

CHAPLAINCY – A RESOURCE OF CHRISTIAN PRESENCE

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This article is an extract of a lecture by the late Tom Scott presented at Heriot- Watt University in 1979. Twenty-one years hindsight shows the authors clear train of thought and while much in chaplaincy has moved forward there is much remains the same. Tom explores: the changes the individual needs to make moving from minister to chaplain, issues of training, the temptation to develop chaplaincy as a department, and the opportunity the Church has to use chaplaincy for theological experiment.

It is hoped the article will stimulate debate and encourage readers to respond. The Editors

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In the last chapter of his book *The British: Their Identity and Religion*, Daniel Jenkins identifies a new re-organisation of life emerging in Britain. He sees this life in terms of cathedrals, chaplaincies, and conventicles. The cathedrals' role is to reflect the churches involvement in and concern for society as a whole. The conventicle is the neighbourhood group concerned with local concerns and issues with the parish structure. The chaplaincy function is to be a resource within the institutions of society, "to help the other institutions in society to fulfil their own function more effectively, without in any way impinging on their autonomy".

In this paper I want to outline some of the gaps which seem to exist in the Church's thought and action concerning chaplaincies, to suggest what would be required to fill the gaps, and identify how the Church's strategy might be adapted in response to the experience of Christian presence.

The need for Professionalism in Chaplaincy Work

Between 1971 and 1974 the Home Board of the Church of Scotland (CofS), (CofS 1974) held a series of consultations with those ministers of that Church who were working as University Chaplains in Scotland. There was much discussion concerning the role and function of Chaplains and the views expressed were divergent. One chaplain saying he saw no reason why chaplaincy should be anything different from a local congregation therefore the

function of ministry was the same. Another chaplain sought to identify and nurture growth points, and saw no institutional form for the chaplaincy. The divergence was explained as resulting from the disparity in size, organisation and tradition of the eight Scottish Universities. In no way was it suggested that the divergence may have had its roots in the fact that none of the chaplains had received specific training for the job, and that each one therefore responded to the job in a relatively esoteric manner.

The esoteric nature of the chaplains role and function was given a more public airing by Leslie Green, (Green 1968, 43). He notes 'the value of chaplains depends on their ability to find the way in which their personal gifts share in and contribute to the whole range of concerns in the university'. However in contrast to esotericism Green offers clearly defined roles and functions for the chaplain: among these are

- The pastoral function of counselling
- The prophetic function: Christian insight on concerns within the institution and beyond
- The function of theological experiment
- The function of priest to the Christian community within the university

Here we have functions for chaplains to undertake none of which is esoteric, in the sense that they are all known and accepted functions of ministry.

The situation also seems to exist in relation to industrial chaplains in the Church of Scotland. A pamphlet (CofS1973), entitled 'What is the Church

doing in industry?’ says the character of the chaplain’s job depends on the character of the chaplain and the circumstances in which he or she operates. The same statement points out that all chaplains have an initial period of training (3 days), and annual day conferences. Again we see the dependence on the esoteric response of the individual chaplain and the lack of much formal training.

If we turn to the situation of hospital chaplains here at least the Church of Scotland has made a serious attempt to look at the whole issue of chaplaincy. A working party report and recommendations were presented to the General Assembly of 1976, (CofS 1976, 263). The report recognised that ‘so far as training for hospital chaplaincy is concerned, Scotland must be regarded as an underdeveloped country’. From this acknowledgement the report developed an outline for the training of hospital chaplains mentioning in detail:

- Counselling skills
- Conduct of services
- Knowledge of social systems in hospitals
- Study of comparative work on health and salvation etc.

However, this emphasis on training was to hinge on the appointment of an Organiser of Chaplaincy Services.

In this instance while the need for training was recognised and a structure for it worked out, in the end the will to implement the recommendations was lacking.

In the light of this evidence from chaplaincies in Universities, Industry and Hospitals, it would seem reasonable to suggest that there is a lack of effectual training offered for equipping ministers appointed as chaplains in these settings.

The context of professionalism in chaplaincy work

One has to admit that responses to the development of chaplaincy have been largely esoteric. However over a period of twelve years, one has been able to test the efficacy of these responses and to define them with some degree of clarity. I want to suggest then that there are three elements of professional content to chaplaincy work:

- The listening posture

- The peripheral stance
- The capacity for theological experiment

The listening posture

The Church’s traditional posture in the dynamic of communication has been that of *the proclaimer*. The training in ministry has focused on this role and every ordinand has been *equipped to preach the gospel*. However, such a posture for chaplains in the institutional setting presupposes that there is a context appropriate for the reception of their preaching, namely the existence of a body of people or a congregation whose expectations are that their minister will preach before them. The existence of such bodies in institutions cannot be guaranteed. So, the minister’s posture in the dynamics of communication has to change radically; from being *the proclaimer* he or she has to become *the listener*.

