

## Relationships, Presence and Hope: University Chaplaincy during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Simon Perfect



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Report

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Simon Perfect





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# Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the university chaplains who kindly shared their pandemic experiences with me, and to the St Luke's College Foundation, which funded this research. I am extremely grateful to my Theos colleagues, especially Madeleine Pennington, Lizzie Harvey and Nick Spencer, for reviewing drafts and providing feedback; and to Dave and Jill Perfect, for their tremendous help in editing and their constant encouragement.

The report is dedicated to all chaplains, faith advisors and pastoral carers, who have done such important work during this time.

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# Executive Summary

Chaplains and faith advisors have been on the frontline of the pandemic – supporting the isolated, comforting the bereaved, and providing pastoral and spiritual care to anyone who needs it.<sup>1</sup> And in universities, they have been frontline responders to a massive mental health crisis among students. In November 2020, a survey of 4,193 students conducted for the National Union of Students found that 52% said their mental health was worse than it was before the pandemic, but only 29% of those people had sought any help.<sup>2</sup>

This report captures the experiences of higher education chaplaincy during the pandemic, drawing on interviews with 16 chaplains from universities across the UK. It explores the unique contributions of chaplains during this time, the challenges they have faced, and the lessons that can be learned by chaplains and employers.

### University chaplains: who they are and what they do

Chapter 1 surveys the landscape of university chaplaincy, drawing on Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law's *Chaplains on Campus* (2019) project, the largest ever study of chaplaincy in higher education. It notes, for example, that:

- There are approximately 1,000 chaplains across UK universities, nearly two-thirds of whom are Christian.<sup>3</sup>
- About two-thirds of university chaplains are volunteers. Of those who are paid, the vast majority are Christian (particularly Anglican). Religious organisations are more likely to fund university chaplains than universities themselves.<sup>4</sup>
- Chaplains provide one-to-one pastoral and spiritual support to students and staff, regardless of religion or

belief. When asked which three groups they work with most closely, over a third of university chaplains say non-religious students.<sup>5</sup>

- Since they are usually part-time or voluntary, religious minority chaplains are more likely than Christian chaplains to focus primarily on serving the needs of their particular community.<sup>6</sup>
- Chaplains also run religious services and community-building activities, and help organise important university civic ceremonies such as graduation and carol services.
- There is an inequality in access to chaplains between types of university, with older, higher-ranking universities having stronger provision than others.

The chapter also surveys a range of models for conceptualising what chaplains do, both Christian theological and secular. The ‘incarnational’ model is particularly common in Christian writing about chaplaincy, where Christian chaplains are seen as manifesting something of God’s love to others through their very presence, mirroring the Incarnation.

Underpinning these chaplaincy models are the themes of relationships and presence. We distinguish between a chaplain’s physical presence and their accompanying presence – the latter meaning their role in being alongside people in their journey, and ‘being around’ and emotionally available even when not literally present.

### Chaplains’ contributions during the pandemic

During lockdowns in 2020-21, university chaplains have had to transfer their activities online. Chapter 2 outlines the

most important contributions they have made to campus life during this period:

- **Supporting people pastorally.** Many chaplains have seen significant increases in requests for pastoral support from students and staff feeling isolated, struggling to cope with work or dealing with the loss of loved ones. They have often been the main port of call supporting people through bereavement.
- **Supporting people spiritually.** National polling suggests that the pandemic has not inspired a religious awakening among the general population. It has, however, led to more people re-evaluating what they consider important in life.<sup>7</sup> Some university chaplains have seen an increased interest among those who seek them out in talking about big issues of meaning and mortality, and sometimes about faith and God. In their conversations with students, chaplains have also been challenging disinformation about COVID-19, and also religious beliefs about the pandemic they think are unhelpful, such as that it is a punishment from God.
- **Maintaining community.** Chaplains have transferred their existing religious or social activities online, and have also sought to generate new forms of community, for example setting up online discussion groups or meditation sessions. They have also played a key role in sustaining corporate belonging among students and staff. Some have become much more active on student social media groups, regularly posting reflective or humorous content which helps foster a sense of togetherness.
- **Encouraging hope.** Around a third of our interviewees identified encouraging hope as something they have been

actively trying to do, as part of their unique contribution to the university.

A number of positive opportunities have arisen for university chaplains in the shift to the virtual environment. In some universities, the situation has:

- Made chaplaincy more accessible.
- Given chaplains an impetus to innovate, bolstering their public image.
- Strengthened relationships within chaplaincy teams.
- Improved the recognition of chaplaincy and increased its inclusion in university policymaking.

As we shall see, however, in other universities the situation has been different.

### The challenges facing chaplains

While the online environment removes some barriers to accessing chaplaincy, it has also created others. Chapter 3 discusses the major challenges facing university chaplains in the pandemic:

- **Overwork, exhaustion and the emotional toll.** In some universities, volunteer chaplains have been unable to maintain the same level of support as previously, meaning lead chaplains have sometimes had to shoulder the burden of chaplaincy by themselves.
- **Loss of sacred space and embodied aspects of chaplaincy work.** With the closure of chaplaincy spaces, students and staff have lost ‘set aside’ places which can help them step outside their work preoccupations to focus on deeper issues. Being unable to sit physically

with someone has also been an obstacle for chaplains, since part of their work is inarticulate and about communicating feelings of empathy through body language.

- **Loss of informal opportunities for pastoral support.** University members have lost ‘water-cooler moments’ – informal opportunities to chat with others outside of meetings. In normal times these are key moments in which chaplains can identify people who are struggling but who would not actively reach out for support. The loss of such moments risks vulnerable people falling through the cracks.
- **Loss of opportunities to meet new students.** The loss of physical welcome events has made it harder for chaplains to meet new people and to overcome misconceptions about their work – in particular the assumption that they support religious people only.
- **Lower take-up of chaplaincy services and low morale.** While some university chaplains have been overworked during COVID-19, others have seen a *fall* in demand for their services, meaning they feel unwanted and unhelpful. How well-known the chaplain was before the pandemic may be an important factor here.
- **Insufficient understanding of, and appreciation for, chaplaincy among university managers.** How well chaplains’ roles are understood and appreciated by managers and other staff varies considerably across higher education. While some chaplains have felt more included in relevant decision-making during the pandemic, others have felt side-lined and their potential to help has not been fully utilised.

- **Difficulties supporting faith and belief societies and concerns about spiritual exploitation.** Many faith and belief societies have struggled to keep going during the pandemic. Others have held events online, but some chaplains are concerned about an increased risk of societies bypassing the normal vetting procedures for external speakers. Some chaplains report that exploitative external groups have taken advantage of the situation to access students.

### Learning from COVID-19: lessons for chaplains and employers

Chapter 4 outlines key points university chaplains can learn from this experience:

- **Being agents of hope and space-holders for the expression of pain.** Chaplains are unique on campus in being the only people who have the encouragement of hope as a core part of their role. At the same time, they should aim to be people who create spaces for others to vocalise their grief and pain – spaces which are much-needed currently.
- **Being safeguards of the water-cooler.** As homeworking becomes an ever-more embedded part of work culture, employers need to be aware of the danger of losing informal opportunities outside meetings for staff socialisation ('water-cooler moments'). Chaplains can play an important role in creating new such opportunities.
- **Developing accompanying presence offline and online.** Despite the loss of physical presence on campus, chaplains have maintained an accompanying presence with students and staff. The chapter offers suggestions

for how they can develop this further (summarised in the Recommendations).

The chapter suggests a range of ways in which university managers can better support their chaplains, which are summarised in the Recommendations. It also calls on large employers more widely to take their employees' spiritual needs seriously as part of their duty of care. Providing access to chaplains can be an important way to support employees through the long-term trauma of COVID-19, and may also be beneficial for organisational culture as homeworking becomes more common.

## Recommendations

### University chaplains should:

- Build on their learning throughout the pandemic to ensure their future provision is as creative and accessible as possible. This should be part of an active conversation with students and staff – what do they want from chaplaincy?
- Look for ways to boost their visibility. On campus (when restrictions are eased) this means being visible in public spaces as often as they can. Online, it means developing a persistent presence on student social media. After the pandemic, they should continue to offer the opportunity for online meetings (for pastoral support and community activities) as well as in-person activities, to maximise their accessibility.
- Embrace being agents of hope and space-holders for the expression of pain as essential and unique parts of their role, and articulate the importance of this to their managers.



- Look to generate new informal opportunities for socialising ('water-cooler moments'), particularly for staff. This may mean proactively inviting staff to join online or offline groups. It is particularly important to reach out to part-time teaching staff, and non-academic staff.
- Be proactive in emailing individual students and staff in their networks to check in with them regularly.
- Check in regularly with faith and belief societies to offer support. Bear in mind that many will be struggling to maintain their activities during the pandemic.

#### University managers should:

- Get to know their chaplains, meeting with them regularly to learn about any challenges they face and to affirm that their work is valued.
- Involve chaplains in relevant university committees where appropriate. Chaplains may have more to contribute to university strategy than is realised.
- Ensure that chaplaincy services are advertised regularly in communications to students and staff, clarifying that anyone can make use of them, regardless of religion or belief.
- Encourage their chaplains to adopt a system for measuring their impact. Managers should also recognise that the impact of chaplaincy lies in the small things.
- Expand the range of chaplains to reflect the major religion or belief groups on campus, and increase the funding for individual chaplaincy posts, depending on the need. They could consider inviting religion or belief

groups (national or local) to contribute part of the funds for the posts.


**Religious organisations should:**

- Consider the provision of chaplaincy (in universities and in other sectors) as part of their service to the community.
- National level churches (including cross-church partnerships) should seek to ensure that there is at least one funded chaplaincy post (ideally full-time) in each university. National religious minority organisations should explore routes to accrediting, supporting and training chaplains from their community.
- On a local level, the main religious minority communities should each consider working to fund a part-time chaplaincy post representing their faith in their local university. They should explore whether universities are willing to share part of the funding costs for a chaplain, to make the role more financially sustainable.

**Large employers should:**

- Consider employing or appointing chaplains as a means of improving their support for employees' mental and spiritual wellbeing in the long-term, especially as homeworking becomes more common.

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- 1 Most people offering the kind of pastoral and spiritual care we are discussing refer to themselves as ‘chaplains’, so the report primarily uses this term. As discussed in the Introduction, however, some people feel it is inappropriate to describe their work using terms originally associated with Christianity and prefer other terms, such as ‘faith advisor’ or ‘non-religious pastoral carer’ (if they are not religious).
  - 2 National Union of Students, *Coronavirus Student Survey phase III: November 2020. Mental health and wellbeing*, pp. 11, 13.  
<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-and-students-phase-3-study-mental-health-with-demographics-nov-2020>
  - 3 Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (Coventry: Coventry University, Durham: Durham University and Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), p. 12.  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Chaplains%20on%20Campus%20Full%20Report.pdf>
  - 4 *Ibid*, pp. 19, 24, 27.
  - 5 *Ibid*, p. 63.
  - 6 *Ibid*, p. 64.
  - 7 Paul Bickley, ‘Religious trends in a time of international crisis’, *Theos*, 11 August 2020.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2020/08/06/religious-trends-in-a-time-of-international-crisis>



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# Introduction

Among those on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis, there are people with a specific role to provide pastoral and spiritual care to anyone who needs it. Throughout the pandemic they have been doing vital work, supporting the isolated, offering a listening ear to the anxious, and (where they can) comforting the ill, dying and bereaved. They are the chaplains. Their work has attracted national media attention: during the first lockdown, for example, *The Guardian* noted hospital chaplains' support for medical staff as they "come to terms with the difficult choices they have had to make".<sup>1</sup> More recently, the BBC profiled Christian chaplains working in a range of sectors during the pandemic, through a series of individual photo portraits.<sup>2</sup> Chaplains' stories, which so often go unheard and under-appreciated, are starting to attract the attention they deserve.

This report, written during the second and third national UK lockdowns, tells the story of chaplaincy during the pandemic in one particular sector: higher education. University chaplains have been faced with a massive mental health crisis among staff and students (most of them young and living away from family support). In November 2020, a survey of 4,193 students conducted for the National Union of Students (NUS) found that 52% said their mental health was worse than it was before the pandemic, but only 29% of those people had sought any help.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, a BBC investigation found that there were at least 10 suspected student suicides during the first national lockdown in March 2020, and an additional 17 up to December that year.<sup>4</sup> The NUS concludes from its survey that the main thing students want is "someone to talk to".<sup>5</sup>

Chaplains have tried to be that someone. This report draws on interviews with 16 university chaplains, of various

religions and beliefs, to capture the unique contributions of higher education chaplaincy and the major challenges it has faced during this unprecedented crisis. In doing so, it adds qualitative insight to the burgeoning research into what chaplains are doing and why they are valuable.<sup>6</sup>

It also speaks to a wider discussion about the changing place of religion or belief in educational, work and leisure spaces. Chaplains are primarily (though not exclusively) religious people wanting to serve people *where they are* (rather than inside a religious building), and to serve *everyone* regardless of their religion or belief. Their emergence in all sorts of places, from airports to shopping centres, is one of the most visible signs that what ‘secularity’ means is complicated and under increasing negotiation.<sup>7</sup> Large employers in many sectors (some more than others) are gradually recognising that they have an interest in providing their employees with spiritual and religious support, as well as pastoral care in a purely secular form. In the wake of COVID-19, which has prompted many people to re-evaluate their lives, it is hoped that more organisations will do the same.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the landscape of university chaplaincy, drawing especially on the seminal *Chaplains on Campus* study co-authored by Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, before setting out different models for conceptualising chaplaincy work. Chapter 2 outlines the most significant contributions of university chaplains during the pandemic, and the unexpected positive opportunities that have emerged for them. Chapter 3 discusses the major challenges they have faced, particularly because they have had to shift most of their activities online and have lost a regular physical presence on campus. Finally, Chapter 4 sets out lessons that chaplains can learn from this experience, and outlines how

employers (within and outside higher education) can better support chaplains.

