Chaplaincy in Christian Schools: Towards a Policy Platform for Productive Partnerships

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Chaplaincy in Christian schools
Towards a policy platform for productive partnerships

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Introduction
Pastoral care or student wellbeing, as it is often referred to, now straddles educational institutions from early childhood centres to university graduate schools. Whether in the public, independent or Christian school sector, it appears no longer optional; it is more than de rigueur, it is integral to the life of effective and caring learning communities in Australia. In the UK, Ron Best has for some years advocated an interesting and widely accepted pastoral care structure that attempts to meet four identifiable types of needs encountered in schools. In his proposed “pastoral tasks”, students' needs are being addressed through casework, where the curriculum provides students with knowledge and skills for becoming more resilient, where a strong sense of community rather than punishment focuses on developing responsible behaviour, and where a whole-school approach results in achieving planned outcomes. How might chaplaincy fit into such a structure?

Chaplaincy brings an added dimension to pastoral care—a spiritual one. In a general sense, chaplaincy may be regarded as a human service ministry that incorporates specific roles in meeting the wellbeing needs of a particular group or community. It does not compete with, but is complementary to and part of the overall pastoral care program of a learning community.

The significance of chaplaincy
The increasing importance of pastoral care and chaplaincy is reflected in the offering of masters and bachelors degree courses (M.Ed. / Student Wellbeing; B.Soc.Sc. / Chaplaincy) at some Australian tertiary institutions. There is evident need for qualified personnel in schools that have to deal with a range of ‘societal ills’. According to adolescent psychologist Michael Carr-Greg, schools have become the front line in the provision of psychological ‘first aid’ to many young Australians. Also, given claims that up to one fifth of adolescents have psychological disorders, on those grounds alone, it might be justifiable to recast the well known 17th century Cartesian proposition into: I care, therefore I am.

From a Christian perspective, pastoral care and chaplaincy are about caring and valuing, which are relational and inclusive qualities that go to the very heart of:

- The character of the Trinity. (cf Matthew 12:8)
- Jesus’ mission statement: “For the Son of Man is come to seek and save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10, KJV)
- Jesus’ vision statement: “… I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10, KJV)

Essentially, caring is about valuing people, and an ethic of care is a demonstration of grace. It constitutes the very core of the plan of salvation which reveals God’s love and integrity to the entire universe.

Looking back and ahead
Chaplaincy is not a recent phenomenon. Chaplains have served in hospices and the military as far back as medieval times in Europe. They also made contributions to the colonisation of America and Australia. Traditionally, chaplains have worked in areas where highly stressful situations were likely to be encountered. Under extreme pressure, or “when facing a crisis, persons often turn to their spirituality as a means of coping.” The armed services, prisons, and hospitals are institutions likely to employ the services of chaplains, but they are also valued by coast-guard services, governments and by some sports teams. As reported by the media, even the world of business recognises the value of chaplains. An interesting insight is provided by one recent example:

Optometry practice owner Janelle Macnamara says a chaplain visits her operation each week to chew the fat with staff. Macnamara could have hired a counsellor or a clinical professional but she wanted a chaplain. “He’s got a lot of ability to call on psychological knowledge and counselling knowledge but as well as a lot of spirituality, for want of a better term,” she says. “He’s not a Bible basher but he’s able to touch on a deeper meaning that perhaps a counsellor might not be able to. And depending on the person, I’m sure he can go to
different levels, whether it’s for religious people or for atheists.”

In an endeavour to provide a more comprehensive pastoral care package for their students, many schools have joined the list of institutions using or employing chaplains. Some private schools have utilised chaplains as part of a long-held tradition. Most public schools, on the other hand, have not been ‘down this road’ before, although schools in Western Australia are a notable exception. There, chaplaincy, since its inception in public secondary schools in 1982, has made a useful contribution to students’ wellbeing and grown significantly over the last two decades.

