

## Chaplains and the Parochial Ministry

### Historical Context

Those who call themselves Christians and profess their faith by being a member of one of the various Churches on Britain today are an increasingly small group of people. For many people today the church in the forms of its local parish churches and its resident, ordained representatives has little or no bearing on their lives. We live in a society which has been characterised as one of “believing with out belonging.” According to this thesis, people of the twentieth and twenty-first century Britain do not believe in nothing in spiritual terms but rather they do believe in a syncretistic “pick and mix” faith. This faith (or rather collection of different faiths) does not require them, or move them, to meet together with like-minded others to share and reflect upon their beliefs. Those holding such amorphous, diverse beliefs feel they have no need therefore for buildings in which to meet and worship or for a certain group of people to be marked out and commissioned to minister to their individual or corporate needs. Church buildings and members of the clergy are seen as something of an historical anomaly by many. They may be regarded as perhaps having been useful in former generations but as now having no connection with the lives of the vast majority of those living in Britain.

Many other people, who perhaps do not hold such eclectic beliefs, do however consider themselves Christians. Although such people, like our previous groups, may not belong to a formal, religious organisation, they would nevertheless be horrified to be regarded as having “no religion” (as the recent Government Census would categorise them). Such a group might visit a church for the occasional offices of baptism, marriage and death (the so called “hatched, matched and despatched”) and perhaps at Christmas, if they felt so moved, year by year. Let us imagine such a family of people in contemporary Britain living, working and playing out their lives in a whole host of different places. The modern-day Smith family lives in a new, sprawling and expanding suburb on the edge of a big city. Margaret Smith, wife and mother, works as a doctor at the large teaching hospital eight miles from home. Tony Smith, husband and father, works as a marketing and public relations manager at the fast growing regional airport twenty miles away. Andrew Smith (16) is studying for his A levels at a local private sector school, whilst his sister Nicola (19) is a first year student at university a hundred miles away. As a family the Smith occasionally worship (when work rotas and studying commitments allow) at their local parish church a ten-minute drive from home. Their Vicar there realises that the nature of most of her parishioners lives means that she exercises as ministry to people at what she calls “their dormitory”, that is to say at their point of residency. She believes that it is physically impossible (if not ecclesiologicaly confusing) to follow her parishioners into all their facets of living and that thus her work should be, as far as possible, to make links with other clergy working in other forms of ministry. It is the ministry of these clergy, chaplains working in various institutions or sectors of society, which is sketched out in this article.

## **Chaplains' Influences**

It is sometimes thought that chaplains are parasitic on the life and work of the Church. This is hardly surprising as for centuries the parish has been the normative model of ministry in Britain, especially in England where the Church, established by law, endures. Until the Industrial Revolution most people lived and worked in one place (that is to say one parish) for most of their lives. England did not move from peasant society to industrial nation in one rapid movement and even before the Industrial Revolution many craftsmen, agricultural labours and their families as well as those in trade and commerce did enjoy some degree of mobility. However, it was true that most people, for most of their lives were based in one place. Urbanisation and new technology altered this relatively static domestication forever: many now travelled in a way previously unknown and resided in a number of places during their lives. New generations were born in towns and cities and the link between a particular parish church and its priest was weakened. Subsequently, the nineteenth century saw the Church lose influence in a whole host of areas in people's lives. Responsibility for charity for the poor moved from the parish vestry to local government. Trades unions and employers' associations replaced Christian guilds of craftsmen. The influence the Church once held over people's lives was rapidly diminishing. For many it diminished to the point of non-existence.<sup>ii</sup>

The experience of the First World War profoundly affected the religious mood of the country. Although many at home felt that God had either abandoned the troops or did not care, many soldiers' experience of the ministry of padres, who had been heavily recruited, was good. After the war there was considerable effort to build-up the chaplaincies to the three services. After the Second World War the need for permanent provision was recognised. Many had become used to having chaplains involved in every aspect of military life and felt a similar experience might be replicated elsewhere.<sup>iii</sup> Clergy began visiting factories and the pioneering Industrial Mission work of Bishop Ted Wickham soon became known.<sup>iv</sup>