### Methodology and terminology

This research involved interviews with 16 chaplains from 15 different universities. To reflect the diversity of the sector, we spoke to chaplains from each category of university identified by Mathew Guest et al in their study of Christianity in higher education (see the table below).<sup>9</sup> Older types of university have close historic ties to churches, and their Christian chaplains and chapels retain an important symbolic place in them. Other universities have more secular foundations, and their chaplaincies, though often highly valued today, have had a more ambiguous historic relationship with their institution (see Chapter 3).

University type	University characteristics	Interviewee numbers and characteristics
Traditional, elite universities ('Traditional Elite')	Foundation in 19th century or earlier Typically a significantly smaller proportion of state school educated students than other categories	4: Anglican; Baptist; Church of Scotland; Interdenominational Christian
Inner-city redbrick universities ('Red Brick')	Foundation in early 20th century Located in large cities	3: Anglican; Catholic; Presbyterian
1960s campus universities ('1960s Campus')	Foundation in 1960s Purpose-built campuses	3: Anglican; Jewish; Pentecostal

<p>Post-1992 universities, former polytechnics ('Post-1992')</p>	<p>Granted university status since 1992, though actual foundation can be much earlier</p> <p>Location variable, and can include both purpose-built out-of-town campuses and city centre locations</p> <p>Students overwhelmingly state school educated</p>	<p>5: Anglican; Muslim; Muslim; Interfaith (personally Buddhist); Interfaith (personally Muslim)</p>
<p>Cathedrals Group universities ('Cathedrals Group')</p>	<p>Universities and university colleges with church foundation</p> <p>Granted university status after 1992, founded in late 19th century</p> <p>Students overwhelmingly state school educated</p>	<p>1: Catholic</p>

Our interviewees came from four Traditional Elite universities; three Red Bricks; three 1960s Campuses; four Post-1992 universities (with two interviewees from the same institution); and one Cathedrals Group university. Two universities were in Scotland, one in Wales, one in Northern Ireland, and eleven in England.

Eleven interviewees were Christian, of varying denominations, and five were of other religions or beliefs. This reflects the fact that most chaplains, in higher education and elsewhere, are Christian. Eleven were 'lead' or 'coordinating' chaplains (mostly, but not all, Christian), meaning they had prime responsibility for chaplaincy provision and led a team of colleagues. Most lead chaplains worked full-time.

All our interviewees were in paid positions. It proved very difficult to secure interviews with unpaid volunteer chaplains, who make up the bulk of university chaplaincy (see Chapter 1). This may be partly because part-time volunteers need to use their limited volunteer hours to serve students and staff, rather than to address external requests. But it may also suggest that, during COVID-19, some volunteer chaplains have been unable



to provide the same level of support as previously. This was indicated in some of our interviews (see Chapter 3).

Finally, a note on terminology. Most people offering the kind of pastoral and spiritual care we are discussing here refer to themselves as ‘chaplains’. Though the term is originally associated with Christianity, it has been adopted by many people of other faiths performing a similar role.<sup>10</sup> However, some feel it is inappropriate to describe their work using Christian terms and concepts, or that it may be off-putting to potential service users. Thus, some describe themselves in other ways, such as ‘faith advisors’. In one of our universities, the preferred term was ‘interfaith advisor’. Meanwhile, the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network, founded by Humanists UK, uses the term ‘non-religious pastoral carer’.<sup>11</sup>

While recognising these nuances, this report primarily uses the term ‘chaplain’ (unless referring to an interviewee who used another term), reflecting the term’s dominance in higher education. We also pay particular (though not exclusive) attention to Christian conceptions of chaplaincy, again reflecting the wider context.

- 1 Harriet Sherwood, 'Chaplains support NHS coronavirus medics giving end-of-life care', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2020.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/chaplains-support-nhs-coronavirus-medics-giving-end-of-life-care>
- 2 Louise Haywood-Schiefer, 'Keeping the faith: Christian chaplains in the time of Covid', *BBC News*, 7 February 2021.  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-55903529>
- 3 National Union of Students, *Coronavirus Student Survey phase III: November 2020. Mental health and wellbeing*, pp. 11, 13.  
<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-and-students-phase-3-study-mental-health-with-demographics-nov-2020>
- 4 BBC, "'There is a mental health crisis with or without corona'", *BBC News*, 16 December 2020.  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-55326874>
- 5 NUS, *Coronavirus Student Survey*, p. 5.
- 6 In particular, it responds to the call for "narrative descriptions of the difference chaplains are making" made by Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (Coventry: Coventry University, Durham: Durham University and Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), p. 118.  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Chaplains%20on%20Campus%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- 7 Ben Ryan, *A Very Modern Ministry* (London: Theos, 2015), pp. 14-16.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Modern%20Ministry%20combined.pdf>
- 8 Chapter 2 discusses COVID-19's impact on the population's religiosity or spirituality.
- 9 Mathew Guest, Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Rob Warner, *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 109-110.
- 10 Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, pp. 18-19.
- 11 See <https://nrpsn.org.uk/>



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# 1 University chaplains: who they are and what they do

Chaplains are everywhere.<sup>1</sup> There are hundreds embedded in particular organisations; others work across organisations on a sector-wide level, such as theatre chaplains; and many operate outside the workplace altogether, such as chaplains among deaf and deafblind people.<sup>2</sup> In the Christian context, at least, with attendance at church services continuing to decline, chaplaincy has shifted from an ancillary service of the Church to one of the primary spaces where people may encounter religion.<sup>3</sup> So, what is the picture in higher education?

This chapter first summarises the key findings from Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law's *Chaplains on Campus* (2019) project: the largest ever study of university chaplaincy, involving a national mapping exercise and interviews with about a third of all UK university chaplains. It then explores the diverse ways in which chaplains conceptualise their work, before drawing out the underlying themes of *relationships, presence and hope*.

### How many university chaplains are there and what is their religion or belief?

**There are approximately 1,000 chaplains or faith advisors across UK universities.**<sup>4</sup> Nearly two-thirds (64%) are

Christian. Muslims make up 9%, Jews 8%, and Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs 3-4% each. A few people represent other traditions, including around 15 Humanists and 15 Pagans.<sup>5</sup>

On average, there are 10.4 chaplains or faith advisors in each institution, but they are not spread evenly across the different types of



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**There are approximately 1,000 chaplains or faith advisors across UK universities.**

university. The older the university type, the more chaplains there are, with Traditional Elite universities having an average of 13 chaplains, compared to 5.5 for Post-1992 institutions. Traditional Elite universities also have the best chaplain to student ratios (1 chaplain to 1,108 students), while chaplains are spread more thinly in Post-1992 universities (1 to 3,043).<sup>6</sup> **Thus, there is an inequality in access to chaplains, and the spiritual and pastoral care they offer,** with older, higher-ranking universities having stronger provision than others.

Furthermore, there is often a tension between the way particular chaplaincies are described publicly – as multifaith – and the reality, where they tend to be led by Christians and shaped by a Christian heritage. Christian students are more likely to have access to a chaplain of their own faith than people of other traditions. Additionally, not all student religion or belief groups make use of chaplaincy space like prayer rooms, so in practice these spaces tend to be dominated by one or two faiths. Sometimes these realities sit uneasily with Christian chaplains aspiring to offer a more thoroughgoing multifaith approach; other chaplains consciously understand themselves as offering a distinctively Christian service, which nonetheless seeks to welcome and make space for all faiths and none.<sup>7</sup>

### What do university chaplains do?

When asked what they do in a typical week by Aune et al, chaplains' most common answer was “providing pastoral support for students”.<sup>8</sup> This means being a listening ear and an emotional support, sometimes in single one-to-one sessions, sometimes over a longer period. Chaplains support people during the normal stresses of university life, and also during crisis moments, including bereavements. Generally they

are not trained counsellors, and their role is distinct from a university's formal counselling services; they may be more immediately available in times of need than counsellors with waiting lists. Chaplains also provide important pastoral support for academic and professional staff.

**Chaplains see their service as available to everyone, regardless of a person's religious or non-religious beliefs, or their position within their organisation (e.g. student, staff, manager).** Many of those they support do not identify as spiritual or religious; when asked which three groups they worked with most closely, over a third of a sample of 367

university chaplains said non-religious students.<sup>9</sup> Thus, many of their conversations retain a secular focus. Nonetheless, of course they offer spiritual guidance and support when requested – a key point of difference from secular counsellors.

That said, the *Chaplains on Campus* research found that Christian chaplains are much more likely to

work with non-religious people than non-Christian chaplains, in part because the former are much more likely to be paid and have more time to serve more people. Conversely, chaplains from minority religions (who as discussed below are often volunteers and spend less time on campus) are more likely to see their main responsibility as supporting students from their own tradition, and are also more likely to work closely with their local religious community outside the university.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from one-to-one support, chaplains run community-building activities, lead religious or community services,

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When asked which three groups they worked with most closely, over a third of a sample of 367 university chaplains said non-religious students.

practices or prayer, and support interfaith activities. Some (lead chaplains more than others) help organise important civic ceremonies in the university calendar, such as graduation ceremonies, Remembrance Sunday, or Holocaust Memorial Day. Some are responsible for managing prayer rooms and other chaplaincy spaces, and for advocating to ensure the needs of religious people are met. Some sit on university committees, for example helping develop policy on equality and diversity. Finally, chaplains have safeguarding duties, including sometimes working as part of their university's Prevent team (the structure to identify people at risk of radicalisation into terrorism).<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 summarises these activities.

This mix of activities means that chaplains make a unique contribution to university life. It also means they need to be multilingual: able to understand the languages and structures of different contexts (their university, their religion or belief organisation, and their local faith community), and able to make themselves comprehensible in each.<sup>12</sup> Depending on the context, it may be more appropriate for chaplains to describe their work in more secular, or more religious, terms.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that active proselytising is not included in this list of activities. **Most chaplains see overt attempts to convert others as inappropriate – even as an “absolute ‘no go area’”<sup>14</sup> – and take care to avoid this when talking about faith issues.** Often, however, chaplains do see their role as being to make space for others to encounter God or their tradition, or to witness to God's presence in a more implicit way. We discuss this below.<sup>15</sup>

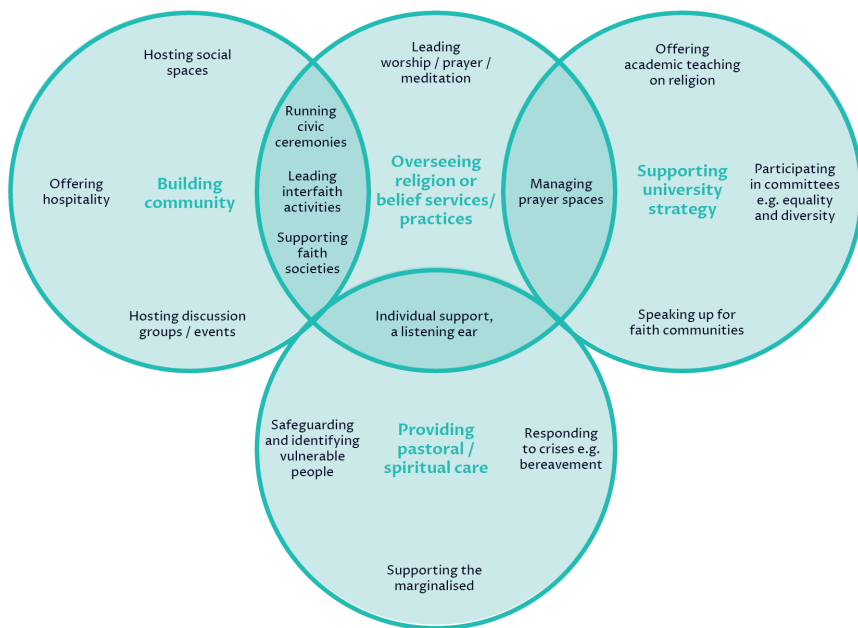


Figure 1: The range of activities of university chaplains



## How many chaplains are paid and who pays them?

**As in other sectors, most chaplains in universities (just under two-thirds) are volunteers.**<sup>16</sup> Most balance their chaplaincy role alongside paid work elsewhere and often other religious roles such as leading faith communities. The *Chaplains on Campus* project estimates that overall, these volunteers provide the equivalent of £4.5 million of labour each year.<sup>17</sup>



**Just under two-thirds of university chaplains are volunteers.**

Among paid staff, Christians (particularly Anglicans) dominate, providing 84% of paid chaplaincy time. Anglicans also tend to be the lead chaplain within university chaplaincy teams (in England and Wales at least). This sometimes reflects the historical connections between the Established Church and universities (with some universities retaining an Anglican chapel); but it is also because universities can often appoint a full-time Anglican without cost to themselves (since the Church of England is the largest external funder of university chaplaincy).<sup>18</sup>

Strikingly, religious organisations are more likely than universities to pay chaplains. Of the 367 chaplains interviewed for the *Chaplains on Campus* project, only 23% were paid solely by their university, while 28% were paid by one or more religious bodies.<sup>19</sup> After the Church of England, the Roman Catholic and Methodist Churches are the largest external funders for university chaplaincy. University Jewish Chaplaincy, an Orthodox Jewish organisation, funds most paid Jewish chaplains, and Humanists UK also funds a small number. The researchers did not identify any organisations from other faiths which fund university chaplaincy.<sup>20</sup>

As we shall see, COVID-19 has revealed the precariousness of voluntary arrangements for chaplaincy, with many volunteers unable to maintain the same level of support to students and staff (usually minority faith members) as previously.