Much of the chaplaincy expansion in W.A. occurred prior to the Coalition Government’s announcement of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) in October 2006, and the subsequent $90 million funding of the voluntary program. Almost 1400 schools (public and private) across Australia received grants in the first round of applications. Three quarters of the recipients were public schools; the ratio of three to one reflecting the respective sizes of the Australian public and private education sectors.

The NSCP was perceived as meeting a need by many educators. But misunderstood by others, either unintentionally or intentionally—particularly special interest groups—it also became the target of strident, partisan criticism. Although NSCP’s present three-year funding is assured until 2010, there are some questions about the program’s future under the current government. According to media reports, “Education Minister Julia Gillard’s office has confirmed the $90 million program will be changed into a secular scheme when current contracts expire.”

Under the present scheme all school chaplains are required to sign a code of conduct. In “religious-based schools,” the code does not prevent them from discussing their faith with students or conduct services according to the faith of the school. Given the signalled change of direction by the incumbent government, if and how chaplains ministering in faith-based schools will be affected remains to be seen. Will funding be maintained, or will this ministry continue unfunded?

Perhaps the issue may be decided on whether faith-based schools (be they Christian, Jewish or other) are able to advance a convincing justification for chaplaincy and comply with any new conditions under the NSCP funding agreement. Furthermore, schools may be required to present a chaplaincy ‘curriculum’ or program with stated outcomes and how such a program links with other curriculum subjects such as Personal Development and Health / Physical Education. The roles of chaplains, their services, tasks, and necessary qualifications, among others, may also have to be explicated.

**Policy development**

Developing a succinct, workable school chaplaincy policy may be a first step in addressing some of these issues. It should aim at providing a school community with a platform for productive partnerships between stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, chaplains, administrators, churches, as well as government agencies.

What is a policy? An eclectic compilation defines it as, “a formal document outlining the ways in which an organisation intends to conduct its affairs. It comprises a cohesive set of responses to a given situation or environment, selected from among alternatives, that guides the implementation of present and future decisions for a long-term purpose.” Essentially, a policy incorporates aspects of Laswell’s classic communication formula: Who does what, for whom, why, how, when, where, how well? School chaplaincy policies may vary from school to school, depending on circumstances. Nevertheless, each policy should rest on an integrated, broad platform that relates to the school’s raison d’etre rather than being made on an ad hoc basis. This should make for greater user-friendliness, avoid problematic interpretations and permit wider and more routine and time-saving application. Among other things, policy may effect the ordering of priorities and the allocation of resources.

How might a school chaplaincy policy be developed? Not infrequently, institutions adopt specific, ready-made policies ‘lock, stock and barrel’ (separate from any mandated by legislation); the advantage being, not having to reinvent the wheel. The drawback of such a shortcut is the possibility of being unaware of the legal implications to which a school might ‘sign up’, not having ‘owned’ the policy in the first place. Ideally, for maximum effectiveness, the policy-making process should not only include those who administer policy, but also those who are affected by it. Additionally it should:

- Demonstrate feasibility and an awareness of available resources whether human, fiscal or physical.
- ‘Speak’ to the perceived needs of stakeholders and their circumstances.
- Incorporate the school’s ethos and value system.
- Align with best practice and any applicable legislation.
- Take into account relevant current research findings.

“Each policy should rest on an integrated, broad platform that relates to the school’s raison d’etre rather than being made on an ad hoc basis”
In offering a suggested chaplaincy policy prototype for a K / R–12 Christian school, the writer accessed findings from several pertinent research studies and has drawn on them. The main study was a modified Delphi application that involved a representative panel of sixty members, made up of parents, students, chaplains, teachers, school principals and church administrators. The study’s main research questions were grounded in Christian faith-based schools and related to: The goals and significance of chaplaincy; desirable attributes of, and employment procedures and assessment criteria for chaplains; matters perceived as contentious in pastoral care; and the nexus between chaplaincy and pastoral care.