## **Non-parochial Clergy**

In addition to such ministries, there has always been a tradition of clergy serving in non-parochial settings. Since the parochial system in England was first sketched-out by Theodore (died c.690), full-time, stipendary clergy have served outside the parochial system. Priests have ministered as cathedral staff, archdeacons, Bishops' chaplains, chantry priests and domestic chaplains to families, amongst others. They have also served for centuries as chaplains in three particular settings: hospitals; the army and navy; prisons. Clergy were intimately involved with setting-up institutions which ministered to the sick and dying. Priests accompanied armies into battle as early as the Battle of Crecy (1346) and ships of the English fleet as early as Cadiz (1597). Chaplains were appointed to the newly built prisons of the late eighteenth century, where even today they exercise statutory functions.<sup>v</sup> In addition, priests have served in Oxford and Cambridge Colleges as dons (Holy Orders being a requirement of appointment until the mid-Victorian period).

## Types of Chaplaincies

Since the Second World War there has been a large expansion of chaplaincy provision. In addition to the "traditional" three chaplaincy groupings listed above, today chaplains are found to be working in a wide variety of institutions and sectors. Chaplains serve in schools, armed forces, hospitals and hospices, prisons, universities, arts and recreation, legal services, police forces, airports, agriculture, transport industry, retail trade and commercial seafaring.<sup>vi</sup> The largest provision is in the sectors of healthcare, universities, prisons and armed forces.

Healthcare chaplains have had an important role to play since the creation of the NHS in 1948 which made specific provision for "spiritual care. The more recent *Patients' Charter* has required NHS Trusts to make provision for the religious beliefs of "patients and staff." The last decade has consequently seen an increase in chaplaincy numbers though now numbers have reached a plateau.

University chaplaincy has also expanded dramatically in the last 50 years. In 1952 there were eight chaplains in universities outside Oxbridge, by 1985 chaplaincies (either full or part time) were established in every higher education institution. This expansion matched expansion in higher education: in 1954 there were 82,00 students in HE, by 2000 there were 1,900,000 (and the government plans for this figure to grow further).

*Crockford*, the directory of Anglican clergy in the UK and Ireland, lists approximately 90 prison chaplains, the majority of whom (though not all) are full-time. Additionally, of course, chaplains of other Christian denominations are employed as chaplains, so we cannot take this figure as amounting to an accurate head count of clergy working in the prison system. Prison chaplaincy provision in England and Wales, paid for by the Home Office, has remained relatively constant. Chaplains still have statutory duties to see every prisoner on the latter's entry and exit to gaol.

The provision of armed forces chaplains is approximately: Royal Navy 50; Army 100; Royal Air Force 50. In the last 30 years chaplaincy provision here has shrunk dramatically, perhaps as much as 50%. This is due, of course, to the dramatic reduction in armed service personnel and defence spending. Various Ministry of Defence reviews have had implications for chaplaincy, and chaplaincy numbers are now described as being in a "steady state." and Recently, however, the Ministry of Defence has planned for a limited expansion in chaplaincy numbers.

From this quick, thumbnail sketch of chaplaincy provision we can see that there is a long and varied history of the Church sending it ordained representatives to work outside the usual parochial structure. In recent years, whilst financially the Church has had to re-adjust in its task of serving nation-wide, almost all of its deliberations have focused solely on parish ministry. The various Churches in this country have devoted little time to serious consideration of the issues raised by chaplaincy or to the strategic

deployment of chaplains. Little has been published in the field of chaplaincy field, and what has mostly consists of papers and articles (almost all of which is from the USA). Often, where chaplaincy is, briefly, considered, theological reflection is notably lacking. In 1983, for instance, a Working Party of the National Society produced the report *Sector Ministries*, which was concerned only with terms and conditions of chaplains.<sup>vii</sup> One sector specific book, of some note, has been recently published.<sup>viii</sup> Clergy working in chaplaincy however have much to contribute to the question of what roles the Church should adopt in the new century. Chaplains are paid to spend their working time with those who do not go to church (those Church claims it most wants to reach).