### What do students think of chaplaincy?

Chaplaincy is highly valued by the minority of students who make use of it. The *Chaplains on Campus* research surveyed 188 students of varying religions and beliefs, all with some experience of using their university's chaplaincy services. 86% thought that "Chaplaincy at my university is an important welfare service for students"; nearly two-thirds said they had spoken to a chaplain on a one-to-one basis at some point, and 80% agreed that "Chaplains provide pastoral support in a way professional support services cannot". Nearly two-thirds of non-religious respondents agreed with this statement, showing that it is not only religious people who see chaplaincy as making a unique contribution to university life.<sup>21</sup>

Among the respondents to this survey, there were higher proportions of non-white, international, postgraduate, and LGBT+ students than in the UK student population. The researchers found that chaplaincies are particularly valued by students who feel isolated (such as newly arrived international students, and LGBT+ students who may feel marginalised in other religious spaces on campus).<sup>22</sup>

### Models of chaplaincy: theological and secular

Chaplains perceive what they do through their particular faith or belief tradition. This means there is no one way of understanding chaplaincy work. Various scholars have proposed schemes highlighting the diverse models that

chaplaincy can take. Often these are rooted in Christian theology, reflecting the Christian dominance of the sector, but some schemes include secular models as well.

The following table outlines some possible Christian theological and secular models, drawing on the work of Miranda Threlfall-Holmes as developed by Ben Ryan.<sup>23</sup> Threlfall-Holmes presents the theological models as how Christian chaplains see their work, and the secular models as how employers and service users see chaplaincy (though non-Christian chaplains may understand their work through these models too). These models are overlapping, and in practice chaplains may identify with multiple models.<sup>24</sup>

<b>Christian theological</b>	
Missionary	The chaplain brings the Gospel to people where they are, outside of church settings. Note that most chaplains disavow overt attempts to convert others, preferring to see mission as being about witnessing to the Gospel through deeds, such as accompaniment and pastoral care. <sup>25</sup>
Pastor	The chaplain's role is to care for and serve others unconditionally, reflecting God's love for all.
Incarnational / sacramental	The chaplain reflects something of God's presence through their own physical presence alongside people in their daily life; the chaplain is understood as a "walking sacrament". <sup>26</sup>
Historical / parish model	The chaplain sees their organisation as their parish, and like a parish priest works for the flourishing of all within it. The chaplaincy acts as the church for those in the organisation. This model works best in institutions where there is a strong link between work and residence, e.g. the armed forces, boarding schools, older universities.
Prophetic or challenging model	The chaplain is an agent of challenge; a "critical friend" <sup>27</sup> of their organisation, critiquing problematic practices and being a voice for justice.
Exile*	The chaplain is a figure 'outside' or distanced from the institutional Church; this gives the chaplain space for making critical challenge to the Church. <sup>28</sup>

<b>Secular</b>	
Pastoral carer	Often the primary secular conception of chaplaincy – that is, the chaplain provides emotional support and guidance – though ‘pastoral care’ may look very different in different settings.
Spiritual carer	The chaplain meets people’s spiritual or religious needs, on an individual and / or collective level.
Diversity model	The chaplain’s role is to promote diversity, advocate for minority groups and advise on relevant policy.
Tradition / heritage model	The chaplain represents the tradition / ‘soul’ of the organisation, leading in important civic ceremonies and community bonding moments, e.g. Remembrance Day.
Specialist service provider	A broad category which can incorporate the other secular models. The chaplain’s role is to provide certain professional services, in response to demand from service users. These services vary depending on the context (e.g. signposting to other services, or a role in counter-terrorism structures identifying people vulnerable to radicalisation).
Community mediator*	The chaplain helps integrate isolated people (e.g. ex-offenders) into the wider community. They may also help build bridges between different groups (e.g. police and local religious communities).

\*Models added by Ben Ryan.<sup>29</sup>

The incarnational model has received particular attention in theological (especially Anglican and Catholic) writing about chaplaincy.<sup>30</sup> For example, in her research with 29 Anglican chaplains, Sarah Dunlop notes that the Christian belief in God’s Incarnation resonates strongly with how some chaplains understand their purpose. Her interviewees perceived their role as mirroring the Incarnation – that is, of manifesting something of God’s love to others through their very *presence*, as well as their overt actions of care. Dunlop encourages Christian chaplains to bring together the incarnational and prophetic motifs in their work – to see their role as reflecting the love of God to others, with the purpose of facilitating transformation in them.<sup>31</sup>

Some of these theological understandings of chaplaincy were particularly evident in our conversations with

university chaplains. At a Traditional Elite university, a black interdenominational Christian chaplain talked about her role in supporting students angered by racist violence in the USA in the summer of 2020. She understood her role as being prophetic, to inspire students and the university to address injustice:

*People were upset, hurt, frightened and because of that more students reached out to me... I was able to [join panels discussing racism] as a sort of pastoral voice – to put it in wider context, [to say] fear not, this is a moment for deep reflection, and somehow we have to process the hurt, but it is a lesson that hopefully we can move on from... [In response] we have to be ready to challenge ourselves and the world we live in.*

She considered herself a “surrogate parent”, guiding students in their journey:

*[A student] was talking about the competitive nature [of his course]... I said the academics is [just] one thing that you will learn... It’s always having that sense of self and reminding them that each one of us has a purpose to our lives.*

Here she saw herself as resisting higher education’s prevailing culture and helping people see the big picture beyond performance. **Similarly, some scholars emphasise a wider prophetic purpose for chaplains – calling universities to look beyond their concern with economic success, and to refocus on a deeper purpose of serving the common good through education and research.**<sup>32</sup>

Some of these Christian ideas of chaplaincy have parallels with non-Christian conceptions. For example, Lindsay van Dijk, chair of the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network and the first Humanist to lead a NHS chaplaincy team, emphasises

that Humanist pastoral care involves empowering people “to come up with their own solutions by being listened to”, and the importance of “unconditional positive regard”. This concept draws on the person-centred approach to psychology developed by Carl Rogers.<sup>33</sup> Thus, pastoral care inspired by non-religious belief remains distinct from secular forms of counselling. The notion of unconditional positive regard also resonates with a Christian approach of wanting to show unconditional love to the other as a reflection of God’s love.

Nonetheless, those theological models which are used most often in Christian chaplaincy (particularly the incarnational and missionary models) are obviously not always appropriate to explain how non-Christian chaplains perceive their work. Asgar Halim Rajput, of the Association of Muslim Chaplains in Education,<sup>34</sup> observes that there is no historical tradition of chaplaincy within Islam, and that Christian conceptions of chaplaincy as a ministry or as witnessing to God’s work are inappropriate for Muslim approaches. Instead, Muslim chaplaincy should be understood as being about “humanistic care and support of the individual with reference to religious intentions”, inspired by the Prophet Muhammad’s example in caring for the community.<sup>35</sup> He notes that Muslim and Christian university chaplains have different activities and may need to deal with different issues. Muslim chaplains may be especially concerned with supporting students in matters to do with daily prayer, fasting, and navigating what is permissible under Islamic law, and also with student experiences of Islamophobia and racism, and questions of belonging as religious minorities.<sup>36</sup>

Since Christian conceptions of chaplaincy can conflict with non-Christian understandings, employers (including universities) should not assume that any one chaplain is

suitable for any context. They also should not assume there is a single generic model of chaplaincy – chaplaincy as being solely about pastoral support – that all should follow. Such a view risks reducing chaplains to “cheap counsellors without a particular identity of their own”.<sup>37</sup> **Instead, employers must appreciate that it is often precisely chaplains’ belief-specific contributions, and the integrity of their own beliefs offered in a non-imposing way, which makes them attractive to those who seek them out.** Diverse chaplaincy teams are important; it is often easier for service users to build a rapport and trust with chaplains from the same religion or belief.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the diversity of university chaplaincy, in terms of both its conception by chaplains and the activities it involves. Two key themes underpin this diversity.

Firstly, *relationships*. Ben Ryan sees chaplaincy as being about “the business of relationship building”.<sup>39</sup> This can easily be understood in a secular or non-Christian sense, but is also commonly reflected in the Christian motifs of incarnational and missionary chaplaincy, where the chaplain seeks to manifest something of God’s concern for the flourishing of each person, through building relationships with, and between, other people.



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Secondly, *presence*. This is a common theme in writing about chaplaincy, though the term is used in various ways by different authors.<sup>40</sup> Broadly, it refers to the idea that *being*

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**Being precedes doing: the chaplain's first role is to be there, which then leads to specific actions of spiritual and pastoral care.**

precedes *doing* – that the chaplain's first role is to *be there*, which then leads to specific actions of spiritual and pastoral care. Chaplains are to become “embedded” in their institution, becoming a familiar face and learning its ways of working.<sup>41</sup> Further, the physical presence of the chaplain is seen as having value in and of itself. This could of symbolic value (for instance, the

chaplain's physical presence reminds people that spirituality is welcome, or, as in the ‘tradition / heritage’ model, is a visible representation of the institution's values). Or it could be of practical value; in his research with palliative care chaplains, Steve Nolan suggests that physically sitting with someone who is dying, even in silence, and accepting their emotions without judgement can be an important part of chaplaincy work, helping people to feel heard and valued.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, the importance of *being there* raises questions about how chaplains can adapt their ministry when physical presence is simply not possible – and an important distinction can be made here between a chaplain's *physical* presence and their *accompanying* presence.<sup>43</sup> The latter refers to the chaplain's broad role in being alongside people in their journey (sometimes over a sustained period of time), simply listening to them without judging them or necessarily trying to resolve a particular issue. This is a sense of ‘being around’ and emotionally available to others which can be felt whether



or not the chaplain is literally present at any particular time. For Christian chaplains inspired by the incarnational model, the notion of chaplaincy as presence has further, theological significance, since they understand their role as reflecting God's physical presence with humanity (in Jesus) and his persistent accompanying presence now.<sup>44</sup>

In the following chapters, these themes of relationships and presence shape our discussion of the experiences of university chaplains during the pandemic. How have they been serving their communities, and what positive opportunities have emerged for them? What challenges have they faced, and in particular, how have they been affected by the loss of physical presence on campus? We shall also see that a third theme emerges from our research, one closely tied to the other two: chaplains as agents of hope.

- 1 Previous Theos research indicates the scale of chaplaincy. Taking a geographical approach, in 2015 we identified at least 169 chaplains in Luton – amounting to about one chaplain per 1,200 people in the borough – and in 2017 we found 198 chaplains in Cornwall, and 230 in Norfolk. See Ben Ryan, *A Very Modern Ministry* (London: Theos, 2015), p. 20.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Modern%20Ministry%20combined.pdf>.  
Theos, *Mapping Chaplaincy in Cornwall: a Report* (London: Theos, 2017), p. 9.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Mapping%20chaplaincy%20in%20Cornwall-FINAL.pdf>.  
Theos, *Mapping Chaplaincy in Cornwall: a Report* (London: Theos, 2017), p. 8.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Mapping%20chaplaincy%20in%20Norfolk-FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>.
- 2 Ryan, *A Very Modern Ministry*, pp. 14-16 outlines the range of areas involving chaplaincy, while Miranda Threlfall-Holmes and Mark Newitt, *Being a Chaplain* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011) provide first-hand accounts of chaplaincy in different sectors.
- 3 Ben Ryan, 'Theology and models of chaplaincy' in John Caperon, Andrew Todd and James Walters (eds.), *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 81.
- 4 Aune et al's national mapping exercise, using websites and telephone calls, identified 1,058 chaplains across the UK. Interviews with 99 lead chaplains produced another estimate of 1,032 chaplains. Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (Coventry: Coventry University, Durham: Durham University and Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), pp. 12, 14.  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Chaplains%20on%20Campus%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- 5 Anglicans make up the biggest proportion of Christian chaplains, followed by Roman Catholics and Methodists. There are also small numbers (under 40 each) of chaplains from other denominations, including Quakers, Orthodox, Baptists and Pentecostals. *Ibid*, pp. 12-22.
- 6 *Ibid*, pp. 16-19.
- 7 *Ibid*, pp. 74-75.
- 8 *Ibid*, p. 64.
- 9 These university chaplains were also asked which four activities they spend most time on. Only 20.7% said "providing religious guidance", whereas 71.1% selected the provision of pastoral support. *Ibid*, pp. 63-64.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 64.

- 11 Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, pp. 64, 95-97 examine how much time chaplains say they spend on each of these activities and their involvement with Prevent.  
Prevent in universities and its impact on religious members, particularly Muslims, is analysed in Alison Scott-Baumann and Simon Perfect, *Freedom of Speech in Universities: Islam, Charities and Counter-terrorism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 48-69, 80-82. See also Simon Perfect, Ben Ryan and Kristin Aune, *Faith and Belief on Campus: Division and Cohesion. Exploring Student Faith and Belief Societies*. (London: Theos, 2019), pp. 112-18.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/Theos---Faith-and-Belief-on-Campus---Division-and-Cohesion.pdf>
- 12 Ryan, 'Theology and models', p. 82; James Walters, 'Twenty-first century chaplaincy: finding the church in the post-secular' in Caperon et al, *Christian Theology of Chaplaincy*, p. 50.
- 13 Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, pp. 42-44 discuss the language university chaplains use to describe their primary aims, and the balance between generic (secular) and explicitly religious language.
- 14 Ryan, *A Very Modern Ministry*, p. 42.
- 15 For a wider discussion of 'proselytism' among faith-based organisations, see Paul Bickley, *The Problem of Proselytism* (London: Theos, 2015).  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Problem%20of%20Proselytism%20web%20version.pdf>
- 16 This finding came from interviews with 99 lead chaplains, who between them gave details of the time commitment and pay of 1,032 chaplains. Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, p. 19.
- 17 This assumes a chaplain salary of £25,000. Ibid, pp. 19-20.
- 18 Ibid, p. 24.
- 19 A further 6.7% were paid jointly by the university and a religious organisation. These percentages (based on interviews with 367 chaplains) give a higher proportion of total paid chaplains than noted previously. However, volunteer chaplains were under-represented in the interview sample. Ibid. pp. 19, 27.
- 20 Ibid, p. 27.
- 21 Ibid, pp. 59, 104, 110.
- 22 Ibid, pp. 102, 107-08. In our research, one chaplain was looking to create a support network for LGBT+ Christians who felt unwelcome in the Christian Union. See Chapter 2.
- 23 Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, 'Exploring models of chaplaincy' in Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt (eds.), *Being a Chaplain*, pp. 116-26; Ryan, 'Theology and models', pp. 84-97.
- 24 Threlfall-Holmes, 'Exploring models of chaplaincy', p. 97.

