

Characteristics of Chaplaincy – a Methodist Understanding

Robert Jones¹

Introduction

The involvement of the Methodist Church in chaplaincy developed throughout the twentieth century and the range of disciplines reflected in the essays that follow give an insight into the scope and work of 700 or more chaplains who represent the Methodist Church in this specially focused ministry.

My intention in this paper is to describe an undergirding understanding that motivates our Methodist commitment to chaplaincy. None of the emphases that are described are particular to the Methodist Church, but rather it is the way in which they combine together which speaks to our Methodist understanding of chaplaincy and our firm commitment to it as a vital model of ministry. I offer here four motifs which help to illuminate this approach.

Motif 1: St Martin of Tours

Martin was a fourth-century Roman soldier and a new convert to Christianity. He was stationed in northern France and the tradition tells of how one day he encountered a destitute man near the gates of the city of Amiens. He took his Roman cloak (capella) and with his military sword, he cut it in half and wrapped the shivering man in half a cloak. This has become a compelling image which is pictured all over Europe and beyond. Martin left the army and was ordained, with a special dispensation to minister away from the gathered church community, in places of real and acute need. He became known as the keeper of the bisected cloak (capellanus)² and as he and his gathered followers extended their work, they built small places of care and worship – chapels. So, significantly, the chapel follows the chaplain, not as we generally assume, the other way round.

Here, then, is the initial feature of chaplaincy, that it first addresses acute need with practical care. Secondly, it goes to where people are without waiting for them to come where we are. These two combine to describe an outreach which has been part of the Church's self-understanding from the beginning. Then there is a third feature of a chaplain's ministry. We may

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sometimes wonder why Martin did not give his whole cloak, but the half cloak serves as a vivid reminder that chaplains addressing critical need are themselves riskily exposed and vulnerable to a considerable degree. Finally, this story says something to us about status, for at the moment of the inception of this ministry, Martin was still a lay person. He was later ordained but at the moment when it all started, he was not. Chaplaincy has had the potential from the beginning to be a ministry of the whole people of God. Only in a very few contexts is it helpful and maybe essential for it to be exclusively presbyteral.³

Motif 2: The ministry of Jesus

The gospels describe the ministry of Jesus, very largely outside of and, to some extent, away from the places of gathered worship – synagogue and temple.⁴ Jesus conducts his ministry in homes or in the open air, in the places where people live and work, and this was very largely outside the confines of the gathered faith community.

This is a serious challenge to the Church which instinctively looks inwards and is concerned with its own preservation. Our calling as disciples is to live out the meaning and the message of the gospel in word and deed. It is to make real in our own time and place, the ministry of Jesus. The model is clear but the reality is that often we struggle to step confidently beyond the boundaries of our own buildings and our own communities. Chaplains recognize this imperative, instinctively and absolutely. To be a chaplain, you have to get used to ministering away from the safe security of the gathered congregation. This is not as simple as it sounds, especially for full-time chaplains, where some Presbyters in particular struggle to maintain their spiritual life without the reassurance of the identity and status that they receive from the role which the weekly Sunday congregational contact provides for them. It is about ministering where people are rather than where we would like them to be; it is about meeting their need with an offer of love, concern and care. This means offering them what they need, not what we want.

Motif 3: John Wesley

In the grounds of the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC is a wonderful bronze sculpture of Wesley on a horse. In a way, the horse is as symbolically important as the man for in its origins and in its self-understanding, Methodism is essentially missional, and so important is this identity that we claim every church member also to be a member of the Methodist Missionary Society. To be part of one is to be part of the

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other. We all ride a horse, metaphorically; we all travel purposefully with the good news.

Chaplains (amongst others), essentially have this ‘sent’ status⁵ but in a more formal way, very much as missionaries were identified and commissioned in a former age. So today, chaplains minister in the *secular* world with a status that is conferred by the Church and with a huge representative role – of God, of the Church (denominational and wider) and of the whole Christian cause. Most people encountering a chaplain in any of the contexts that we serve, are not particularly bothered about their provenance but much more that they are people of faith, they are followers of Jesus and have some kind of structured understanding of eternal truth. Out of this kind of encounter, all manner of things become possible. In return for making their missionary commitment, chaplains can expect the support and prayers of the whole Church.

Sometimes, chaplains may also have a ‘prophetic’ role to speak a caution or a word of vision, to encourage reform as a critical friend but always from the standpoint of one who works for the creation of the kingdom of God.

Motif 4: A plural world

The plurality of ethnicity, of faiths and of values means that most chaplains live and work in a multi-faith environment. This is not an option but a necessity, and for most chaplains, it has become a welcome option. So as a matter of course chaplains need to be familiar, however sketchily, with the main formal faiths of our community and to be able to accept and work with representatives of those faith communities with respect and dignity. One of the biggest groups that chaplains engage with, however, is those who do not believe anything or who only believe very little.