### **Points for Reflection**

It is hoped that just as it might be seen as talking about issues in parochial ministry as if this were a single, homogenous whole, talking of “chaplaincy” generically is even more complicated given the wide-range of provision. Nevertheless, as a stimulus for discussion by the Churches, the following points might be made:

- Very often chaplains work in an ecumenical way which their colleagues in a parochial setting are not able to do. A range of paid chaplaincy provision may be made by institutions and this opens-up exciting possibilities for ecumenical dialogue and practice.
- Similarly, many chaplains work in inter-faith situations. Where chaplaincy provision is small Christian chaplains may carry the role of “religious professional”. Where provision is greater Christian chaplains will work alongside chaplains of other faiths.
- Because parishes are now larger than they once were (for instance George Herbert’s benefice of Fugglestone and Bemerton had a population of 400 in the 1630s, today it is 8,000), parish priests inevitably have more people to minister to.<sup>ix</sup> Chaplains often minister in smaller situations and are given greater opportunity for intimacy with those around them (though this is not necessarily the case, the chaplain at Heathrow Airport minister to 40,000 staff alone, quite aside from the millions of passengers).
- Sadly the financial realities of today’s Church has meant a diminution in the number of clergy. With fewer assistant clergy and larger parishes, despite best intentions, some parish churches may become more congregational in feel. Chaplains are able to maintain a model of ministry of caring for all, regardless of denominational alliance or specific religious belief.
- Chaplaincies allow the Church to more easily engage with the challenges of the society it seeks to serve as they ensure that the Church is fully enmeshed in them. For instance, armed service chaplains are increasingly occupied with complex moral questions faced by the armed forces, as are chaplains in regard to research in healthcare and university sectors.
- Through working with people in the context in which they spend the greater amount of their lives, the world of work, chaplains are able to represent the Church to the world and the world to the Church in a unique way.
- Chaplaincy provision is increasingly being paid for by the institutions in which chaplains work. This is a testimony not only to the chaplains

themselves but also to the notion that there is an increasing recognition of pastoral and welfare issues in the workplace and religious provision as part of this.

- The existence of chaplains most often means that institutions have easy access to a person with religious knowledge and expertise. Chaplains in such places have long been familiar with concepts of annual appraisal and review. This means that not only are they paid by the institution but they are accountable to it also, as well as being accountable to the Church.

Whilst not claiming in any sense to be a definite lists of points emerging from a particular chaplaincy experience or from chaplaincy in general (a claim for the latter would be supremely arrogant), the items mentioned above, together with the earlier historical background, are offered as starting points for discussion on chaplaincy. Chaplains working in other areas will have different stories and perceptions to share. The main Christian denominations in this country are increasingly speaking of ideas such as “all member ministry” and “the priesthood of all believers.” A cynical view might be that the Churches have only, reluctantly, started to highlight such concepts in the Christian tradition as the economic realities brought about by of falling Church membership have forced the Churches to think of more imaginative ways of maintaining their mission and ministry (and by happy co-incidence these new ways are cheaper too!). Whatever the motivation these patterns of ministry are to be welcomed. Chaplaincy work may be well suited to assisting the Church in these efforts. Indeed, it should not just be chaplains who are enthusiastic about chaplaincy work, but with greater understanding of what chaplaincy involves, parochial clergy too, like the Smiths parish priest, can be caught up in recognising what the Church can offer chaplaincy and what chaplaincy can offer the Church.

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<sup>i</sup> This phrase is used in Davie, Grace, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, (Oxford: Blackwell), 1994.

<sup>ii</sup> For an example of the profound impact that religion had in the English countryside see, Duffy, Eamon, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Little has been published on the history and theology of military chaplaincy in the Britain. Smyth, John, *In This Sign Conquer: The Story of the Army Chaplains*, (London: Mowbray), 1968, does however give some bibliographical references.

<sup>iv</sup> The history of this initiative is detailed in Wickham, E. R., *Church and People in an Industrial City*, (London: Lutterworth Press), 1957.

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<sup>v</sup> For a description of this expression of ordained ministry see Atherton, Richard, *Summons to Serve: Ministry to Prisoners*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman), 1987.

<sup>vi</sup> Many of these modern expressions of ministry are described in Legood, Giles, (ed.), *Chaplaincy: The Church's Sector Ministries*, (London: Cassell), 1999.

<sup>vii</sup> *Sector Ministries*, (London: The National Society), 1983.

<sup>viii</sup> Orchard, Helen, *Hospital Chaplaincy: Modern Dependable?*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 2000, is the result of a 12 month study into healthcare chaplaincy provision in London in five different settings.

<sup>ix</sup> These figures are given in Russell, Anthony, *The Country Parson*, (London: SPCK), 1993, p.163.