**SCHOOL CHAPLAINCY POLICY**

A generic prototype for Christian faith-based schools

**Definition of chaplaincy**

In an educational setting, chaplaincy is a human services ministry that focuses on the pastoral nurture and spiritual development of a school community, and forms an integral part of a school’s overall pastoral care program.

**Rationale**

The [insert name] Church has a mission and vision for its schools. They should be places of learning for students’ holistic development, where both academic excellence and spiritual values are fostered in a climate of “Christ-centred worship, loving relationships and practical concern for others.”

The [insert name] school / system recognises the potential contribution of chaplains as spiritual leaders in ministering to students, parents and teachers, and in enhancing the wellbeing of the whole school community. There is valid justification for providing and supporting an effective school chaplaincy ministry, for many educators perceive it as being indispensable to the life of a Christian school.

**Job description**

This is a spiritual-pastoral leadership position. The chaplain, as part of the school’s pastoral care team, plans, organises, and implements a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities, events and projects, to achieve the pastoral care goals of the school. Relevant experience and qualifications are thus requisites for the position. In their everyday work, chaplains are responsible to the principal and the school council / board of governors.

**Qualifications**

- **Personal**
  A ‘short list’ includes: being readily available and approachable, an effective communicator and having a genuine interest in children / youth and their salvation; being a person of integrity with a positive outlook on life; exhibiting ethical behaviour and an authentic Christian lifestyle, and also having relevant life experience.

- **Professional**
  Because school chaplains are spiritual leaders, the chaplain, preferably, should have a recognised tertiary qualification in theology, counselling or education (or a combination of these) from an accredited tertiary institution and have relevant practical experience.

If an appointed chaplain does not have all the desired qualifications, then the appointee will be required to enter into an agreement to commence an appropriate professional growth course or study program approved by the school council / board of governors. This body may provide some financial assistance for such an ‘own time’ study program.

**Appointment**

Chaplains are appointed to schools on the following basis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student numbers [as a guide]</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–150</td>
<td>Pro rata budget, chaplain funded by associated church/es</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150–400</td>
<td>0.5 budget, funded by school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400+</td>
<td>1.00 budget for each 400 or major part thereof, funded by school [also NSCP funding]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The appointment of the school chaplain is a joint school and church function, undertaken in the following manner:

- Principal to notify the school council of the need to appoint a chaplain. As with other important staff appointments, forward planning is essential.
- The position will be advertised.
- The final selection to be determined through an interview panel including the school principal, members of the school council, and (an) appointed church representative/s.

**Remuneration**

The chaplain will be considered to be an employee of the school and remunerated on the basis of qualifications and experience.

Where a pastor / minister is appointed as a full-time school chaplain (ordained or not), the chaplain’s position is to be recorded as a secondment from a church to the school. The period of secondment will ordinarily be a maximum term of, for example, four or five years. The school will enter into dialogue with the appropriate church administrative body no less than four months prior to the end of each year to determine whether the secondment will be continued or a replacement chaplain sought.

Where a teacher / minister is selected to be a chaplain, the teacher / chaplain appointment may be an annual basis.

Where an applicant for a chaplaincy position comes from other than a teaching ministry, pastoral ministry or counselling background, they must also...
satisfy the personal and professional qualifications criteria, and if such a person is selected, they will be appointed to the position of chaplain on the following basis:

- A probationary period of 12 months
- An initial contract period of two years (inclusive of the probationary period)

**Employer-employee relationships**

The initial interviewing panel should appoint a suitably qualified and experienced person to be the spiritual mentor for the chaplain and be a resource for professional development. It is recommended that the chaplain provides the principal with a brief, half-yearly and end-of-year reflective reports about their work, activities and contribution to the school’s pastoral care program.

Chaplains are required to attend and participate in the following:

- Professional in-service opportunities, seminars, conferences and ministerial meetings.
- School registration days, ‘home and school meetings’, parent-teacher interviews (be available for).
- Annual conventions or planning sessions held by the churches.