The listening posture is the only way in which chaplains can begin to know, understand, and be sensitive to the institution in which they work. They are concerned to define what I can only describe as the ‘dynamics of humanity’ in the place. When listening the chaplain must bear a number of questions in mind:

- How are people valued?
- What is the level of satisfaction and fulfilment in the work situation?
- How is people’s commitment engaged?
- What is the awareness within the institution of its relation to the world beyond it?
- Where are the blocks which prevent participation in decision making?
- Where are the opportunities for the growth and development of the people within the institution?

Unless chaplains can begin to answer these kind of questions they will be unable to offer the resources of their professional ability in the whole area of the dynamic of humanity.

This radical change from proclaimer to listener demands the interaction of two factors. First the individual minister needs to tolerate the disuse of what might have been one of the prime motives for entering the ministry, and so needs the sensitive support of colleagues who have been through a similar experience. Second, the minister needs to be reassured by their Church that it not only recognises the

change of roles but positively affirms it. This kind of support and affirmation can only be given through a strategically planned programme of training. If it is not provided then the individual concerned may either be beset with guilt, or simply fulfil certain role expectations which may be highly inappropriate.

More important than all this, the *listening posture*, when seen theologically, can be recognised as a positive way by which chaplains, and through them the Church, can learn what are the questions with which people are fundamentally concerned.

The peripheral stance

The central goal of a secular institution can never be the development of its chaplaincy, and any attempt by chaplains to impose themselves in that centre can only lead to annoyance on the part of the institution. The chaplain must learn the structure of the institution, whether it be a hierarchy of committees or a confederation of department units. The temptation is to find for the chaplaincy an equivalent status e.g. calling itself a department, or building itself into the committee structure. In doing so the chaplaincy will find itself immersed in the rush for the sharing of scarce resources and similar internal battles. So chaplains will have lost that *neutrality* armed with which they can in fact bring insights and perceptions to bear on the conflicts within the institution and so enable their resolution.

The positive function of the peripheral stance is that it enables a chaplaincy to be free to act as an agent of change. Most institutions seem to have a number of groups or individuals who stand at the periphery. Their detachment from the centre creates a special relationship between the centre and the periphery which allows either well-defined conversation, or when the occasion demands, well-defined confrontation to take place.

Once again this is a radical shift from the minister's position in the community which requires encouragement and affirmation. The minister is trained as a leader to be at the centre of things. In the church setting ministers expect to be depended on to the full. Inevitably this means that much skill, time, and energy are involved in the maintenance of the organisation. However, in a non-church institutional setting the chaplain is free from such responsibilities

and this freedom allows time and energy for being involved with the periphery where changes really occur.

As I have already hinted, institutions seem to have groups within them who adopt a peripheral stance. Certainly in our recent experience in the University a staff group came into being to develop an independent broad-sheet with the purpose of encouraging critical thought and activity within the institution. The group identified chaplaincy as being automatically involved in the project. Clearly there are risks involved for those who adopt this stance, in terms of their position within the institution. However, if there is to be any agency of change which fulfils a *prophetic* function within institutions then it would seem that the adoption of a peripheral stance is a prerequisite for prophecy.

Wickham (Wickham 1973, 230) outlines Paul Tillich's three modes of relationship: There is the *theonomous* mode, in which the Church is basically a reflection of society, and the *heteronomous* mode in which the Church is split from society to live out its own theocratic existence. The third mode, for which Tillich provides no name, Wickham describes as the mode where the Church is acutely conscious of belonging to the world, subject to the conditions of the world, yet a catalyst within the world which is its only sphere of obedience. I would suggest that this third mode might be described as the peripheral mode, and further suggest that this mode may have its clearest form in chaplaincies within institutions, and industrial and commercial enterprises. However, as a mode of the Church's ministry, it requires a degree of professionalism through which the dynamics of the mode can be understood and the techniques of using it developed.

The capacity for theological experiment

Chaplains entering a ministry in an institutional setting are bound to take with them their own understanding of the Christian faith – what I would call their basic Christian hypothesis. The elements of this hypothesis will come from:

1. The Christian tradition in which they have been educated
2. The insights personally gained through correlating faith with life experience
3. Expectations concerning the new ministry

4. A measure of support from a denominational or similar base.

The capacity for experiment will, to a certain extent, be determined by the level of awareness about their Christian hypothesis and by readiness to test that hypothesis through reflecting on and evaluating the experiences within the new ministry.

