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# BEING A CHAPLAIN

SPCK Library of Ministry

Edited by  
MIRANDA THRELFALL-HOLMES  
and  
MARK NEWITT



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(Editors' note: the descriptions 'full-time' and 'part-time' used above relate to the contributors' chaplaincy employment only.)

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# Introduction

MIRANDA THRELFALL-HOLMES  
and MARK NEWITT

## Introduction

Chaplaincies are a major part of the mission and ministry of Christian churches and are increasingly being valued and entered into by members of other faiths. There remains, however, little common reflection and analysis about what chaplaincy is, what a chaplain might be expected to do and whether and why it is important. This book aims to help chaplains and those considering chaplaincy or ministry more generally to reflect upon these questions and the very varied contexts in which chaplains operate.

Following this initial chapter, which briefly surveys the rapidly changing context in which chaplaincy operates and goes on to discuss the concept of ‘marginality’, the book is divided into several parts. The first five collect together 22 stories from those engaged in chaplaincy in a variety of contexts. The focus is on the major areas in which chaplains are employed, and takes a deliberately multi-vocal approach. Each broad category of chaplaincy (armed forces, education, healthcare and prisons) is represented by several contributors working in different contexts. There are also contributions from chaplains in airport, sports and arts chaplaincy. While the majority are Anglican, this collection also includes Methodist, Baptist, URC and Roman Catholic contributors. In addition lay and ordained chaplains are represented and several of the contributors work in or coordinate multi-faith teams. This variety illustrates the breadth and diversity of roles that exist within the umbrella title of ‘chaplaincy’ and also allows common themes to emerge.

Finally, Part 6 consists of four chapters of theological reflections on specific aspects of chaplaincy. For the first, Chapter 23, we invited Andrew Todd to consider multi-faith chaplaincy. He outlines some of the reasons for its development, explores how three areas of public sector chaplaincy have responded and discusses the implications these reactions raise for the future of chaplaincy. In the remaining three chapters of Part 6 the editors, drawing on all that has been before, offer further reflection. Hence Chapter 24 analyses the role(s) that a chaplain fills and the key skills needed by chaplains across the range of institutional contexts in which they minister. Chapter 25 goes on to discuss models of chaplaincy held

both by chaplains and also, crucially, by those institutions employing them. Finally, in Chapter 26 issues around institutional values are identified and the tensions delineated in the chaplains' stories are discussed.

## **The contemporary context**

Over the last decade much has changed both in the Church and in the institutions in which chaplains minister. After September 11, the tensions and challenges between secular and faith perspectives are very much on the agenda of public and private institutions. Multi-faith chaplaincy is suddenly in vogue, but conflicting definitions and understandings of it exist. How such understandings are put into practice also varies widely. Meanwhile chaplains in institutions such as prisons and universities are increasingly being seen by government as on the front line of combating religious extremism.

Within the Church many of the tensions between chaplains and parochial clergy identified by Legood (1999) still exist. Indeed, in places they have been exacerbated by lack of funds and clergy 'restructuring' over the decade. In addition other, more subtle changes have occurred to the church context in which chaplaincy operates. For example, increasing numbers of dual-clergy households mean that chaplaincy can be a career choice that enables two ordained clergy each to receive pay for their work (Hancocks et al., 2008).

Against these changing backgrounds, chaplaincies themselves are a major area of ministry for the churches and other faiths. There are around 500 full-time and a further 3,000 part-time chaplains in the NHS in the UK (roughly half of these from the Church of England). Around 320 chaplains are employed in universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, with perhaps a further 1,000 voluntary associate university chaplains from other faiths and minority denominations. From the Church of England alone there are over 200 ordained chaplains employed by prisons and young-offender institutions. A further 160 are employed by the Army, Navy and Air Force. There are over 170 ordained Church of England chaplains in both private and state schools and many more schools with lay chaplains or a chaplain from another denomination. There are also chaplains at airports, theatres, shopping centres, sports clubs and so on. Through these latter roles many clergy combine part-time or honorary chaplaincy work with church responsibilities.