- 25 Ryan, 'Theology and models', pp. 86-87.
- 26 Threlfall-Holmes, 'Exploring models of chaplaincy', p. 99.
- 27 Rowan Clare Williams, *A Theology for Chaplaincy: Singing Songs in a Strange Land* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2018), p. 16.
- 28 See *ibid* for a discussion of 'exile' as a theological motif for higher education chaplaincy.
- 29 Ryan, 'Theology and models', pp. 84-97. Ryan adds the 'cultist' model, referring to a community that is united primarily by a shared admiration of the chaplain themselves. Since this risks becoming an unhealthy arrangement and is not a model that chaplains would consciously adopt (even if it may sometimes occur in practice), we have omitted it from the table.
- 30 See for example Williams, *A Theology for Chaplaincy*; Andrew Todd, 'A theology of the world' and Margaret Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy: integrity and presence', both in Caperon et al, *Christian Theology of Chaplaincy*, pp. 23-44, 101-17.
- 31 Sarah Dunlop, 'Is "being there" enough? Explorations of incarnational missiology with chaplains', *Journal of Practical Theology*, 10, 2 (2017), pp. 180, 184-85.
- 32 Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, pp. 123, 127. See also Walters, 'Twenty-first century chaplaincy', p. 57; Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 256; Stephen Heap (ed.), *The Universities We Need: Theological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 33 Humanists UK, 'The art of listening: an interview with humanist pastoral carer Lindsay van Dijk', 19 March 2019. <https://humanism.org.uk/2019/03/19/the-art-of-listening-an-interview-with-humanist-pastoral-carer-lindsay-van-dijk/>; Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (London: Constable, 1967).
- 34 <https://amced.org.uk/>
- 35 Asgar Halim Rajput, 'The role of Muslim chaplains in higher education: should they be doing what they are doing?' *Practical Theology*, 8, 3-4 (2015), pp. 230, 238.
- 36 *Ibid*, pp. 238, 241. For an alternative Muslim conception of chaplaincy, see Asim Hafiz, 'Muslim chaplaincy in the UK: the chaplaincy approach as a way to a modern imamate', *Religion, State & Society*, 43, 1 (2015), pp. 85-99. See also Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Mansur Ali and Stephen Pattison, *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Mohammed Arshad, 'Multifaith working' in Christopher Swift, Mark Cobb and Andrew Todd, *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 109-22.
- 37 Ryan, *A Very Modern Ministry*, p. 63.

38 Ryan, 'Theology and models', p. 84.

39 Ibid, p. 98.


40 See for example Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy'; Dunlop, 'Is "being there" enough?'; Steve Nolan, 'Chaplain as "hopeful presence": working with dying people', *Practical Theology*, 4, 2 (2011), pp. 165-79; Steve Nolan, *Spiritual Care at the End of Life: The Chaplain as a 'Hopeful Presence'* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2012).

41 Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy'.

42 Nolan calls this chaplaincy's "evocative presence". Nolan, 'Chaplain as "hopeful presence"'.

43 See Williams, *A Theology of Chaplaincy*, p. 19. Other writers break down the concept of presence further than this. Steve Nolan, *Spiritual Care at the End of Life*, for example, distinguishes between a chaplain's "evocative presence", "accompanying presence", "comforting presence" and "hopeful presence". Meanwhile, Margaret Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy', identifies "faithfulness", "evocative presence", "necessary liminality" and "exquisite attentiveness" as different aspects of a chaplain's presence.

44 "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).



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## 2 Chaplains' contributions during the pandemic

**How has the pandemic affected the roles of university chaplains? Broadly speaking, they have not only had to maintain or adapt their existing activities, but also to respond to the student and staff mental health crisis.**

After the announcement of the first national lockdown in March 2020, followed later in the year by the tier system and a further lockdown, chaplains had to transfer their activities online. Many interviewees discussed shifting their religious services or corporate prayer activities online, with mixed success. Some reported seeing more attendees tuning in online than had previously attended in person, while others reported a decrease.

In this chapter, we focus in detail on the four most important contributions chaplains have made to campus life during the pandemic:

- Supporting people pastorally
- Supporting people spiritually
- Maintaining community
- Encouraging hope

We also consider what positive opportunities have arisen for chaplains on campus as they navigate this new and challenging environment.

### **Supporting people pastorally**

**Many chaplains have seen significant increases in their pastoral workload during the pandemic, with more requests from students and staff for one-to-one support meetings.** Usually these meetings have been online, though some chaplains have been able to offer in-person,



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Many chaplains have seen significant increases in their pastoral workload during the pandemic, with more requests from students and staff for one-to-one support meetings.

socially-distanced meetups, for example in public parks. Many of those reaching out to chaplains have been struggling with mental health issues. Some have found it difficult keeping up with online learning, or have been worried about family members or job security. Some have been bereaved. Some people contacted chaplains simply to find human contact in an otherwise very

lonely period. Chaplains have also played an important role in supporting international students, many of whom were unable to return home after the end of academic terms in the spring and summer of 2020.

Some interviewees proactively emailed or called students and staff who they had previous contact with, simply to say hello and check how they were. Some were surprised by how positive the response was:

*Students are notorious for not answering or getting back; but 'ping!', the email comes back from them... they really do appreciate it. (Anglican chaplain, Post-1992 university)*

Chaplains are unusual in being among the few people in higher education who, as part of their role, can make such personalised direct offers of pastoral care, since they often have greater flexibility in their time than formal counsellors. They are able to initiate conversations, rather than having to wait for individuals to approach them.

**Chaplaincy is a demanding role which requires a considerable amount of emotional resilience, even under normal circumstances.** Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has



exacerbated this, particularly among those chaplains who have seen a sharp rise in the number of people needing support following the illness or death of a loved one. The Muslim chaplain at a Post-1992 university said that:

*I don't think it's always understood how intense chaplaincy can be. It's often seen as a soft 'cup of tea' ministry type of thing. Whereas when you're dealing with intense bereavements all day, that obviously has an impact on the staff member.*

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**Chaplaincy is a demanding role which requires a considerable amount of emotional resilience, even under normal circumstances.**

She noted that in her university, bereaved people needing support would be referred in the first instance to chaplaincy, rather than the counselling services. Chaplains can offer someone more time to listen, and over a longer period, than formal counsellors may be able to. In her experience:

*Counselling is very much about trying to get you to think about things [differently], or how to address a problem, whereas with bereavement it's a real painful issue and very often what students or staff need is someone to sit alongside them through that and tell them that they're doing okay and that the way they're reacting is normal.*

These sentiments affirm the distinctive pastoral contribution of chaplains during the pandemic, as an accompanying presence through suffering. Their value lies in listening, comforting and validating, more than in helping people work through particular problems.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, chaplains are often the best placed people in universities to support people through grief, because they are able to address



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**Very often what students or staff need is someone to sit alongside them and tell them that they're doing okay and that the way they're reacting is normal.**

spiritual or existential issues that often arise at such times.

They are also more likely than secular counsellors to understand particular religious conceptions of death which may impact how grief is managed. In Islam, for example, Muslims are required ritually to wash bodies to purify them before burial. The risk of infection has created difficulties for Muslims

preparing the bodies of those who have died of COVID-19, adding to the trauma of the bereaved.<sup>2</sup> Muslim chaplains in universities have had to support students and staff through this, providing religious and spiritual guidance as well as emotional support. As the Muslim chaplain in the Post-1992 university noted, not being able to attend a funeral because of COVID-19 restrictions is tragic for anyone, but disrupted funeral arrangements could be even more traumatic for bereaved people who believe that certain practices are needed to help “a person get to Heaven”.

While the pastoral workload has increased for many chaplains, this has not always been the case. Some interviewees said their pastoral load had stayed broadly the same as in pre-COVID times. They saw a decline in the number of new people contacting them, but a rise in the frequency of contact with chaplaincy ‘regulars’ – people already engaged with the chaplaincy. An Anglican chaplain at a Red Brick university said that the support needs of her regulars grew:

*These are students who probably struggle in lots of different ways, and really did cling on to chaplaincy and each other during that time. So more from them, less from others.*

We discuss differences between chaplains in terms of their pastoral workload in Chapter 3.

### Supporting people spiritually

There is not always a clear line between pastoral and spiritual support, and conversations with chaplains that are at first focused on practical issues, such as a person's mental health, may quickly lead to deeper discussions about their reflections on life, beliefs, and ultimate meaning.

**Several interviewees perceived a shift in the kinds of issues students and staff wanted to talk about during the pandemic, with conversations more often focusing on fundamental issues of suffering, mortality, and purpose.** Sometimes this was quite a subtle change. An interfaith advisor (personally Buddhist) at a Post-1992 university noted that:

*Things that are arising for people – uncertainty, mortality, suffering, disruption – in other times might have less of a resonance [but] now are things that people are more willing to sit and talk about. There's an increased receptivity I've found.*

He found that staff members were more open to “bringing the personal in”, whereas before their conversations tended to be “grounded in the office language”.

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**Several interviewees perceived a shift in the kinds of issues students and staff wanted to talk about during the pandemic, with conversations more often focusing on fundamental issues of suffering, mortality, and purpose.**

He also found colleagues joining his online meditation and mindfulness sessions who “I’d known for years who had never [previously] expressed any interest in coming along.”

While many of these conversations will have retained a secular focus, some chaplains noted an increased interest in talking explicitly about faith and God. The Pentecostal chaplain at a 1960s Campus felt that some of the Christian students he spoke to were starting to take their faith more seriously. Another chaplain said she knew students:

*...who are nominally Christian, in that fringe group, who have had a family member unwell, and suddenly they’ve wanted to speak about God. They want me as a priest to give them reassurance that God has a plan, life has meaning. (Anglican chaplain, Red Brick campus)*

Meanwhile, a Muslim chaplain in a Post-1992 Midlands university thought that COVID-19 has had a “huge impact” on the religiosity of those students he supported. He had noticed Muslim students showing much greater interest in “the world hereafter; they think more about themselves in terms

of reformation and the concept of purification and the concept of obedience”, as well as being motivated by their faith to do more charity work.

Of course, we cannot generalise from these examples about religiosity or spirituality on campus

during the pandemic. National polling conducted by Theos between May and June 2020 suggests that the pandemic has not inspired a religious awakening among the general population: for example, among those who thought there was

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**The pandemic has not inspired a religious awakening among the general population.**

probably or definitely no God (51% of the population), there was a net increase of just 2% accessing spiritual or religious content online.<sup>3</sup> Other polling in November 2020 confirmed this picture.<sup>4</sup> But COVID-19 does seem to have inspired people to refocus on what they consider important in life, whether understood in religious terms or not. Thus, 31% of the population said they were thinking more about what makes life meaningful than they were before the pandemic, rising to 43% for 18-24 year olds. Additionally, 18% of the population said they were spending more time in quiet reflection (26% for 18-24 year olds).<sup>5</sup>

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**For some chaplains, part of their role as a spiritual advisor has included challenging problematic beliefs about COVID-19.**

This increased desire to re-evaluate life and search for meaning, especially among young people, points again to the importance of having university chaplains who can help individuals navigate existential, and sometimes spiritual, change.

**For some chaplains, part of their role as a spiritual advisor has included challenging problematic beliefs about COVID-19.** This was particularly striking for those interviewees who mainly supported religious or ethnic minority students. Some reported having to tackle disinformation – for example a Muslim interfaith advisor at a Post-1992 university discussed encountering conspiracy theories about the virus among Muslim students. This reflects wider trends among minority groups: a Royal Society for Public Health study, published in December 2020, found that black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people were significantly less likely to say they would take a vaccine than white people (57% to 79%) as a result of exposure to anti-vaccine conspiracies.<sup>6</sup>

Some chaplains have also had to tackle *religious* beliefs they think are unhelpful. A Pentecostal chaplain in a 1960s Campus said that people occasionally asked him if COVID-19 was a divine act of judgment or punishment. His response was to say that “this is not how God operates”, and sensitively to encourage people to access these beliefs critically:

*And sometimes we had to engage with people in that type of conversation and say, ‘is that supported by the Bible? Is that supported by our faith? Is that someone’s opinion?’*

Similarly, a Muslim chaplain in a Welsh Post-1992 university said she had engaged in conversations among her local community, challenging a frequent belief that “this is a punishment for something we’ve done wrong or someone else has done wrong”. **Here we see chaplains playing critical roles as informal public theologians, actively contesting certain religious narratives and offering alternatives.**

### Maintaining community

**Beyond individual support, chaplains have also maintained existing communities online as well as generating new ones.** The priority for many chaplains has been to replicate their religious services or prayer provision online, but they have also sought to maintain other, more social-focused, community activities. Some interviewees were hosting regular online coffee mornings, setting up book clubs, and offering group mindfulness and meditation sessions. These groups were usually small, often with only a handful of attendees each time. But despite their size, such groups have played a very important role in fostering friendships and supporting the mental health of participants.

Chaplains have also continued, or even increased, their pre-COVID activities of creating spaces for debate and reflection on important issues to do with religion, spirituality and society more widely. Some interviewees noticed an increased number of attendees after transferring these events online. For example, an Anglican chaplain at a 1960s Campus initiated a series of death cafés – spaces to discuss how people view and cope with death – and had seen the number of participants rise from 6-8 per session to 30-40, including people from outside the UK.