Ordinarily, chaplains will take their annual leave during school-term or year-end breaks.

**Roles, tasks, and responsibilities**

Chaplains, are an integral part of the school’s staffing. As such the school principal will assist the chaplain in determining their daily and weekly schedule, within the framework of a planned, written, ‘program of ministry’ for a four-term school year. This document should specify outcomes, activities, events, programs, and the necessary strategies, resources, personnel and budget for implementation.

Chaplains are encouraged to participate in all aspects of school life, including church visitations, student and staff service activities, sports carnivals, campouts etc.

Because every school is unique, the role in each case will vary in relation to available time and other circumstances. It is unrealistic to prescribe a single set of expectations to suit all chaplains. However it is appropriate to identify a set of typical responsibilities and activities many of which could reasonably become part of a particular chaplain’s ‘role set’. On appointment, the chaplain, together with school and church administrators should formulate (set down in writing) and agree on the chaplain’s role, and then review it from time to time. In recommending the following list of activities and responsibilities as suggestions, it should be stressed that it is unrealistic to expect that every item in the following list will be included in any one person’s role.

The school chaplain’s ‘role set’ will include, but is not limited to, many of the following responsibilities and tasks:

**Spiritual modelling and mentoring**

- Be a spiritual mentor to students and staff
- Contribute actively to building the spiritual tone of the school
- Model an authentic Christian lifestyle

**Worship activities**

- Plan and organise chapels and staff worship in partnership with school administration and staff
- Participate in the planning of special worship events such as Week of Spiritual Emphasis

**Bible study and teaching**

- Conduct special Bible study groups with a view to leading students to Christ and baptism; participate in such baptismal events
- Support the Bible / Biblical Studies teachers in the school and contribute to the development of curriculum resources for teaching the subject
- Assist in developing resources for use in pastoral care, and for roll teachers in their presentation of class worship

**Leadership in, and support of school-related activities**

**Worship and fellowship:**

- Lead out in worship and fellowship activities
- Give leadership at, and provide support for youth rallies and week-end fellowships
- Be a resource person for school-presented church programs

**Outreach and service:**

- Work collegially with teachers in planning service activities and community programs
- Organise and assist with outreach and service programs
- Plan and support discipling and training activities

**Social and recreation:**

- Support or participate in formal and informal recreation activities and social events
- Attend school camps
- Participate in sports coaching
- Accompany school band tours

**Parents and the community**

- In collaboration with teachers, contribute and participate in the organisation of parent education nights e.g. “What does your school teach about God?” “What is the school’s policy on bullying?”
- Assist in parenting seminars and community programs
- Access and provide appropriate resources for Christian parenting and family.

**Nurture and pastoral care**

- Be actively involved in the school’s pastoral care program, as leader of the pastoral care team
- Be involved in the induction of new students into the school as one of the points of contact between the school and students’ families to establish a relationship to serve possible future needs
- Contact or visit homes of students on a systematic basis: to enquire on students’ progress emotionally, scholastically and spiritually; to pray with the family for the success of the children in the school and at home, and to invite the family to special functions organised by the school
In such communities each person knows and experiences that they belong. They are not ‘free-floating islands in a sea of humanity’ or victims of the rampant individualism that presently characterises much of Western culture. Each member finds support and spiritual nourishment in the fellowship of a Christian school community; where its “needy students [are] bringing their struggles, home issues and brokenness into every classroom” and with teachers responding (at a level appropriate to their experience and expertise) not only individually, but also collegially, as each student is ‘lifted up in prayer’ during daily staff worship in an atmosphere that sensitively balances genuine Christian concern with confidentiality. Such acts of ministry, among others, would lead one to conclude that policy is being translated into reality as, “The caring and concern central to a school’s social-emotional climate leads it to embrace the difficulties and pain of its students and [those of the] wider community.”