As an example of this we might say that chaplains enter their new task with the following hypotheses:

- The substance of the gospel is concerned with change
- Individuals and structures have the capacity for being changed from prior modes of living into new ways, whereby their whole living becomes more abundant in its scope, style, and concern
- Evidence for this new life is the Person of Jesus Christ who gave clear indication and examples of change in his earthly life
- The spirit of Christ is active in the world of people and structures in a dynamic way, bringing this change constantly to fulfilment
- The locus of the Spirit's activity is not confined to the *Church Organisational* but can be identified in all sorts of events and experiences which indicate changes taking place
- The task of the Church, and in this case the chaplain, is to learn how to identify, assess, and develop awareness of the dynamic operation of change within the institutional setting.

Starting from this basic Christian hypothesis chaplains next have to adopt *the listening posture*. Only then will the chaplain be receptive to and perceptive of the events and experience through which changes are occurring. They will probably discover that the bulk of such changes are occurring at the periphery of the institution, among groups and individuals who are open to the dynamics of change and thus chaplains will adopt *the peripheral stance*.

Margaret Kane, (Kane 1971), offers a complex model for theological experiment. While I agree substantially with the process she has outlined I believe the process can be simplified, at least for those working in chaplaincies in institutional settings.

1. With a listening posture, and from a peripheral stance, a chaplaincy can identify and enable events and experiences of significance through which moments of disclosure may occur.

2. Such moments of disclosure may themselves produce aspirations for alternatives which can be expressed and evaluated.
3. The alternatives may engage people's commitment and direct them to take courses of action towards the goals which the alternatives signify.
4. From the experience of such commitment certain convictions may be developed and articulated.
5. Such convictions have to be evaluated in terms of their relation to the substance of the Christian gospel.
6. The convictions and the changes they imply have to be fed back, both to the institution and to the church organisational.

This kind of theological experiment demands a high degree of professional expertise. I agree with Margaret Kane, that in the training of the ministry there needs to be considerable emphasis on developing skills in relating life situations and the gospel. It is not a matter of putting more things into the syllabus, but planning for disciplined reflection that relates actual issues arising in practical work to the main Christian themes that are studied in the academic course.

Church Institutional and Christian Presence: Polemic or Policies?

In the foregoing paragraphs I have sought to indicate how the concept of *Christian Presence*, expressed in the existence of chaplaincies can articulate theological reflections. There are questions to be raised:

- Are theological reflections only of value to those acting as a resource of Christian Presence, or do they have value for the Church as a whole?
- Has practical theology any value for dogmatic theology, or is it only of value to practitioners rather than academic theologians?
- Have the reflections anything to say to, or as they modify, the substance of the faith?
- Is *Christian presence* a resource by which the church functions in institutions, or is its experience a resource for the Church as a whole?

Jenkins (Jenkins 1975) concludes that Churches are old and tired and need renewal. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1976 sought to analyse its structures and produce radical recom-

mentations in the hope of finding the key to revival. In that report the space given to the resources of Christian presence in industry, hospitals and universities amounted to 16 out of 670 pages, leaving one to deduce that the Church does not see its agents of Christian Presence as having much relevance to its basic strategy for revival.

Conclusion

These two preceding paragraphs illustrate the heart of the problem as I understand it.

1. There are a host of questions arising from the experience of an agency of Christian presence.
2. I see a fairly firm refusal to listen to the questions.

There would appear to be a deep division between the Church institutions and the agents of Christian presence.

The paradox is that the Church institutional has a siege mentality, asking itself sociological and business organisational questions to keep itself alive. On the other hand, the agencies of Christian presence are asking theological questions reflected on their experience of the world. One has to ask whether the prerequisite elements for theological reflection presently exist in more dynamic form in the un-churched world than in the institutions of the Church itself? Perhaps one has to be as definite as to answer "yes", not to induce polemic, but in the belief that there must now be an opportunity for the agents of Christian presence to talk with realism to the conservers of the Church institutional.

The day of the Church's imperialism is clearly over. Either it can continue to build up a siege mentality around itself, and by rigid constraints and strictures, keep the faithful in the faith as they see it, or, it can use the resources of Christian presence to discover how faith emerges in the un-churched world and seek how to give it form and meaning. Will the Churches afford themselves the luxury of doing both? Paradoxically, perhaps they have to.

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