**Some interviewees emphasised that chaplaincy is, in part, a ministry for the marginalised** – as an interfaith advisor (personally Buddhist) at a Post-1992 university described it, for “people who fall through the cracks”. In one Traditional Elite university, for example, the interdenominational Christian chaplain saw part of her role as fostering a community for students who “don’t feel aligned with one faith or another” or for whom “the Church hasn’t been a safe space”. She planned to set up a support group for LGBT+ Christians, after some had approached her after feeling unwelcome at the Christian Union.<sup>7</sup> Maintaining such communities, where students support each other pastorally, has become an even more important part of the chaplain’s role during COVID-19 – particularly since some student-run societies (including faith and belief societies) have struggled to maintain themselves in the shift to the virtual environment (see Chapter 3). **In this**

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**Chaplaincy is, in part, a ministry for the marginalised. Some chaplains have also sought to sustain a sense of corporate belonging among students and staff.**

**context, the chaplain can act as a fulcrum around which friendships and mutual student support can develop.**

During the pandemic, **some chaplains have also sought to sustain a sense of corporate belonging among students and staff.** Chaplains are often responsible for organising key civic ceremonies in the university calendar, such as carol services, graduation ceremonies, or Remembrance Day. Chaplains' involvement here reflects the 'tradition / heritage' model of chaplaincy, where they are seen as embodying the ethos of the university.<sup>8</sup> Organising such events can be stressful enough in normal times; the switch to virtual (or hybrid) events has exacerbated the challenge. Moreover, these events have taken on even greater significance during the pandemic, as they have become rare moments where the university community can be brought together for celebration or commemoration in an otherwise fragmented time. Some chaplains have also used their leadership of such events to spark discussion of wider societal issues. For example, in one Post-1992 university, the interfaith advisors produced new video content for Remembrance Day, highlighting the contribution of ethnic minorities in the World Wars as a way of opening up discussions about racism.<sup>9</sup>

Corporate belonging can also be encouraged in simpler ways. The Anglican chaplain at a Post-1992 university started a daily practice of posting a video reflection ("a little positive message") each morning in the university-wide Facebook group, and – less seriously – a blurred photo of some everyday object ("like a mouse or a pen"), inviting students to guess what it was. This "puzzle challenge" became very popular and generated a sense of togetherness among participating students. This simple daily ritual was another way for her to minister to students, by creating a regular moment of humour



and bonding each day. It also revealed a new side of chaplaincy to students – the chaplain as a source of fun – and gave her much greater visibility among them.

### Innovative chaplaincy: Building community through TV

A particularly striking example of chaplains driving campus debate and building a sense of corporate belonging during the pandemic was in one of our 1960s Campus case studies. Here, the chaplaincy effectively turned itself into a media production house, whilst maintaining its usual pastoral offering. The lead chaplain had prior experience in media production and worked with the students' union to produce a suite of over 300 programmes, each usually about 30 minutes long, to be streamed on social media. They ranged from reflections and prayers from the chaplains, to discussions about racism, LGBT+ issues within religious communities, and interfaith matters. The chaplains and faith advisors played key roles in this work, hosting and producing different programmes.

Sometimes the audience was global: in a moment of levity, the students' union and chaplaincy livestreamed the launch of SpaceX's rocket in May 2020, gaining an impressive 31,000 views worldwide. According to the chaplain involved: "They thought I had direct communication with the astronauts".

The chaplaincy has since scaled back its programme creation but maintains some regular outputs. As the Jewish chaplain said: "People said we created not just chaplaincy presence, but a university presence" – that is, a sense of community which went well beyond the people engaging directly with the chaplains themselves.

### Encouraging hope

Encouraging hope among university members is a key contribution made by chaplains during COVID-19 – whether through one-to-one conversations, online discussion groups, or their social media engagements. This is not just the passive consequence of chaplains’ activities; around a third of our interviewees identified encouraging hope as something they were actively trying to do, as part of their unique contribution to the university:

*My experience of COVID-19 [is] that we need to be led by hope rather than by fear. And if we have anything as people of faith to offer, it’s got to be hope. (Anglican chaplain, 1960s Campus)*

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**My experience of COVID-19 [is] that we need to be led by hope rather than by fear. And if we have anything as people of faith to offer, it’s got to be hope.**

*I aimed to be a voice that can inspire hope in ourselves and each other. (Interdenominational Christian chaplain, Traditional Elite university)*

The chaplains understood this task through their particular faith or belief frameworks. The Muslim chaplain at a Post-1992 Midlands university described trying to encourage students to counter pessimism by focusing on their spirituality, in particular developing a “sense of patience” and “gratitude” to God:

*[On the] one side, we’re going through difficult times; but on the other side, [we have] so many other blessings. We’re unable to count the blessings of God.*

Meanwhile, a Catholic chaplain at a Cathedrals Group university believed that chaplains “have to offer people hope

at this time” – particularly because, in his view, churches at a national level had failed to do so. He thought the reason he had seen a *rise* in attendance at daily Mass during the pandemic was because “people are looking for some answers or some hope”. By continuing to celebrate daily Mass and pray the Divine Office in the university chapel, he saw himself as offering to the university a sign of hope, rooted in the conviction that God is in control even in times of crisis.

### Positive opportunities for chaplaincy

Though it may seem counter-intuitive, the demands of the pandemic and the shift to the virtual environment have also presented some opportunities for chaplains. In some universities, the situation has:

#### — Made chaplaincy more accessible

Several interviewees noted rising attendance in their discussion or support groups and that the shift online had enabled people to join who would not normally be able to do so (such as those not resident on campus, including mature students). More fundamentally, a virtual chaplaincy can sometimes help remove barriers to discussion about profound issues. For example, the Anglican chaplain holding death cafés at a

1960s Campus (see p. 53) thought that people had “felt much happier” meeting online than “turning up to a room full of strange people”, and had “really opened up” in small group discussions. Paradoxically, then, the physical distance between people in the online space can sometimes help them to be more open and vulnerable with each other. That said, as discussed in



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**A virtual chaplaincy can sometimes help remove barriers to discussion about profound issues.**

Chapter 3, in other ways it has created new barriers in terms of visibility and spontaneity of contact.

— **Given chaplains an impetus to innovate, bolstering their public image**

As with many other sectors, the pandemic's challenges have forced chaplains to think of new ways of working. This can be exciting: as one chaplain noted, "there is something quite liberating" in thinking about how to do something differently, such as holding a carol service online, making it accessible to more people (Anglican chaplain, Red Brick campus). Where chaplains have had the time and technical knowhow to embed themselves in student social media, they have helped to reposition chaplaincy as something that is public-facing and accessible, and even (as with the daily "puzzle challenge" and the space rocket livestream) a source of fun. This improves student and staff perceptions of religion on

campus, shifting it from something on the side-lines to something very visible in a confident and inclusive way; in turn, it can also help improve perceptions of religion *in general*.<sup>10</sup>

— **Strengthened relationships within chaplaincy teams**

In some universities, chaplains have met more frequently online than previously on campus. Some of our lead chaplain interviewees noted

that not having to travel to campus has meant more volunteer chaplains or faith advisors have been able to join team meetings. This has been crucial for building a greater sense of collegiality among chaplaincy teams. Chaplains within the



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**In some universities chaplains have been more included in online meetings with senior managers, and have been given a greater say in decision-making.**

same university, and also between different universities, have become important sources of pastoral support for each other, and interfaith dialogue between colleagues has deepened.

— **Improved the recognition of chaplaincy and increased its inclusion in university policymaking**

As we have seen, many chaplaincies have seen increased numbers of staff accessing their services for pastoral support. Some department managers have started to think about chaplaincy as a possible support mechanism for their staff for the first time. Additionally, in some universities chaplains have been more included in online meetings with senior managers, and have been given a greater say in decision-making relevant to them (such as decisions about how to make chaplaincy spaces COVID-secure). But as we see in the next chapter, this has not always been the case: in some universities, chaplaincy's potential is restricted by senior management's lack of recognition.

**Conclusion**

Through this crisis, many university chaplains have found themselves more needed than ever before. They have been essential pillars of support for students and staff – sometimes for small numbers of students whose pastoral care needs have increased, and sometimes for much larger numbers than previously.

Moreover, despite the challenge of significantly reduced *physical* presence on campus, chaplains have successfully maintained an *accompanying* presence in this shift online. Some



**Despite the challenge of significantly reduced physical presence on campus, chaplains have successfully maintained an accompanying presence in the shift online.**


have found new ways of establishing a sense of chaplaincy ‘being around’ and available to people, which can be uplifting even for those who do not make direct contact with a chaplain. On an individual level, chaplains have accompanied students and staff as they have navigated anxiety, isolation and grief. They have provided support that complements, and is distinct from, that of counsellors, in that it is often long-term, as much about building relationships and overcoming loneliness as about resolving particular issues, and addresses directly the difficult issues of faith, doubt and spiritual change that have arisen at this time. In the words of Margaret Whipp, a hospital chaplain and academic, chaplains have provided a “pastoral point of anchorage in a sea of change”.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, they have encouraged hope.

None of this has been easy – and while for some this period has been an opportunity to revitalise chaplaincy, for others the challenges have been almost overwhelming. We turn to these challenges now.

- 1 Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (Coventry: Coventry University, Durham: Durham University and Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), p. 104.  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Chaplains%20on%20Campus%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- 2 See Muslim Council of Britain, 'COVID-19 Muslim burial resources'.  
<https://mcb.org.uk/community/covid-19-muslim-burial-resources/>
- 3 When asked "what things matter most when trying to live a fulfilling life", only 10% of the total population chose "growing your spirituality, religion or faith" – the second lowest choice out of 14 options. Paul Bickley, 'Religious trends in a time of international crisis', *Theos*, 11 August 2020.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2020/08/06/religious-trends-in-a-time-of-international-crisis>  
These figures challenge the impression given by earlier polling, showing that a quarter of British adults watched or listened to a religious service online, on the radio or on TV during the first lockdown in spring 2020, a significantly higher rate than usually attend physical services. Savanta: ComRes, 'Tearfund COVID-19 Prayer Public Omnibus Research', 3 May 2020.  
<https://comresglobal.com/polls/tearfund-covid-19-prayer-public-omnibus-research/>
- 4 YouGov found that 5% of the UK population said they had found faith or seen it strengthened during the pandemic, whereas 4% had seen their faith strained or had lost it entirely. Matthew Smith, 'International study: how has coronavirus affected people's personal lives?', *YouGov*, 10 December 2020.  
<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/12/10/impact-coronavirus-personal-lives>
- 5 Bickley, 'Religious trends'.
- 6 Sean Coughlan, 'WhatsApp rumours fear over BAME Covid vaccine take up', *BBC News*, 16 December 2020.  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55332321>
- 7 Chaplains offering support to those who feel excluded from Christian Unions is a pattern highlighted in other research. See Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, pp. 73-74.
- 8 See Chapter 1.
- 9 Minority faith groups have also used Remembrance Day to open up similar conversations. For an example, see Madeleine Pennington, *Cohesive Societies: Faith and Belief* (London: The British Academy and Faith & Belief Forum, 2020), pp. 44-45.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Cohesive-Societies-Faith-Belief-FINAL.pdf>

- 10 There are parallels here with Steve Nolan's argument that chaplains can help deconstruct people's negative assumptions about God simply by being themselves and showing love. Steve Nolan, 'Chaplain as "hopeful presence": working with dying people', *Practical Theology*, 4, 2 (2011), pp. 171-72.
- 11 Margaret Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy: integrity and presence' in John Caperon, Andrew Todd and James Walters (eds.), *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 105.





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# 3 The challenges facing chaplains

All people working in care and wellbeing have faced considerable challenges under the pandemic, and university chaplains are no different. These difficulties include:

- Overwork, exhaustion and the emotional toll
- Loss of sacred space and embodied aspects of chaplaincy work
- Loss of informal opportunities for pastoral support
- Loss of opportunities to meet new students
- Insufficient understanding of, and appreciation for, chaplaincy among university managers
- Difficulties supporting faith and belief societies and concerns about spiritual exploitation

As we have seen, in some universities demand for chaplaincy services has risen (sometimes significantly) – but others have seen the opposite:

- Lower take-up of chaplaincy services, with a negative impact on morale

These challenges are ultimately due to the significant reduction of chaplains' physical presence on campus. Recognising them is crucial if university managers are to help chaplaincy better fulfil its potential. In this chapter we discuss these issues in detail.

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**Emotional resources are not limitless, and the pandemic had left some interviewees completely drained.**

**Overwork, exhaustion and the emotional toll**

*The last three weeks have been absolutely manic – never known the like. The pastoral crises are deep as is a*

*general exhaustion.* (Anglican chaplain, Post-1992 university; email December 2020)

Emotional resources are not limitless, and the pandemic had left some interviewees completely drained. Many chaplains have faced not only an increased volume of requests for pastoral care, but also heightened emotional intensity of those conversations, as they deal with anxious students and staff worried about the situation, lonely and isolated, or coping with the illness or death of loved ones. They have also had to prepare themselves mentally for the potential deaths of university members, whether this possibility was realised or not.

At the same time, like everyone else, chaplains have had personal challenges to manage, from juggling childcare to grieving their own loved ones. Some interviewees indicated their own mental and physical exhaustion. One spoke about his own illness with COVID-19 and how he had lost close friends. At the time of our research in autumn 2020, some interviewees were anticipating an even greater crisis of mental health problems among students and staff over the winter period, particularly among those unable to visit family – what one called a “slow catastrophe of loneliness” (interfaith advisor, Post-1992 university).

In some universities, chaplaincy teams have been strengthened during the pandemic, with chaplains and faith advisors engaging in more regular meetings and supporting

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**In some universities, lead chaplains (who are usually Anglican) have had to shoulder the burden of chaplaincy largely by themselves during the pandemic.**

each other pastorally. In others, however, lead or coordinating chaplains have seen reduced engagement from their volunteer colleagues, as understandably the latter have had to refocus their energy on their non-university commitments. **In these cases, lead chaplains (who are usually Anglican) have had to shoulder the burden of chaplaincy largely by themselves during the pandemic.** Reduced engagement from these chaplains or faith advisors also means that students from non-Christian religious traditions have less access to dedicated support from chaplains of their faith. This risks exacerbating the imbalance in chaplaincy provision highlighted in Chapter 1.

Aside from the obvious impact on chaplains' capacity to support others if they feel too busy, there are also deeper, theological problems. Some chaplains understand part of their role is to model a way of life that is not defined solely by performance. Margaret Whipp describes this as meaning that chaplains should "walk slowly" – preserving a "countercultural leisure" in the midst of "frenetic busyness".<sup>1</sup> If in reality chaplains are continuously run down, they are unable to act in this vital symbolic way.

