



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

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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.¹

In universities, chaplains have faced 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.² 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.³
- 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.⁴

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.

- 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.⁵
- 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.⁶
- 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.⁷ 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

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>

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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