

Ministering within the school

Karen Muirhead

Chaplain, Macquarie College, Wallsend, NSW

It's overwhelmingly wonderful having a grade five student's arms wrapped around your waist as they say, "I love Jesus", it's challenging when a year 11 student says, "but you don't really believe all this" and satisfying when another in the same year says, "God is awesome".

This is the core of Christian education and is of particular concern to a school chaplain.

Experiencing the shift from secondary teaching to chaplaincy has been enlightening. The boundaries and directions of the syllabus disappear and in many ways the way you fulfil or create your role is dependent initially upon the culture of your school (what they expect, what they allow). Every chaplain functions uniquely and relates in different ways to students.

The trouble with chaplaincy, and the beauty of chaplaincy, is that you don't get to fill out a register of work, or measure the value of the time you spend with a student in sick bay, or with a teacher on a walk around the oval. Each day starts with a prayer but the plan for the day and the reality of the day sometimes have very little in common.

As a former teacher, I understand the need to consider the timetable and the fact that teachers are heavily loaded. As a chaplain, I understand the need to support staff, all staff, because the giving nature of their work can leave them drained and, at times, spiritually worn.

I also realise that for some students, the school is their first opportunity to know anything of God. In this case, everyone on staff is representing Him, thus making consistency across the school a vital goal. Throughout the day, "coincidences" make me aware that God is very interested in everyone on campus. This heightens my awareness of the importance of the faith-commitment of each staff member as they are in a unique position to have an impact on students.

For seven years, I worked at a rural Christian school where the ministry of staff was integral to the existence of the school. The questions in the initial interview went a little like this, "Do you attend church", "Could your minister sign this slip to indicate you are a regular attendee?", "Do you believe in a literal six-day creation?", "What does the term 'salvation' mean to you?" A number of

similar questions continued from the principal and relevant heads of department. Later that evening, the parent board also asked questions about my Christian experience. To me, the interview process demonstrated particular care in the appointment of staff.

This school did not have a chaplain. All staff—administrators, receptionists, maintenance staff and teachers—met together each morning for worship and prayed together as they prepared to minister to the school's 600 students.

A move to Newcastle in 2008, allowed me to take on the role of school chaplain. My current school provides the amazing opportunity of weeks of spiritual emphasis, Bible studies for a large number of students, camps and retreats, and unique opportunities for worship and connection with God.

However, as student numbers increase in many Seventh-day Adventist and Christian schools, and as the numbers of students who know nothing of Christianity outweigh those that do, the chaplaincy role each staff member fulfils needs to be constantly reaffirmed. The historical role of the Seventh-day Adventist minister / teacher is being lived out on many campuses. Teachers are taking Bible studies, providing worships, befriending and caring for students.

It is wonderful to have school chaplains; the hundreds of Bible studies alone justify employment. However, chaplains alone cannot affect the lives of all students. We need to constantly acknowledge and support the minister / teacher within each class. It may be that the chaplain's role becomes skewed towards spiritual coordinator (as well as a Bible study, chapel and events organiser) as all staff are established and affirmed as the faith warriors of a school—and employed with that as part of their passion for teaching. TEACH

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