### Loss of sacred space and embodied aspects of chaplaincy work

As university buildings have closed under repeated lockdowns, so too have their chapels and campus prayer rooms. Lead chaplains have often had prime responsibility for making these spaces COVID-secure, or else have had to make the emotionally painful decision of closing them. This has involved navigating complex and changing government guidelines, sometimes with little support. Our interviewees reported that decisions to restrict access to campus sacred spaces, or to close them entirely, had generally been supported

by regular attendees, though occasionally chaplains have had to deal with opposition. The lead chaplain (an Anglican) at a Traditional Elite university chaired the Islamic Prayer Space Steering Group; the only Muslim prayer rooms in the local area were two spaces run by the university, and the Steering Group's decision to close them angered some local residents. Since the vast majority of lead chaplains are Christian, the pandemic has therefore led to the uncomfortable situation of Christians (particularly Anglicans) having to tell non-Christians to close their prayer spaces.

But the unavoidable loss of sacred space on campus poses other problems for chaplains beyond these practical and community issues. It also limits chaplains' one-to-one pastoral support. The shift to online chaplaincy means pastoral support now takes place in the same spaces where people work (often in students' bedrooms), rather than in separate spaces set aside for prayer and reflection. This makes chaplaincy more immediately accessible, but at the same time something distinctive and special is lost. **Physical space often matters for the provision of pastoral and spiritual care, and 'set aside' spaces can be especially important for chaplaincy;** physically entering them can help people step outside their preoccupations with work and home life, enabling them to focus on deeper issues.

Similarly, **physical presence often matters for pastoral and spiritual care, and chaplains' ability to be an accompanying presence can be limited by its absence.** Chaplaincy work is not only about listening and

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**Physical space often matters for the provision of pastoral and spiritual care, and 'set aside' spaces can be especially important for chaplaincy.**



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**The online environment may remove certain barriers to accessing chaplaincy but it also creates others.**

talking (though these are the most prominent aspects). It also involves inarticulate, embodied, and even unconscious work – as evidenced by Steve Nolan’s research with palliative care chaplains, which found that a priest’s physical presence, as much as anything

they did or said, helped generate a positive religious nostalgia among elderly patients.<sup>2</sup> During the pandemic, chaplains in many sectors have lost the ability physically to sit with those they are supporting, meaning that communicating feelings of empathy and solidarity through their body language is more difficult. Perhaps this loss has been felt most acutely among hospital and hospice chaplains, who have sometimes been unable to provide comfort to the dying by sitting beside them.<sup>3</sup> But as our interviewees confirmed, it has affected the work of university chaplains too. A Zoom call with a lonely student, while vital, may not have the same comforting impact that sitting alongside them would. As we have seen, the online environment may remove certain barriers to accessing chaplaincy but it also creates others.

**Loss of informal opportunities for pastoral support**

**The loss of physical presence also means that chaplains have lost what we may call *water-cooler moments*.** These are informal opportunities to chat with people, such as in the lunch queue, which can help chaplains identify people who are struggling but who would not actively reach out for support.<sup>4</sup> The Muslim chaplain in a Post-1992 university talked about how the loss of such moments means that vulnerable students could fall through the cracks of welfare support:

*[Before the pandemic] I would go around the cafés and lunch spaces, look out for someone sat alone and make conversation, and usually through that I would find people who are not doing so well... Sometimes even having just one person that they could come and speak to through me would help them overcome some of that loneliness... [But now] there will be students who will be very vulnerable, very isolated; and with social distancing, I don't know how they're going to build a rapport with other students.*

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**The loss of physical presence also means that chaplains have lost what we may call *water-cooler moments*.**

In the pandemic, chaplains' one-to-one pastoral interactions have become largely 'meetingized' – initiated by people who already know they want a conversation, and who contact the chaplain to arrange a meeting. This hampers chaplains as they try to provide pastoral care to all who need it. They have lost informal opportunities to meet new people and initiate new relationships themselves – what one interviewee called the “soft social gateways” to chaplaincy.

Some interviewees described the loss of these moments using the language of presence. One said that the loss of physical “presence” meant she was unable to “take the temperature of the place” – to judge the mood of students and staff from her conversations and to pass this on to senior management. For another, the Baptist chaplain in a Scottish university, its loss made her grapple with serious questions about her role and what she could contribute, “because so much of what we do is that informal presence”. These comments reaffirm the link between accompanying

and physical presence, and the loss of the latter can limit the former.

### Loss of opportunities to meet new students

Related to the loss of ‘water-cooler moments’ is chaplaincy’s reduced visibility to new university students.

Chaplains have lost crucial opportunities to raise awareness of their services among incoming students in autumn 2020. With Fresher’s Fairs and welcome events being online (with mixed success), chaplains have become more reliant on their existing networks to inform others about what chaplaincy is and what it is for. Those who did not have

a strong social media presence before the pandemic, or who lacked the skills or time needed to develop one, have found it particularly difficult to spread the word about chaplaincy to new people.

**The loss of physical welcome events has also made it harder for chaplains to correct misconceptions about their role – in particular the assumption that they support religious people only.** This is a major problem since most chaplains seek to support everyone, regardless of their beliefs. The Catholic chaplain at a Red Brick university pointed out that many students (particularly international ones) arrive at university with no concept of chaplaincy, and COVID-19 has made it more difficult for chaplains to explain their role. In her experience, the range of people seeking chaplaincy support had shrunk:

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**The loss of physical welcome events has made it harder for chaplains to correct misconceptions about their role.**



*...students who have got in touch with us already had a strong faith. How we get to people with no faith or are questioning is a tough question and one I don't have the answer to yet.*

More widely, the first few weeks of university life are often crucial for religious students in their faith journey. It is then that such students often search for a religious community to join, sometimes trying different places of worship in their locality. Many churches in student towns rely on an annual influx of new students and for these and similar student-based centres of worship, COVID-19 is likely to have seriously affected the size of their community and their finances.

Many chaplains and faith advisors also lead a local faith community, so have faced the additional challenge of trying to maintain it. For example, in a 1960s Campus, the Pentecostal chaplain (and pastor of a local church) said that in pre-COVID times, between 50 and 100 new students would attend his church's annual welcome event. In autumn 2020, they had three. This not only reduced the size of the congregation but had pastoral implications: many new Christian students, who in normal times would have joined his church, were not benefitting from peer-to-peer church support networks:

*If [at the welcome event] you've got three, what's happened to the other 97?... my worry is are they being supported?... Are we gonna pick up the mess one or two months down the line?*

### **Lower take-up of chaplaincy services and low morale**

Low participation and take-up of chaplaincy services may seem surprising considering our previous discussion of heightened demand for chaplaincy support. But whilst some chaplains have been overworked during COVID-19, others have faced a *fall* in demand for their services, meaning they feel

unwanted and unhelpful. Our interviewees were fairly evenly split between those who had seen an increase in demand, those who had seen a decrease, and those who felt the demand level had stayed the same.<sup>5</sup>



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**Some chaplains have been overworked during COVID-19, but others have faced a fall in demand for their services, meaning they feel unwanted and unhelpful.**

There could be many reasons why demand for support spiked in one university and fell in another. Important factors include how well-known the chaplaincy, or an individual chaplain, was before the pandemic; the strength of their pre-existing social media presence; and the size of the community already established around the chaplain. How embedded students are into home support networks may also make a difference. In one

1960s Campus, where two-thirds of students come from ethnic minority backgrounds and many are Muslim,<sup>6</sup> the Anglican chaplain saw a fall in the number of people requesting pastoral support during the first national lockdown, and said the university counselling service had also been surprisingly quiet. He thought that many students were accessing alternative support, since a high proportion came from the local area and were supported by their families and local faith communities. Nonetheless, the fall in demand for chaplaincy support left him feeling worried that he wasn't doing enough: "And it was just really hard to justify my pay cheque almost during lockdown." Through contact with other university chaplains, he was aware that he was not alone in thinking this.

A chaplain's role is partly to be available for students and staff, including being able to devote significant time to the

same person over a long period if needed, in a way that may not be possible for other wellbeing staff. But the gift of time is a double-edged sword: if the offer is not taken up sufficiently, it can lead to the chaplain feeling underused and undermine their morale.

### Insufficient understanding of, and appreciation for, chaplaincy among university managers

In general, university managers recognise the unique contributions of chaplaincy. The *Chaplains on Campus* project found that senior managers see chaplains as valuable because they are relatively independent from university bureaucracy and can offer a fresh perspective (an understanding of chaplaincy which clearly resonates with the prophetic theological model). Managers also appreciate chaplains' ability to build relationships across the entire university. The project also found that chaplains tend to feel that their university has become more accommodating of faith in recent years, as managers embrace a more inclusive agenda.<sup>7</sup>

However, how well chaplains' roles are understood by other staff, and how far chaplains feel they are fully embraced in university life, varies considerably. Chaplaincy is more deeply embraced in Traditional Elite and Cathedral Group universities, where chaplains are more likely than elsewhere to be well-resourced and included in decision-making, reflecting the historic ties between these universities and churches. It tends to have a more ambivalent position in

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How well chaplains' roles are understood by other staff, and how far chaplains feel they are fully embraced in university life, varies considerably.

Red Brick, 1960s Campus and Post-1992 universities.<sup>8</sup> In some universities, it seems that chaplaincy is seen as something of an

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**In some universities, the mere toleration rather than full embracing of chaplaincy has meant that chaplains' potential to help during the pandemic has not been fully utilised.**

oddy – to be tolerated for equality purposes, but often forgotten about, or viewed with indifference by other staff. This is partly because so many chaplains and faith advisors are volunteers at arms-length from their university – but it is also because many staff remain uncertain about how to handle the public presence of religion in a supposedly secular space.

These structural dynamics have influenced how far chaplains have been included in university decision-making during the pandemic. COVID-19 has certainly raised the profile of chaplains in some universities, with some saying they feel more included in discussions about university strategy. **But in others, the mere toleration rather than full embracing of chaplaincy has meant that chaplains' potential to help during the pandemic has not been fully utilised, or persistent obstacles have meant some chaplains feel side-lined.**

For example, in a Red Brick university, the Anglican chaplain said that she struggled to obtain sufficient information from the university estates managers about how the chapel (owned by the university) would be managed during lockdown. She felt left “out of the loop” of relevant decision-making because she was not a university employee. More widely, the university management did not fully understand “who we are and why we’re here”. In her view, there was still some way to go to making it clear “that we’re

not proselytising” (a basic misconception about chaplaincy, as noted in Chapter 1). The shift to the online space has made it even harder for chaplains to tackle these assumptions among staff, including among those important for signposting people to chaplaincy support.

Unsurprisingly, feeling undervalued by senior management can be devastating for chaplains’ morale. Another Anglican chaplain (on a 1960s Campus) saw a tweet showing the senior management visiting the local cathedral to build ties with it. As a local priest, the chaplain knew the Cathedral Dean well and was aggrieved that the managers had not thought he might be helpful in building the relationship.

*And that made me feel really depressed, who am I kidding, nothing’s changed... On a bad day I sit there thinking ‘chaplaincy is a tick-box exercise, they’ve got to have one and so they have one and that’s me.’*

It appears that although university managers generally appreciate chaplaincy, some are not sufficiently making their chaplains feel valued or included. Rather than treating chaplaincy as a “tick-box exercise”, university managers should consider it a unique pillar in the life of a diverse, multifaith campus: an asset to be built into university structures and invested in, rather than tolerated on the side-lines. We discuss this further in Chapter 4.

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**Rather than treating chaplaincy as a “tick-box exercise”, university managers should consider it a unique pillar in the life of a diverse, multifaith campus.**

### Difficulties supporting faith and belief societies and concerns about spiritual exploitation

A final challenge facing chaplains concerns student-run faith and belief societies. As previous Theos research has shown, these societies provide essential peer-to-peer support in normal times, as well as a sense of community and opportunities to practice and explore faith.<sup>9</sup> But student societies have been hit hard by COVID-19: the NUS survey of students in November 2020 found that 65% of respondents were interacting less with societies (of all kinds) than they had before the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Several interviewees discussed the struggles that faith and belief societies are facing in keeping members engaged and recruiting new ones, with some simply becoming inactive. Some chaplains said they had been unable to make contact with the Presidents of particular societies, despite their best efforts, so were unaware of how they were faring.

Some interviewees raised concerns about external religious groups seeking to gain access to campus to proselytise. With all activities now online, students may be more likely to invite guest speakers without going through the vetting procedures that are usually in place for campus-based events. It has become far harder for universities to know who societies are inviting to speak. Our interviewees were particularly worried about certain religious groups that pressurise students to make significant financial commitments – financial as well as spiritual exploitation. This is not a new phenomenon – our previous research highlighted worries about this from students' unions,<sup>11</sup> and more widely there has been media coverage of particular churches financially exploiting young people<sup>12</sup> – but the risk is greatly increased when students and their societies are operating fully online.

One chaplain said she had been informed (by a colleague at a different university) of the following case:

*The colleague said students are invited to one-to-one Bible studies by another student. The inviter then brings along a leader from the [external church]. The CU [Christian Union] student who attended the session felt the aim of the [external church] was to convince them to leave their current church by severing contacts and join the [external church], making also substantial commitments, including financial. My colleague said that this is a known way for the [external church] to act but it hasn't been witnessed online before, targeting students in faith societies such as the CU. (Anglican chaplain, Post-1992 university; email January 2021)*

It should be emphasised that most external groups seeking to build relationships with students do not have malign or exploitative purposes. Nonetheless, this is likely to be an ongoing area of concern for universities.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined the scale of the challenges facing university chaplains during this period. Their work has been emotionally draining and, in many cases, exhausting. In light of this, chaplains' success in supporting people pastorally and spiritually, maintaining community, and (most importantly) encouraging hope is even more impressive.

Yet this chapter also highlights that university managers could do more to support their chaplains. While some chaplains have felt more recognised and included in university strategy-making, others have clearly felt side-lined. This can be deeply demoralising. University managers need to take active

steps to reassure their chaplains (including the volunteers) that their work is valued and appreciated.

