In the next seven minutes I am going to attempt to summarise the first four hours of [a subject](#) I teach within the [CSU School of Theology](#), on Christian chaplaincy in institutional contexts. I'll say a little more about that subject, and an exciting development in relation to it, in the last few minutes.

In talking to as many chaplains as I've been able to get to, I find it striking how sprawling, varied, fluid, protean, the role becomes. It turns out there may be good reasons for that.

However, I also find that as chaplains try to make sense of their role, they often come into conflict with each other. Our denomination shapes us; our sector (in your case, schools) inducts us into a slew of expectations; and we bring to it our way of inhabiting the world theologically: evangelical, sacramental, incarnational, and so on.

Sometimes chaplains are disagreeing over substantive differences. At other times, their disagreement is about using different language for similar concepts. There's not a lot of commonality out there!

I have found a helpful starting point in the work of former Royal Australian Navy Chaplain, the Rev'd Dr Christine Senini. She identifies six 'models' of chaplaincy that she has seen:

- The Presence model (which sometimes go by 'incarnational'):  
where my task is *being there*, '*loitering with intent*', being present to people.
- The Parochial model:  
where my task is to bring people to Christ, and effectively *plant a church community in a workplace*
- The Sacramental model:  
where my task is to represent Christ to people through sacrament and liturgy
- The Prophetic model:  
where my task is to be a *voice to power*
- The Mentoring model:  
where my task is to be a *spiritual life-coach*
- The Professional model:  
where my task is to fill a niche on a *team* of carers

Each of these models has a kernel of truth, and Scripture includes themes pointing to each of them. I think that they do not so much represent *models* of chaplaincy, as *aspects* of it.

So, what cannot be justified is trying to double-down on only one of them, attempting to make it the key that unlocks every door.

Let's provisionally agree, for the sake of argument, that a chaplain primarily has a spiritual purpose. Some may balk even at that. But God's life-giving breath makes each person a spiritual being at core, whatever we believe and live. The chaplain exists, I submit, to help each person to do business with that; and Christian theology has views on how best to be spiritual. These views springs from Christ's teaching, and his work of redemption, and God's offer of the Holy Spirit to all people through him.

At the same time, though, the chaplain is a guest in a terrain dedicated to various purposes. Every chaplain is asked to further the aims of the organisation where he or she is a guest. So, it takes a very great deal of discernment to detect how to express his or her expertise in the spiritual in that context.

Hence those six models. The wise chaplain doesn't double down on just one of them, but moves as needed through all six of them, as circumstances demand.

We should pause to note, though, that each of those models has their vice:

- There are ways to loiter with intent that are lazy and awkward (and I suggest that calling oneself 'incarnational' might illicitly transfer a little too much of Christ's unique Two Natures into my own august personage.)
- There are ways to seek conversion, and plant a mini-church, that are unhelpfully tribal.
- There are ways to be priestly that are clerically privileged, and disinterested in other aspects of people's lives.
- There are ways to be prophetic that presume too much about my knowledge of what's good, and end up with me simply opposing everything in the organization.
- There are ways to mentor that are presumptuous about how interested the recipient is in the 'generous offer of my wisdom'.
- And there are ways to be professional that simply lose the chaplain's distinctive spiritual purpose.

But,

- The chaplain when present witnesses to Christ's deep love for each and every person.
- The chaplain when parochial—that is, when shepherding a little flock of like-minded people—witnesses to Christ's intention to forgive, reconcile and recreate connected communities under God.
- The chaplain when priestly brings God to people using outward, visible signs of the inward, spiritual grace on offer through Christ.
- The chaplain when prophetic witnesses to Christ's determination that human vices and powerplays will not eclipse human dignity, nor determine our relationships.
- The chaplain when mentoring witnesses to Christ's kindly disposition to the particularities of each person.

- The chaplain, when acting professionally within a team, witnesses to the way all human agency is Christ's gift, for building others up.

In other words, each of these models is an aspect of chaplaincy, because each is *a facet of Christ's abundance*. And the chaplain has the privilege of bringing Christ's abundance into a workaday setting.

The managers of that setting may or may not be aware of anything about Christ. But because it is *Christ's abundance*, the discerning chaplain is a gift to any workplace. Many workplaces can't say anything out loud about Christ, or faith, or religion; that's less so in faith-based schools, but even some of those have painted themselves into a corner on such things.

But even so, you and I know that over time, the wise and discerning chaplain who brings the abundance of Christ into a workplace becomes trusted, loved, and sits slightly outside the usual hierarchies as a point of contact for life in the Spirit.

And I think that sprawling, diffuse, many-faceted nature of chaplaincy that you inhabit is precisely because that wellspring of abundance, Jesus Christ, is springing forth through you.

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I mentioned a subject I've taught in this area. It's a part of the [Master of Ministry](#) course, taught out of St Mark's National Theological Centre, clothed as [Charles Sturt University's School of Theology](#). I highly recommend that course to chaplains.

But we're also working on something else, provisionally entitled the *Graduate Certificate/Graduate Diploma/Masters in Theology and Leadership (Educational communities)*. This will be a course that sets people up better for leadership in an Anglican school community, and by extension into the wider community; and the chaplaincy subject will be a part of it too.

We think this course will be useful for school teachers, school executives, school boards, and school chaplains. But we'd really like your thoughts on it. I'm here with Dr Jen George, who is developing the course, and we'd very much like to hear your thoughts on it over lunch and throughout the day.



We'd also love it if you completed [a quick survey](#) in relation to it (open until early September).

Our hope is that this course will enable our schools to appropriately bring the abundance of Christ to our school communities. But we do want it to be fit for purpose, and we think you're well-placed to give us some wisdom on it.

Thanks for your time today, and for completing our survey.

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