

Chaplaincy in a secularising culture

Bendigo Chaplaincy Committee Annual General Meeting

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Thank you for having me here. I have attended these annual dinners since I moved to Bendigo and began teaching at Eaglehawk Secondary College, and Marion Drummond encouraged me to come along.

I think I've been asked to speak because of a few reasons: I'm involved in Seeds, a ministry which parallels chaplaincy in the sense that it is not focussed on a church congregation, but a local community. I also train people to work with young people through Praxis, and at least one of our students has gone on to work as a chaplain. And I have a history of working with young people over the last 15 years in churches, residential care and outdoor programs. But I don't really want to talk about those things.

Those that know me know I love to think about our world, and the way we live in it. Tonight I don't want to talk about the work of chaplains as much as the conditions in which they work. Can I say, that most of what I will say has already been thought about by the chaplains here – they are the ones most aware of the tense space they occupy between a secular culture and a church that is anxious to retain the influence it once had.

Chaplaincy in the media

Chaplains in Australia are notoriously low-key. We don't hear much from them, and that's because they are too busy doing good stuff! But in the last few years they have been the subject of hot debate. In 2006, Prime Minister Howard introduced the National School Chaplaincy Program, with \$90m going to towards employing chaplains in schools. Indeed, it is the reason many more schools now have chaplains in the Bendigo area. Here's what John Howard had to say about it at the time:

"My assessment of the Australian community is that whatever its view about formal religious adherence may be, it does hunger for additional

ways of looking at the spiritual and pastoral side of life," the former PM said.

On the one hand, this move was welcomed by chaplaincy bodies and many schools. On the other hand, it provoked a storm of protest from those who believed that taxpayer's money should not be used to fund religious personnel in schools, on the basis that not all taxpayers are religious. Here are some of the comments made by opponents of the scheme:

- Ridiculous
- Overtly discriminatory
- Incredibly divisive in a multicultural society
- Unconstitutional because it blurred church and state

We might say these are the ravings of those already ideologically opposed to Christianity. But chaplaincy is not the only Christian activity in schools that has been criticised. More recently, NSW has been trialling a secular ethics class that parents can opt for their children to attend, in place of Bible classes. Up to 47% of students have moved to these classes, prompting the Anglican Diocese of Sydney to claim:

'If we lose religious education, we risk losing true, fundamental 'ethics' that have underpinned Australia's moral framework for hundreds of years

Now, whether you agree or disagree with these remarks is beside the point. It is clear that Christian activity in schools, funded by the state, is under threat, and that parents, when given the choice, often avoid it. Why is this so?, and what's it got to do with how chaplains operate today?. To explore this, let me take us back a little.

A God-permeated society

Chaplaincy began in societies that were permeated by God, in cultures that understood themselves to be Christian. Until quite recently, most people went to church, everyone was assumed to be Christian, the laws were made with reference to theology, economics was partially restrained by considerations of Christian charity, wars were waged in the name of God and many nations believed themselves to be founded on Christian values.

All elements of our society were seen to be tied together and sustained by God. Thus the soldier and his padre were doing God's work together. The student and the chaplain were united in their faith. All parts of society were God-inspired, and unintelligible without God. In such a context, the role of chaplains made perfect sense. The chaplain was the visible, necessary and welcome representative of God in the workplace. As the priest was God's representative in the parish church, so the chaplain was God's representative in the school, or navy, or prison.

Of course, this culture I am describing does not exist today, at least not in Australia. We have to admit, either with frustration or relief, that things are not the same.

Secularity

I think our society has changed in fundamental ways, which at the very least, make the times very interesting for chaplains. This change can be called "secularism". Let me outline 3 ways in which our culture has become secularised. It's possible to view these as positive or negative developments.

Firstly, God is no longer present in our public space: all the public spheres of life – economics, politics, entertainment, sport, cultural, educational – are now conducted in a way that doesn't take account of God. This is a huge shift in a very recent time. Not long ago, the church could lay down guidelines and even commands which would be taken very seriously. No longer do prayers occupy time at public events. No longer is the inculcation of Christian belief the role of state education. Funerals are routinely conducted without reference to God. So, although God is not entirely absent from public life, he is definitely not at centre stage.