Moreover, the pandemic has shown the significant benefit of funded chaplaincy posts (whether part-time or full-time). As we have seen, although volunteer chaplains have played important roles during this crisis, in some universities they have been unable to sustain their support provision – and this has meant the burden of chaplaincy work has fallen on the shoulders of the (sole) paid chaplain. If universities want to meet the diverse spiritual and pastoral support needs of their members, which are currently particularly demanding, they should recognise the need to pay more for it – just as local faith groups themselves should consider funding chaplaincy posts as a form of social witness in their community. Of course, the pandemic has shook university finances – but this too will have long-lasting repercussions for mental health on campus (particularly for staff, many of whom face uncertain futures with some institutions slashing jobs).<sup>13</sup> Chaplains, properly resourced and supported, will be needed more than ever to support them as they navigate these challenges.



- 1 Margaret Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy: integrity and presence' in John Caperon, Andrew Todd and James Walters (eds.), *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), pp. 109-10.
- 2 Steve Nolan, 'Chaplain as "hopeful presence": working with dying people', *Practical Theology*, 4, 2 (2011), p. 170.
- 3 Some hospital chaplains have been permitted to see people and sometimes only they can visit those dying of COVID-19. But other chaplains have been unable to enter the wards. See The Royal College of Pathologists, 'COVID-19 – a chaplaincy view from a multi-faith university hospital community', *Bulletin*, no. 191 (July 2020).  
<https://www.rcpath.org/profession/publications/college-bulletin/july-2020/covid-19-a-chaplaincy-view-from-a-multi-faith-university-hospital-community.html>
- 4 A small minority of chaplains, including one interviewee, a Presbyterian chaplain in a Northern Irish university, have been able to maintain these informal interactions, because they live alongside students in halls of residence.
- 5 Further large-scale research is required to assess whether demands for chaplaincy service grew, declined or stayed broadly the same across higher education overall.
- 6 Sol Gamsu and Michael Donnelly, 'Appendix of Tables' in 'Diverse places of learning? Home neighbourhood ethnic diversity and the ethnic composition of university', *IPR Policy Brief* (August 2017).  
<https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/diverse-places-of-learning-home-neighbourhood-ethnic-diversity-ethnic-composition-of-universities/attachments/appendix-of-tables.pdf>
- 7 Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (Coventry: Coventry University, Durham: Durham University and Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), pp. 60-61, 76.  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Chaplains%20on%20Campus%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 9 Simon Perfect, Ben Ryan and Kristin Aune, *Faith and Belief on Campus: Division and Cohesion. Exploring Student Faith and Belief Societies*. (London: Theos, 2019), pp. 52-71.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/Theos---Faith-and-Belief-on-Campus---Division-and-Cohesion.pdf>

- 10 NUS, *Coronavirus Student Survey*; 'NUS student survey sends clear message to government – invest in mental health now', 9 December 2020, p. 18. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-and-students-phase-3-study-mental-health-with-demographics-nov-2020>
- 11 Perfect et al, *Faith and Belief on Campus*, pp. 108-109.
- 12 See for example Ben Bryant, 'SPAC Nation: Church group 'financially exploited members'', *BBC News*, 16 December 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-50815142>
- 13 One estimate predicts that the long-term losses to the higher education could be anywhere between £3 billion and £19 billion. Elaine Drayton and Ben Waltmann, *Will universities need a bailout to survive the COVID-19 crisis?* IFS Briefing Note BN300 (London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020), p. 2. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN300-Will-universities-need-bailout-survive-COVID-19-crisis-1.pdf>



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**4**  
**Learning from COVID-19:  
lessons for chaplains  
and employers**

What might chaplains and employers learn from the pandemic? In this chapter we outline key suggestions for university chaplains from our interviews, according to the following themes:

- Being agents of hope and space-holders for the expression of pain
- Being safeguards of the water-cooler
- Developing accompanying presence offline and online

We then offer suggestions for large organisations, including universities and employers in other sectors, about how they can better support chaplains – and ultimately why it is important to consider investing in chaplaincy.

### Looking forwards: chaplains

Being agents of hope and space-holders for the expression of pain

**Chaplains are people of hope, and providers of hope to others.** In Chapter 2 we argued that one of the primary contributions of university chaplains has been to encourage

hope among those around them. Chaplains are unique on campus in being the only people who have this as a core part of their role.

This is demanding work. Chaplains, like everyone else, have struggled to retain hope during this

pandemic. But COVID-19 has also shown just how crucial it is to have people around us who bring us hope. Many people are experiencing what we may call ‘vicarious hope’ – looking for others to maintain hopefulness even if we cannot share



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**Chaplains are people of hope, and providers of hope to others.**

it ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Having such people around us is as important in our places of work and study as in our personal lives. As the pandemic continues, we encourage chaplains to focus on building hope as they reflect on what their purpose is, and as they articulate their unique contribution to their managers.

Sometimes, encouraging hope in others is about helping them to be optimistic about change in the future – something particularly important in this period as we wait for the pandemic to end. But it is also about helping people to be hopeful in the *present* – meaning approaching life with a positive, appreciative attitude, and finding comfort in relationships.<sup>2</sup> The distinction is important for chaplains because in some scenarios – tragically more common currently – it may be inappropriate to encourage hope in terms of optimism about change, such as in cases of severe or terminal illness.

Encouraging hope does not mean disavowing any feelings of despair. According to a palliative care chaplain interviewed by Steve Nolan:

*[T]here are times when I look at patients who are feeling hopeless and I suppose I feel hopeless with them and for them, but at least I'm allowing them to feel hopeless, whereas other*

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**Encouraging hope does not mean disavowing any feelings of despair.**

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**Chaplains should also aim to be space-holders for the expression of pain – people who create opportunities for others to vocalise their grief, hopelessness and outrage at suffering without pressuring them to change how they feel.**

*people may be aren't... if we let people talk about it, then it loses some of its awfulness.*<sup>3</sup>

As this chaplain indicates, sometimes the best (or only) thing a chaplain can do is to accompany people in their hopelessness, and to affirm that it is alright to feel that way. **Thus, as well as being agents of hope, chaplains should also aim to be space-holders for the expression of pain – people who create opportunities for others to vocalise their grief, hopelessness and outrage at suffering without pressuring them to change how they feel.** Holding these two roles together is challenging but critical.

Spaces for people to express pain and outrage, individually but also communally, are desperately needed during the current crisis, but all too often are unavailable. Sometimes keeping calm and carrying on can be damaging; vocalising one's sorrow, collectively with others, can be liberating. Chaplains, including in universities, are the people best-placed to facilitate this in a safe and non-judgmental way.

Both of these themes, hope and the expression of pain, can be easily understood in secular models of chaplaincy. For some religious chaplains, however, they are likely to have additional resonance rooted in their faith traditions. For Jews and Christians, the communal expression of pain is central to the tradition of lament. In lament, the expression of pain is not merely cathartic, but is a prayer directed to God. In John Swinton's Christian interpretation:

*Lament allows us honestly to express rage to God for the injustices that constantly befall us but helps us at the same time to hold onto the compassion of God in the midst of human suffering.*<sup>4</sup>

By making space for the prayer of lament, as well as a more general expression of pain, chaplains can help religious people who feel angry with God.<sup>5</sup>

Hope, meanwhile, is perhaps *the* central theme in Christianity. As noted in the Introduction, the notions of relationship and presence are central to how chaplains understand their role; for Christian chaplains, these concepts are connected theologically to hope. Christian hope in the realisation of the Kingdom of God emerges from the themes of relationship (a God who loves us) and presence (the Word became flesh), which are physically embodied in Christ. For chaplains inspired by Christian hope, encouraging hope in others is not only about helping them cope with the trials of their life – it is about helping them to see the world differently, and becoming open to transformation.

### Being safeguards of the water-cooler

Writers about chaplaincy often talk about the role’s ‘liminality’ – what Margaret Whipp describes as “Being willing to linger somewhat on the edge of things, while striving to be genuinely embedded in context”.<sup>6</sup> In part, this refers to the fact that much chaplaincy work takes place on the margins of working life – outside of formal meeting structures, in the corridors and queues, in what we have called the water-cooler moments. It is through casual interactions in such spaces that chaplains sow the seeds of relationship and trust. But during the pandemic, most of these moments have been lost in the shift to homeworking. This has weakened the bonds between



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By making space for the prayer of lament, as well as a more general expression of pain, chaplains can help religious people who feel angry with God.

team members and (sometimes) undermined chaplains' pastoral efforts.

As homeworking becomes an ever-more embedded part of work culture, employers need to be aware of the danger of losing water-cooler moments for staff socialisation. Some are already worried about this.<sup>7</sup> Regular team-building days are important, but they are still formal, organised activities. They cannot replace the everyday encounters and casual conversations through which relationships develop.

**As people who seek the flourishing of the whole community within which they are embedded, chaplains should see part of their role as being to resist 'meetingization' – the reduction of workplace interactions to formal meetings.** They should actively seek to generate new opportunities for informal socialisation, which operate

away from the normal power dynamics and hierarchies of the organisation, and which bring together employees who would not normally interact. Our research found good examples where university chaplains had successfully created such spaces online, for instance hosting drop-in coffee calls for staff (whether academic or professional). In one case, a Church

of Scotland chaplain set up an invitation-only book club for staff members he identified as potentially isolated or lonely. During the pandemic, the club shifted online and continued to meet during summer 2020 (when it would usually pause), giving its members a much-needed space to socialise and build



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**Chaplains should see part of their role as being to resist 'meetingization' – the reduction of workplace interactions to formal meetings.**



friendships. Such contributions from chaplains are small in scale but can strongly increase the vitality of team culture.

### Developing accompanying presence offline and online

We have argued that accompanying presence – being with individuals in their journey, and more broadly, creating a sense of ‘being around’ and available – is key to understanding chaplaincy, whether in religious or secular terms. ‘Presence’ is a theme that resonates with university chaplains, and according to the *Chaplains on Campus* research, a significant proportion describe it as their primary aim.<sup>8</sup> It was also a notable theme in our interviews.

Despite the significant challenges facing them, university chaplains have maintained an accompanying presence in both senses through the transition online. Some have found the shift has revitalised their work, making chaplaincy more accessible and visible. As we have seen, though, something is lost when pastoral care can only be online, and chaplains are no longer able to rub shoulders with those they seek to serve. **Learning from this, the future of university chaplaincy must be blended, with chaplains continuing to cultivate their online offering (the possibility of online one-to-one meetings and also online community activities) to complement their in-person activities.**



**The future of university chaplaincy must be blended, with chaplains continuing to cultivate their online offering (the possibility of online one-to-one meetings and also online community activities) to complement their in-person activities.**

How might chaplains develop their accompanying presence?

- **They should be proactive in reaching out to students and staff in their networks.**

We heard from our interviewees that a simple email ‘hello’, and an open offer to chat with no particular agenda or purpose, can make a huge difference to isolated people. Chaplains may find it helpful to keep a record of who they have contacted and when, and to adopt a regular discipline of sending checking-in emails to different people every few days.

- **They should develop a persistent presence on social media, including on student community pages if possible.**



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**Where they can, chaplains should also find ways to cultivate humour and a sense of fun on student social media pages.**

Quick videos with short reflections for the day or week can usefully prompt online discussion. Regularity of posts is important; the aim is to become a regular feature of student social media, gently and frequently reminding students that pastoral and spiritual care is available. Where they can, chaplains should also find ways to cultivate

humour and a sense of fun on student pages; a good example of this is one chaplain’s daily “puzzle challenge”, discussed in Chapter 2. When done regularly, such online activities can provide mini rituals, giving students a sense of structure and an opportunity for bonding with others.

- **Religious chaplains should reflect *theologically* on what it means to be an accompanying presence where**

**homeworking is an increasingly significant part of working life.**

For those Christian chaplains who root their work in the incarnational model of chaplaincy, being physically alongside people and sharing their experiences in ordinary life is critical, because it shows that God is present in all aspects of life – including our labour. For these chaplains, the loss of physical presence poses a particular theological challenge beyond the practical obstacles to pastoral care. It may help them to focus on the themes of solidarity and relationship-building. Chaplains may not be sharing the same physical spaces as their colleagues, but they are sharing many of their pandemic experiences – including isolation, feeling anxious, and sometimes juggling the demands of work and childcare. This means they can still offer a sense of solidarity with others based on mutual experiences. Showing solidarity, and the relationship-building it leads to, can be understood as imitating Jesus and reflecting the Incarnation: Christians believe that in coming into the world in Jesus, God seeks to build relationships with humanity and share our experiences, showing a divine solidarity which brings hope.<sup>9</sup>

- **Finally, chaplains should look for ways to boost their physical visibility when they are able to return to campus.**

Once restrictions are eased, chaplains should try to be as visible as they can in public spaces. This could mean sitting in lunch spaces to spot and chat with potentially lonely people; or it could be as simple as setting up a regular outdoor stall at a major campus thoroughfare, or walking around the university wearing any particular clothing that signifies the person's role as a chaplain or faith leader. In so doing they can convey a

visual message to onlookers that there is someone they can talk to about their problems, spiritual as well as secular, which will be particularly important when students and staff eventually return to campus but continue to navigate the trauma of this period.

### Looking forwards: employers

#### Supporting university chaplains

Our interviews highlighted a number of ways in which higher education managers can better support chaplains:

- **They should take active steps to show chaplains that their work is appreciated, and should make more use of chaplains in supporting and developing university policies.**



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**Chaplains may have more to contribute to university strategy than is realised.**

Despite their essential work during the pandemic, some chaplains still report feeling under-appreciated and marginalised by senior management, or left out of decision-making to which they could have meaningfully contributed.

University managers should get to know their chaplains (including the volunteers), meeting with them regularly to learn about any challenges they face and to affirm their work is valued. Managers should also involve chaplains in relevant university committees where appropriate. Chaplains may have more to contribute to university strategy than is realised. Many are keen to help in this way and bring useful perspectives as people with ‘ears to the ground’ across different levels of their organisation.

