

How Multifaith Chaplaincy Can Aid Mission

Summary of the Clergy Learning Day held on 7 November 2017

This event was held to support chaplains in their increasing role, in the workplace, in hospitals, in universities and in prisons – to name just a few, as they provide non-judgemental, confidential support and comfort wherever there is need, in whatever situation.

It started with the Revd Dr Fiona Stewart-Darling, Lead Chaplain at the Canary Wharf Multifaith Chaplaincy, giving an introductory talk on what mission looks like in a multi-faith chaplaincy context based on her recent book.¹ She stressed that it is important for chaplains to be rooted in their faith communities, and to build relationships within the institutions with which they work. Demonstrating to secular organisations that religion was not something to fear is critical.

Revd Stewart-Darling identified the paradox of the decline of religion in Britain, accompanied by an increase in conversations about God in public. As the academic Grace Davie has pointed out, the UK might be becoming less Christian, but it is still coloured by it. In the rest of the world, religion still plays a major role, particularly in Africa and Asia, and people who self-define as ‘non-affiliated’ are expected to decline. Religion in all its guises is not going away. As theologian David Ford put it, ‘It is no longer viable not to do God.’

When considering the benefits of working in a multi-faith chaplaincy environment, the speaker emphasised how chaplains can draw on their shared experiences when working on projects and trying to encourage conversations about God in the workplace – especially when navigating the tensions between secular and religious forces. In these contexts, chaplains must always remember that they are outsiders who have been invited into what are often non-religious spaces. Therefore hospitality has to be a key part of any sense of mission. At the same time, she stressed that chaplains are there to ‘hold mirrors up to organisations in which we serve.’

Revd Stewart-Darling used the Emmaus Road Bible story as a model for chaplaincy, involving four key elements:

- Listening
- Answering questions
- Scriptural explanation and help with understanding, and
- Choice and recognition.

She also touched on how people can still want to explore issues of faith even if they initially claim they do not. The key therefore is sometimes for chaplains to listen rather than talk. To connect with people effectively,

¹ Fiona Stewart-Darling, Multifaith Chaplaincy in the Workplace: How Chaplains Can Support Organizations. London 2017, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

chaplains above all need to be willing to speak to people on their terms, employing their own terminology, and to be empathetic and willing to be challenged in their own.

Revd Stewart-Darling's talk was followed by a three-way conversation between Fiona's colleagues at the Canary Wharf multifaith chaplaincy, Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman and Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra. Rabbi Freedman discussed how multifaith chaplains can work well together because of, rather than despite, their differences. Shaykh Mogra affirmed this by talking of the self-development and constant sense of learning he felt working alongside his colleagues. The three also emphasised the importance of adhering to their own individual beliefs, and being able to listen without compromising on that. Rabbi Freedman insisted that it is vital not to shy away from controversial conversation topics; otherwise relationships can become very superficial.

The three panellists then discussed the challenges they often face, including persuading those with no religious beliefs that chaplains are still there to support them. They emphasized their role of signposting to appropriate traditions or faiths without proselytizing in spite of Christianity and Islam being missionary religions. Above all, when faced with such challenges the panellists agreed on the need for honesty, trust and avoiding any exploitation of those with those who might be vulnerable. The role of chaplain is merely to make the ground 'as fertile as possible' and to let people start the conversation, in the hope that eventually, they will reveal their reasons for doing so.

The Revd Andrew Wilson, a university chaplain at London's Imperial College, described some of the experiences faced by chaplains in his situation, including the degree to which aspects of faith come alive for people at university, as well as the need to understand how power structures can operate in specific contexts, as well as their implications. Those present discussed the key issues they face together and reconvened to highlight the themes raised, which included:

- The challenges of working with humanist chaplains, who can sometimes be very combative towards those in of faith. It was also mentioned that tensions can often rise far more between chaplains of different denominations rather than different religions.
- The difference between faith, which can be personal, and religion, which is far more about community.
- A lot of people have been very damaged by religion, and chaplains need to respect that.
- Interfaith work needs to be about actions, not just discussion.
- Chaplains must not just assume that people will know what they are talking about – any religious language needs to be clear, with explanations offered if necessary.
- Chaplains are also an alien concept in many places, so it is important to develop roots. Many of those present said they also felt forgotten by their diocese, with far more emphasis being given to parish priests rather than chaplains.
- There is no 'one size fits all.' Chaplaincy has to focus on the needs of the individual in that moment, no matter what type of chaplaincy it is.