## **Ministry on the margins and in the midst**

Chaplaincy, often labelled 'sector ministry' as though it only addresses a narrow facet of society, can be seen by the church hierarchy as not

just on but beyond the margins of church life proper. A typical view is that ‘the core business of the diocese . . . is the ministry of the parishes’, as Jackson (2005) declares, while suggesting that a diocese might save money for its ‘core business’ by cutting chaplaincy funding. Yet from another standpoint the picture looks very different. Chaplains are placed not in churches where people may or may not come looking for them but actually where people are. They are, to use Ballard’s (2009) helpful term, ‘embedded’ in prisons, schools, universities, hospitals, shopping centres, airports, workplaces, battlefields and barracks. There at the time they are wanted, on the spot, many chaplains are on call day and night. Chaplains may be marginal to the churches, but they are often in places where the 90 per cent of the UK population who do not regularly attend church will be found. In marketing terms, chaplains and chaplaincies are gold dust. Like an advertising slot in the middle of a world cup final, they give the Church an opportunity to engage with the unchurched or dechurched majority whom it would otherwise find hard to reach.

In the context of the increased focus on mission and outreach, of fresh expressions and ‘mission-shaped’ church, it seems perverse that chaplaincy remains so commonly characterized as marginal. In theological reflection on and discussions about chaplaincy, issues of marginality or liminality almost invariably arise. Furthermore, the terms ‘marginal’ and ‘liminal’ are often used interchangeably, with various distinct yet overlapping meanings that compound the problem. There are three primary ways in which these terms are used in the context of discussing chaplaincy, some more helpful than others. First, as noted above, the experience of being a chaplain can be one of marginalization. While this may be the case for any minister in our increasingly secular society, it can be doubly so for chaplains who find themselves marginal both to the institution to which they are chaplain and to the church from which they are sent.

Second, the value or distinctive nature of a chaplain’s ministry may be perceived as one of liminality – standing between heaven and earth, pointing out the existence of an alternative reality, embodying and being a threshold between the two. Used in this way the term derives from sociology and anthropology, often used of a shaman or similar religious figure. Chaplaincy is not distinct from other ministry in being conceived in terms of liminality. However, the nature of chaplaincy as embedded within a (usually non-religious) organization or institution emphasizes this aspect of the role. The chaplain’s very presence opens a doorway between two realms, or at least points to the existence of such a doorway. Images of liminality most obviously lend themselves to contexts such as hospice chaplaincy, the chaplain being seen as the one who helps people to confront and/or cross the threshold between life and

death. It can, though, be extended to other ‘thresholds’, such as adolescence/adulthood (education chaplaincy), freedom/imprisonment (prison chaplaincy) and so on.

Third, it can be argued that much chaplaincy occurs in marginal places. The major employers of chaplains – hospitals, prisons, universities, schools and the armed forces – are all places that are, to some extent, marginal to everyday life for those not immediately involved in them. However important and even central to our society such institutions may be, they hover on the edges of our consciousness until or unless they are forced upon our notice. Yet for those within these institutions, even if only temporarily, they provide an alternative reality. University students speak of the ‘bubble’ of university life – even as they travel from rented houses to lecture theatres, both set in the real world, they feel a disconnection, speaking of ‘real life’ as what lies outside the university. Being in hospital can create a similar experience – patients often feel that normal family and community life has been disrupted. Likewise members of the armed forces often struggle to adapt to life in Civvy Street. In these marginal places, chaplains are amid the very real life that goes on.

So what kind of ministry goes on in these places? An enormous variety, as the stories contained in this volume demonstrate. There are, though, common themes that emerge and that begin to demonstrate that these ‘marginal’ ministries are in fact very mainstream. Themes that emerge from the stories that follow include the importance of forging personal relationships, both in the institutional structures and with the more transient populations that pass through. The importance of both knowing people and being known, and of listening attentively and respectfully to people’s stories, is repeatedly stressed in the contributions.