Secondly, there has been a turning away from belief in God, and from the practices of faith, and from knowledge of religion. All those here who are church-goers, and many of those who are not, will recognise this trend. When teaching some Year 8s, I was helping them learn about religion. During a discussion about Christianity, one student professed that Easter was about Easter eggs. Another student, keen to correct her, said, "No, stupid! Easter is when Jesus was born!" Fewer and fewer people attend church, and more and more people do not subscribe to any religion. In the 2006 Census, 18.7% of Australians indicated they had "No Religion". In a global

survey of 2008, the *Christian Science Monitor* found that globally, only 7% of young people thought there was no spiritual dimension to life. When that question was applied to Australia, the percentage increased to 28%.

The third change, and most significant change, is that it is become much harder to believe than it ever was. Imagine a crowd of thousands streaming through a city street. Everyone is walking along happily, in the same direction and in the same way. This is the situation of the religious believer in the past; everyone on the same path, with the same assumptions about the direction in which they are going. Now imagine the crowd turning a corner – the believer feels compelled to keep walking straight, but that path is littered with obstacles, there are innumerable potholes...and it's lonely too.

Charles Taylor, author of "A Secular Age", puts it like this:

The shift to secularity...consists...of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.

Our culture's whole approach to religion has changed: in our public spaces, in our individual beliefs, and in the soil in which faith takes root.

Most of us are conscious of these changes, but our minds haven't caught up with the reality. So, in some way, our minds still operate in the past, where God was central. But the rest of our culture is living in a different world.

What do these changes mean for chaplains? Chaplains mostly know these things – I'm saying them because chaplains rely on us, and we need to have a realistic view of the context they work in, and realistic expectations of what they can achieve.

1. **God and public space:** Chaplains used to occupy public space in schools through sermons at Easter and Christmas, Christian reflections in school newsletters and the like. As a teenager at a state school, I clearly remember the chaplain preaching at Easter and Christmas, and as a primary school student, being taken to the local church for an Easter service. Now, it's becoming rarer for chaplains to give a Christian message at state school

assemblies, as was once common. We can't expect our chaplains to publicly proclaim the Christian message in compulsory school activities. We can't expect Christians to be given privileged access to schools simply because we are Christians. That time is going and will soon disappear.

2. **Individual Belief and Practice:** when few people believe or practice a religion, is there a place for chaplains to foster religious practice in schools? When parents are not religious themselves, is it ethical for a chaplain to encourage religious practice in young people and children? In any case, chaplains are not building on a foundation of familiarity with the stories of Abraham & Jesus. More likely they are confronting an ignorance of these. We can't expect chaplains to spend lots of time discipling young people, producing biblically literate young people
3. **The atmosphere of belief:** it is difficult for chaplains to encourage belief in a context where belief is now seen as odd, and unsupported by the majority of institutions in our country. Chaplains now have to rediscover what it means to create soil in which the seeds of faith can grow. That is a hard task, because we haven't had to do it before.

The way forward?

Although the picture I have painted seems a despondent one, that's only because the church has, for 1500, been used to having power and influence. Now that this power is receding, we worry about our loss of influence, but we need to realise that weakness brings its own opportunities.

Despite the march of secularism, people are still searching for meaning and purpose...not only students, but parents and teachers well. Removing God from the scene has not reduced our desire for direction and hope. Therefore, I still think we need to support Christian workers in schools, whether we call them chaplains or something else.

So, to end, I want to paint a picture, a vision of how Christians could work in schools, in a secular world. This vision has a cost, but also many opportunities.

I imagine a time when no Christian feels that we should have privileged access to schools. Once that happens, we are free to change what it means to be a chaplain, to not be bound to outdated practices. Chaplains and we who support them can begin to work in a way that doesn't try to adapt the role of parish priest or minister to the school, but begins with the questions "What is God already doing here? How can we co-operate?" I imagine, and we are already seeing, an incredible diversity of work that chaplains do. Chaplains know this – we who support them need to encourage this diversity without in any sense expecting them to produce religious results like conversion or church attendance or increased knowledge of the Bible.

I imagine a time when chaplaincy does not receive government funding. Once that happens, we can honestly say to the community that we are not here because money has been taken from their taxes, but because we believe that it is right to be doing the work of a chaplain. Chaplaincy, to be effective, needs to be long term. The church has an opportunity to financially support chaplains so that when the goose with the golden egg dies, chaplains are still there with the community.

I imagine a time when we don't worry about getting airtime to talk about God in schools, or overly concerned that chaplains from other religions are gaining entry to schools. We don't need to be anxious about this. Once chaplains are not expected to preach at school assemblies or provide the "Christian voice" on every issue, then dialogue about religion and spirituality can be encouraged and celebrated.

Above all, we can allow chaplains to relax into what they excel at – bring good news into circumstances of hardship and growth.