- **They should ensure that chaplaincy services are advertised regularly in communications to students and staff.**

This is particularly important during the pandemic, when chaplains have lost vital opportunities to meet new students. When drawing attention to chaplaincy, university managers should also clarify that their doors are open to everyone, regardless of religion or belief. It is also worth exploring other ways of helping chaplains connect with new people; one interviewee suggested that an option for students to give chaplains permission to contact them could be included on any form where students register their details with their university.

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**When drawing attention to chaplaincy, universities should clarify that chaplains' doors are open to everyone, regardless of religion or belief.**

- **They should expand the range of chaplains to reflect their university's diversity, and increase funding for chaplaincy posts.**

Universities should see it as a priority to expand their range of chaplains until it reflects the major religion or belief groups on campus. In the short-term, additional posts may need to be filled by volunteers. But universities' reliance on volunteer chaplains, particularly in the case of minority faiths, means they cannot guarantee a consistent level of religion-specific chaplaincy support across different communities. This has become clear during the pandemic, with some volunteer chaplains unable to maintain the level of support they had previously offered. Universities should work towards funding their various chaplaincy posts, as a long-term investment

which will secure chaplaincy provision and the many benefits it brings.

- **They should encourage chaplains to adopt a system for measuring their impact, and should recognise that the impact of chaplaincy lies in the small things.**

Sometimes it can be hard for chaplains to demonstrate their own impact in terms of tangible ‘results’. Attempts to measure impact vary depending on the sector, and whether or not the chaplains in question are volunteers. The *Chaplains on Campus* research found that chaplains working in universities are less likely to have impact assessment measures in place than those working in healthcare or prisons – and that volunteer university chaplains (the majority) are less likely to track impact than paid colleagues. The research also found that this lack of sustained impact assessment contributes to a lack of confidence among university chaplains about their effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

University managers should encourage chaplains (including volunteers) to adopt impact measures which are appropriate to their context and are not overly burdensome. This will help chaplains improve their practice, and ensure they receive the recognition they deserve for their work. Theos’ 2015 report on chaplaincy suggests a process for this.<sup>11</sup>

Including stories in impact assessments is important, because the real impact of chaplaincy is not necessarily captured by numbers. Some chaplains will be unable to point to large numbers of people requesting pastoral conversations, but nonetheless will be making a significant difference in the lives of those they do speak to. Impact for a chaplain could be having one conversation in the day with someone who really needed a person to listen to them. But chaplains also make a

difference to people's lives in ways which are less tangible than this. For example, in our research, in a Post-1992 university the Anglican chaplain sent out regular weekly emails to staff:

*People would say, 'Oh I didn't open the email but it was so nice to see it in the inbox, it reminded me you were there'.*

The simple act of sending out a regular email could remind someone that there is a person available to support them should they ever need it. It is important for employers to appreciate that these small activities can have significant, unseen impact, particularly during periods of crisis.

### Employers outside higher education

Finally, we turn to employers outside universities. As Theos' previous research has shown, chaplains are now well-embedded across different sectors and spaces, from sport to ports to police and town centres, and their numbers are growing.<sup>12</sup> As in higher education, they have been crucial in providing support to workers during the pandemic – including to people working in some of the hardest hit sectors. For example, Lindsay Meader, an Anglican priest in London, is the Senior Chaplain for Theatre Chaplaincy UK, and therefore has pastoral responsibility for anyone working in the theatre sector.<sup>13</sup> With the closure of theatres, Theatre Chaplaincy UK moved online, holding regular meditation and prayer sessions as well

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**University managers should encourage chaplains (including volunteers) to adopt impact measures which are appropriate to their context and are not overly burdensome. The real impact of chaplaincy is not necessarily captured by numbers.**

as socials “for those missing, and in some cases mourning, their theatre jobs”. Meader notes:

*Over 70% of the workforce in the theatre community (including many performers) are freelancers, most of whom have not qualified for any of the government financial support schemes... Most important of all has been getting out the message that we are still here to offer support and a friendly confidential listening ear to everyone who works in the theatre, of all faiths and none.<sup>14</sup>*

One person wrote to her saying:

*Having spent forty years teaching Drama and Theatre Arts, to be deprived of my passion for the wonderful work of others in the theatre and knowing the crisis they are all facing, has sent me into despair... I know so many people who work in all aspects of the industry and I feel you are giving so many of them comfort, calm and hope.<sup>15</sup>*

Such comments show the value of having chaplains embedded across different sectors, already present and ready to serve when crisis occurs.

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**Now is the time for large organisations and employers, in sectors from recruitment to hospitality, to consider providing their employees with access to a chaplaincy service.**

**Following the pandemic, now is the time for large organisations and employers, in sectors from recruitment to hospitality, to consider providing their employees with access to a chaplaincy service.** Employees should be able to access the same kind of informal listening ears that are available to students, whether to work through specific challenges or



moments of crisis, or to discuss larger existential and spiritual questions. The pandemic has encouraged many people to reconsider what is important to them in life, and employers should look for ways to support their employees in this.<sup>16</sup>

Employers should also consider how to prepare for the future of work. As homeworking becomes more normalised and teams remain physically fragmented, they will increasingly benefit from the presence of those who, as a core part of their role, are dedicated to building relationships across the workforce, with a particular eye for identifying and supporting those who may be isolated or lonely. Chaplains and the long-term accompanying presence they offer can provide this crucial role.

## Conclusion

Work on this report finished as the UK passed a terrible milestone – 100,000 deaths from COVID-19.<sup>17</sup> The scale of the loss is inconceivable, and our trauma as a nation will last for many years.

As the pandemic continues, it is important to recognise the chaplains, who have been providing essential pastoral and spiritual support and have borne much of the emotional burden of this crisis – and who will continue to do so, long after the immediate risk posed by COVID-19 is over. This report has been about recognising their contributions in one particular sector, and learning from their stories. University chaplains have faced major obstacles as they have navigated the loss of physical presence on campus, but they have developed new ways of working to continue providing such crucial support to those around them.

The importance of chaplaincy has never been clearer than during the pandemic. As we look to the future, we need to see those organisations (including universities) that already have chaplains ensure they are properly funded, supported and included in relevant decision-making. Large employers elsewhere should recognise they have an interest in taking their employees' spiritual needs seriously, and that providing access to chaplains can be beneficial both to individual wellbeing and to organisational culture.

Above all, we should learn from this experience that major organisations and employers should care about hope. This is not something that emerges spontaneously; it takes investment in people who are hopeful themselves, and have a gift for encouraging hope in others. Taking hope seriously is a good start for ensuring that working life is better than, not the same as, before the pandemic.

- 1 To modify Grace Davie's concept of 'vicarious religion'. See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2015), pp. 81-88.
- 2 Steve Nolan, 'Chaplain as "hopeful presence": working with dying people', *Practical Theology*, 4, 2 (2011), p. 176.
- 3 Ibid, pp. 173-74.
- 4 John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (London: SCM Press, 2018), p. 105.
- 5 See Armand Léon Van Ommen, 'Lament in Times of COVID-19', *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal*, 4, 2 (2020), pp. 113-125.  
<https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-42-SEI-Journal-Summer.pdf>
- 6 Margaret Whipp, 'Embedding chaplaincy: integrity and presence' in John Caperon, Andrew Todd and James Walters (eds.), *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), p. 108. See also John Caperon, 'Chaplaincy and traditional church structures', p. 138, and Andrew Todd, 'Conclusion: an invitation to theology', p. 163, both in Caperon et al, *Christian Theology*.
- 7 See this tweet thread from February 2021 [https://twitter.com/chris\\_herd/status/1359135080753614854](https://twitter.com/chris_herd/status/1359135080753614854). The author, a member of the company Firstbase, says that from his conversations with over 2,000 companies over 2020, 30% of the companies spoken to plan to get rid of their office and move entirely to remote-working. Many worry about the loss of "water cooler chat".
- 8 The researchers asked 367 university chaplains what they thought the "primary aim" of chaplaincy was in telephone interviews. 12% of respondents gave 'presence' as their answer – the third most common aim after 'pastoral' (33%) and 'religious' (18%). Kristin Aune, Mathew Guest and Jeremy Law, *Chaplains on Campus: Understanding Chaplaincy in UK Universities* (Coventry: Coventry University, Durham: Durham University and Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), pp. 36-37.  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Chaplains%20on%20Campus%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- 9 Ben Ryan, 'Theology and models of chaplaincy' in Caperon et al, *Christian Theology*, p. 91 discusses the connections between the incarnational model of chaplaincy and relationship-building.
- 10 Aune et al, *Chaplains on Campus*, p. 112.
- 11 Ben Ryan, *A Very Modern Ministry* (London: Theos, 2015), p. 67-75.  
<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Modern%20Ministry%20combined.pdf>
- 12 Ibid, pp. 14-16.

13 <http://theatrechaplaincyuk.com/>

14 Correspondence with the author, January 2021.

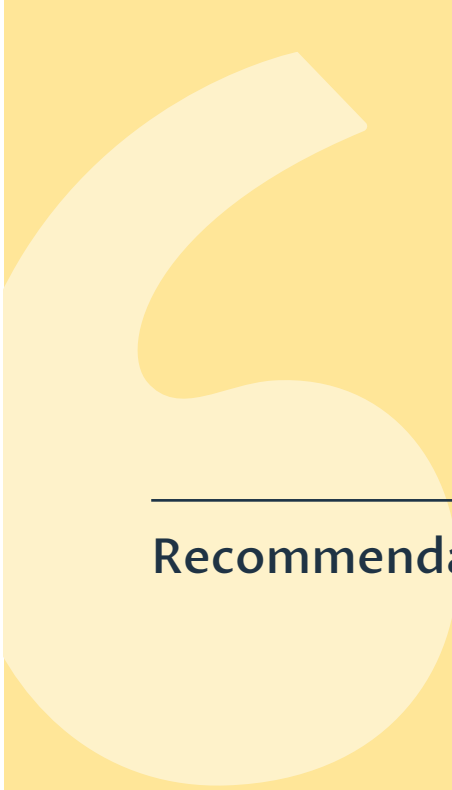
15 Ibid.

16 Paul Bickley, 'Religious trends in a time of international crisis', *Theos*, 11 August 2020.

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2020/08/06/religious-trends-in-a-time-of-international-crisis>

17 'Covid: UK virus deaths exceed 100,000 since pandemic began', *BBC News*, 26 January 2021.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55757378>



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# Recommendations

University chaplains should:

- Build on their learning throughout the pandemic to ensure their future provision is as creative and accessible as possible. This should be part of an active conversation with students and staff: what do they want from chaplaincy?
- Look for ways to boost their visibility. On campus (when restrictions are eased) this means being visible in public spaces as often as possible. Online, it means developing a persistent presence on student social media. After the pandemic, they should continue to offer the opportunity for online meetings (for pastoral support and community activities) as well as in-person activities, to maximise their accessibility.
- Embrace being agents of hope and space-holders for the expression of pain as essential and unique parts of their role, and articulate the importance of this to their managers.
- Look to generate new informal opportunities for socialising ('water-cooler moments'), particularly for staff. This may mean proactively inviting staff to join online or offline groups. It is particularly important to reach out to part-time teaching staff, and non-academic staff.
- Be proactive in emailing individual students and staff in their networks to check in with them regularly.
- Check in regularly with faith and belief societies to offer support. Bear in mind that many will be struggling to maintain their activities during the pandemic.

### University managers should:

- Get to know their chaplains, meeting with them regularly to learn about any challenges they face and to affirm that their work is valued.
- Involve chaplains in relevant university committees where appropriate. Chaplains may have more to contribute to university strategy than is realised.
- Ensure that chaplaincy services are advertised regularly in communications to students and staff, clarifying that anyone can make use of them, regardless of religion or belief.
- Encourage their chaplains to adopt a system for measuring their impact. Managers should also recognise that the impact of chaplaincy lies in the small things.
- Expand the range of chaplains to reflect the major religion or belief groups on campus, and increase the funding for individual chaplaincy posts, depending on the need. They could consider inviting religion or belief groups (national or local) to contribute part of the funds for the posts.

### Religious organisations should:

- Consider the provision of chaplaincy (in universities and in other sectors) as part of their service to the community.
- National level churches (including cross-church partnerships) should seek to ensure that there is at least one funded chaplaincy post (ideally full-time) in each university. National religious minority organisations should explore routes to accrediting, supporting and training chaplains from their community.

- On a local level, the main religious minority communities should each consider working to fund a part-time chaplaincy post representing their faith in their local university. They should explore whether universities are willing to share part of the funding costs for a chaplain, to make the role more financially sustainable.

Large employers should:

- Consider employing or appointing chaplains as a means of improving their support for employees' mental and spiritual wellbeing in the long-term, especially as homeworking becomes more common.





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# Theos – enriching conversations

**Theos exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society.**

Religion and faith have become key public issues in this century, nationally and globally. As our society grows more religiously diverse, we must grapple with religion as a significant force in public life. All too often, though, opinions in this area are reactionary or ill informed.

## **We exist to change this**

We want to help people move beyond common misconceptions about faith and religion, behind the headlines and beneath the surface. Our rigorous approach gives us the ability to express informed views with confidence and clarity.

As the UK's leading religion and society think tank, we reach millions of people with our ideas. Through our reports, events and media commentary, we influence today's influencers and decision makers. According to *The Economist*, we're "an organisation that demands attention". We believe Christianity can contribute to the common good and that faith, given space in the public square, will help the UK to flourish.



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the 21st Century**

Nick Spencer

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Chaplains have been doing vital work during the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting the isolated, comforting the bereaved, and providing pastoral and spiritual care to anyone who needs it. Their stories, which so often go unheard and under-appreciated, deserve to be told.

This report captures the pandemic experiences of university chaplains, who have been frontline responders to a massive mental health crisis among students. It explores the unique contributions of chaplains during this time, the challenges they have faced, and the lessons that can be learned by chaplains, higher education managers and other employers.

It also emphasises the critical role of chaplains in building relationships across campus, maintaining an accompanying presence even in times of physical separation, and being agents of hope. The value of this work has never been clearer than during the pandemic, and will continue to be important as we recover from it.



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