Many of the chaplains writing here speak of their ministry as ‘incarnational’, emphasizing the theological as well as the practical importance of presence and relationships. The metaphor of journeying with people is also a recurring theme. Chaplaincy is above all a ministry of presence, of simply being there amid things – a sacramental ministry, not primarily in the ‘churchy’ sense of celebrating the sacraments but in the theological one of taking the everyday stuff of life and making it a sign of God’s presence and love. It is also an expectant ministry, waiting for opportunities to present themselves and expecting those opportunities to come.

Chaplains will not often get to follow the lives and careers of those they interact with at significant moments. We often only see people once or at most for a few years, and rarely get to see the seeds we have (it is hoped) planted, watered or tended come to fruition. Accordingly chaplains have to be extremely good at discernment – at discerning what the particular task at hand is, getting on with it and then accepting the



next task that comes along. We have to be extremely good at setting boundaries in our own minds and at managing the expectations of others. Finally, we have to learn to live with the tension that comes from serving two masters and often being considered only marginally relevant by both.

## **Chaplaincy and church ministry**

It is clear, therefore, that while chaplaincy has certain distinctive features that differentiate it from parochial ministry, most notably the more transient nature of the relationships that are formed and the population that is served, it is by no means essentially different from church and parish ministry. Furthermore, we would suggest that because chaplains serve in the world of work and are amid society outside of the church structures, their insights and experience are of key importance for the churches – chaplaincy may well be the canary in the mine for the churches' relationship to society. Chaplains seem often to be facing the rapidly arising and changing issues in contemporary society more sharply and more quickly than the rest of the Church (Gilliat-Ray, 1999). Those whose stories are collected together here often describe a sense of alienation from the wider Church arising, at least in part, from the fast-moving and changing contexts in which they operate. Chaplains often have to formulate answers to questions the institutional churches have not yet begun to ask. Andrew Todd, in Chapter 23, discusses the ways in which chaplaincies have responded to the challenges of diversity in faith, individual philosophy and belief, and secular viewpoints. Models of ministry that arise from chaplaincy experience may well be precisely those to which other clergy will need to adapt in years to come.

Any discussion of chaplaincy therefore needs to take place within, and to contribute to, the wider context of the theology and practice of ministry more generally. Chaplains, whether lay or ordained, have a particularly visible and defined representative role within their institutions. They may variously articulate this as representing in themselves either the Church, God or the faith/spiritual dimension in that place. They are representative persons, set aside in some way. Being a chaplain carries with it a representative function and an ontological freight. For this reason, much of what is said about chaplaincy in this book should be read in conversation with the extensive literature on ministry and vocation. In turn, the experiences and reflections of chaplains in a wide variety of contexts that this book provides will shed light on some of the key issues in ministry and ministerial practice facing the wider Church.

It is notable that in much that is written on ministry more generally, 'chaplaincy' is often one of the models presented for this wider ministry.

Sometimes this is a positive model, but often its use is more negative. It has become commonplace to say that parish priests should not be mere chaplains to their congregations. In the context of the recent emphasis in all the mainstream churches upon mission and evangelism, where ‘mission-shaped church’ has become such a rallying cry, the point being made is that the focus of a minister’s work should be not on those who already belong to the church but on those who do not. The term ‘chaplain’ in this context is used to describe an overly limited role. Those with an evangelical background in particular may be suspicious that chaplaincy leaves no room for mission. Yet all the chaplains represented here speak of their ministry to the whole community in which they are situated. Being a chaplain is precisely the opposite of the overconcentration on the worshipping community that can sometimes be characterized by the term ‘chaplaincy’. Mission is a broad category and involves engaging with a community in terms and in ways that are fitting to the particular context. This is at the heart of how most chaplains describe their role.