Such school communities cherish and convey hope. They have hope in the faithfulness and promises of God in Jesus Christ who addresses the most fundamental questions of human existence and thus sweeps away fear and existential despair. In the words of one school principal, it allows students “to view the world through the eyes of faith and provides a solid foundation for their spiritual development.”

In such schools we feel loved, safe and valued. We learn and experience that, according to salvation narrative, we are all precious in God’s sight—irrespective of individual gifts, abilities, social status, cultural background or race. We understand that from our very first breath we were intended by God to live in relationship and to each one is extended the invitation of accepting God’s saving grace. Herein is found authentic humanity. Regarding this, David Atkinson refers us to the story of the Velveteen Rabbit who, with other toys, lived in the nursery.

The Velveteen Rabbit turned to the old wise experienced Skin Horse in the nursery and asked, ‘What is real? Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’ The Skin Horse replied, ‘Real isn’t how you are made. It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.’ ‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit. ‘Sometimes’, said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘Does it happen all at once, or bit by bit?’ ‘It doesn’t happen all at once,’ said the Skin Horse, ‘you become. It takes a long time. …Generally by the time you are Real most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get very shabby… but once you are Real, you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.’

Professional development

- Engage in on-going personal development that involves completing units of formal education in pastoral care, counselling, or similar studies
- Participate in a chaplains’ network supported by a professional or church body
- Attend conferences relevant to perceived professional needs

Appraisal and evaluation

The chaplaincy program should be evaluated in the school’s specified accreditation process, as part of the overall pastoral care program of the school.

A biennial reflective self-assessment should be completed by the chaplain, alternating with a peer assessment, against a set of agreed, specified criteria or, if preferred, the chaplain’s service may be evaluated annually with a modified version of an instrument used by some church bodies for the appraisal of pastors. Assessment and evaluation should be regarded as a constructive process and the conclusions reached should be used to inform further planning.

Budget

As for other areas of the school’s operation, provision should be made in the annual school budget to fund the various elements of the chaplaincy program, including a suitable office where the chaplain is easily accessible, and also funding for the chaplain’s professional development.

A concluding note

A carefully developed chaplaincy policy, potentially, is a valuable strategic instrument. However, what ultimately counts is what actually is put into practice and whether that makes a qualitative difference to the lives of the members of the school community. A significant difference is made when everyone participating in pastoral care and chaplaincy in Christian faith-based schools sees themselves as being engaged in ministry that portrays and demonstrates Christo-centric relationships.
The Velveteen Rabbit became real by being loved. It would “learn through relationship, gradually over time, with pain and struggle no doubt, to say, ‘I am loved, therefore I am’” a truly metamorphic transformation of Descartes’ aphorism.

Christian educators appreciate that such an outcome can only be accomplished by a whole-school approach that is enabled by the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

Endnotes


8 Refer to first-hand accounts by school chaplains in Berlach, R. & Thornber, B. (Eds.). Pastoral care: The first ten years of chaplaincy in Western Australian government secondary schools. Perth: The Churches’ Commission on Education & Edith Cowan University.


17 A Delphi study (application) is a structured non-face-to-face communication process that elicits group opinions or judgements regarding a complex problem. The process counteracts the influence of powerful or dominant individuals.

18 A prototype may be improved or adapted to suit different schools and circumstances.


22 This section of the prototype draws on, or incorporates material from, Adventist Schools Australia (2004), Guidelines for school chaplaincy, pp. 1–2.

23 The “role set” is based mainly on the research by Christian, T. (2004) and also on Adventist Schools Australia (2004), ibid.


26 A cautionary note is in order here. The temptation, particularly in small under-resourced schools, to utilise well-intentioned but unqualified and inexperienced volunteer ‘chaplains’ (such as high school graduates who are filling in a gap year) is fraught with inherent dangers. These young volunteers often readily identify with students and such arrangements may even have positives. However, occasionally there might also be unexpected dire personal and legal consequences from which it may take a school a long time to recover.

27 Hill, B. (2009), ibid.