Overall, this means that most chaplaincy engages with those who are not theologically literate. They may wish for a spiritual understanding of their life experience but they are often very cautious about using the language of the Church or even of faith. Chaplains need a special facility for such engagement which means finding some kind of bridging language, often non-verbal and certainly overtly non-theological, by which matters of spiritual and eternal consequence may be addressed.

The identifying characteristics of chaplaincy

From these four motifs, we may deduce these key features of an authentic chaplaincy ministry:

- a ministry which is earthed in acute or critical pastoral care

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- a ministry that takes place outside of church buildings and is located where people are. Chaplains go to where they are needed rather than waiting for people to come to them (to church)
- a missionary ministry which might be termed twenty-first century ‘field-preaching’
- a ministry earthed in the diversity and plurality of our community and always looking for a language which communicates across the divide of misunderstanding or ignorance.

In the Methodist Church, chaplaincy is divided into disciplines in ways defined by history. So education includes Day Schools and Independent Schools, Further Education and Higher Education. In statutory chaplaincy, we have Healthcare, Prisons and Forces and the biggest sector of all is Workplace⁶ with a number of subsets, of which Rural or Agricultural chaplaincy is sometimes seen as an independent discipline. The difference between chaplaincy and a range of other community ministries, such as Street Pastors, would be very small indeed and it might be said that chaplaincy is just that, a form of community ministry, albeit an ancient and fairly well-organised example.

Torry⁷ suggests that the single most significant issue facing the Church today is secularization or, as he prefers it, secularizations and he helpfully summarizes eight forms of contemporary secularization. His book makes the significant case that Workplace Chaplaincy is the most important way in which the Church faces the challenge of an increasingly secularized society. We can broaden this case just as effectively since all chaplaincy has some connection with the workplace.

So, in addition to being a ministry that begins with traditional pastoral care, beyond the borders of the Church and to the widest possible community, chaplaincy also meets a very modern challenge of a society that in multiple ways is abandoning religion.

The practical theological challenge to our churches and to the whole Church is not whether we involve ourselves in a mission within secular contexts, institutions and the whole of society; the challenge is how will we choose to do this with enough resources and commitment to make chaplaincy effective and secure, though not too secure since vulnerability is part of our life – after all, we only have half a cloak.

NOTES

- 1 Robert Jones is Coordinator of Chaplaincies and Secretary of the Methodist Forces Board in the Discipleship and Ministries Cluster of the Connexional Team.

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- 2 Harris, A., 'Military Saints of the Late Roman Army', *JRChD*, v. 48, 2009, 23 quotes in an unpublished paper by Roy Burley.
- 3 Notably in the Armed Forces at the present time, and this because of the need for sacramental ministry in the field of battle.
- 4 The Gospels mention four occasions when Jesus is in the Temple, Lk 2.36–38; Lk 2.41–51; Jn 2. 13–21 (cf. Matt 21.12, Mk 11.15, Lk 19.45); Matt 21.14; and 3 occasions when Jesus is in a synagogue, Mk 1. 23 (cf. Lk 4.33), Lk 4.15–30; Jn 6.59. Whilst it is quite clear that Jesus did teach in the synagogues and the Temple, Jn 18.20, the Gospel writer's principal focus is on his preaching, teaching, healing ministry in the places where people carried on their normal life.
- 5 Davidson, L., *Sender and Sent*, London, Epworth Press, 1969, chapter 2.
- 6 Industrial Mission, which developed with so much flair in the 25 years following WWII, was faced with the decline of heavy industry in the 1980s and has reformed into a very diverse sector that has gradually become known as Workplace Chaplaincy. For a history of its development see Torry, M., *Bridgebuilders*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2010.
- 7 Torry M., 2010, chapter 1.

Understand the tough topics in IB with our teacher written Study Guides. Learn more. [Essay Writing Guide](#).[^] But throughout time especially in the last 50 years the word chaplaincy has taken a whole new meaning. The influx of multi-faith immigrants has forced the nature of chaplaincy to reach out to other cultures and religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Sikhism etc. unlike before, predominantly everything was very much exclusive to the adherents of the Church Of England. In the modern world today, we see that chaplaincy work is not just confined to religion but has a broader spectrum. It deals with comforts and soothing the pains of difficulties in life. The Church of Ireland and Methodist Chaplaincy is a jointly-backed Christian mission, currently based at Queen's University Belfast. The status of the most popular Christian traditions at Queen's is unusual, as the four so-called mainline traditions (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Methodist) each own and operate property adjacent to the central university campus, whilst maintaining full independence. This situation is unique within the British Isles.