Given the tensions and fears in the contemporary Church surrounding such issues as faith in public life and the role of the state in pressing forward an equality agenda, the delicate balancing act undertaken by most chaplains provides an important case study in how mission is possible in a secular environment. Billings (2010) has argued that the Church of England requires clergy who are prepared to accept the role of ‘chaplain to the nation’ and in so doing are prepared to relinquish being too quick to evangelize, too determined to draw boundaries around the membership of the church or acceptable behaviour, and prepared to welcome everyone in and – to some extent at least – give them what they want. This characterization of chaplaincy rings true with the stories told by many of the chaplains in this volume. There is in many quarters of the Church a siege mentality – a sense that the world is becoming a dangerously secular place and that the response of the churches must be to nail their colours to their masts and fight.

Yet the experiences of chaplaincy related here show, gloriously and optimistically, that this is by no means the only possible response. This new, aggressively secular world, in which values such as tolerance, equality, accountability and transparency are consistently expected to trump historic church tradition or belief, has been precisely the context in which chaplains have been operating cheerfully for decades. The ‘social contract’ implicit in the relationship between the churches and the nation has been explicitly spelt out in contracts, working agreements and policy documents in schools, hospitals, prisons and universities for some time. Chaplains work creatively and productively within these guidelines. The experiences of chaplains can, therefore, be of considerable help in

shaping the Church of the future and showing how faith and ministry can flourish in an explicitly secular and even, on occasion, hostile environment.

(In Parts 1–5 the names of people referred to have been changed to preserve anonymity.)

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**Ruth Hake** (full-time, Anglican priest) was ordained in 2002. She served her title post at St Michael le Belfrey in York, during which time she was also a Territorial Army chaplain. She joined the RAF as a chaplain in 2005. She is currently force chaplain, British Forces South Atlantic Islands, based in the Falkland Islands.

**Chris Hughes** (part-time, Roman Catholic priest) is a sessional chaplain to HMPs Acklington and Cavington. A priest in the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, previously he was pastoral director at Ushaw College. He has been chaplain to a mental-health trust, a hospice, a comprehensive school, Newcastle College, Northumbria and Newcastle Universities, L'Arche, the Student Cross Pilgrimage and even a football tournament – Euro 96.

**Clare McBeath** (full-time job share, Baptist minister) worked for two years as multi-faith chaplain in a large further-education institution in a northern city. She is currently minister of Openshaw Baptist Tabernacle in East Manchester. She has a doctorate in contextual theologies and is a non-executive director of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care NHS Trust. She has been engaged in local regeneration as chair of the Health and Well-Being Programme, as a local school governor and as vice-chair of Brook Manchester. Clare is co-author of *Crumbs of Hope: Prayers from the City* (Peterborough: Inspire, 2006) and of the Dancing Scarecrow worship-resource website – <[www.dancingscarecrow.org.uk](http://www.dancingscarecrow.org.uk)>.

**Ian Maher** (full-time, Anglican Church Army evangelist). Since January 2006 he has been the multi-faith chaplaincy coordinator at Sheffield Hallam University. In previous posts he has been head of academic programmes at Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism, Sheffield, where he also taught ethics and world religions; national coordinator of the ecumenical Certificate in Evangelism Studies; and a parish evangelist in south-east London. He has also written extensively about film.

**Stephen Robbins** (full-time, Anglican priest) trained at King's College London and St Augustine's College, Canterbury, and then worked in parishes in Durham diocese for 11 years before becoming a forces chaplain in 1987. His career since then has been within the forces, including a time as chaplain of the Royal Memorial Chapel, Sandhurst. He is currently Chaplain General Land Forces and Archdeacon for the Army.

**Hugh Shilson-Thomas** (full-time, Anglican priest) is dean of chapel and chaplain at Selwyn College and chaplain and director of Studies in Theology at Newnham College, Cambridge University. After chaplaincies at Kingston University and Robinson College, Cambridge, and a masters