Chaplaincy as an expression of the Church’s Mission

HE Chaplains’ Conference

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Assumptions

- Chaplaincy is an unavoidably contextual ministry – unless university chaplaincy is involved in the business of the university it isn’t chaplaincy
- We need a theology of mission which enables, rather than disables, good contextual ministry and full, if critical, engagement with the university
- Such a theology should serve the wider contextual ministry of the Church
Further assumptions

That such a theology of mission should enable:

• Direct engagement with education (considering what would be good for university chaplaincy to be and do)

• Engagement within a secular context (considering what would be possible for university chaplaincy to be and do)
Aims

• To consider the context of chaplaincy (the university as educational institution; and as secular liberal institution)

• To reflect on how that shapes university chaplaincy; and on the implications for a theology of mission that enables chaplaincy

• To consider the implications for the churches (both in their support for chaplains and in their wider life)
Context 1

Whatever happened to education? Marketization:

• Increased student numbers & reduced direct funding (a culture of managed ‘efficiency’)
• Student loans – the individual financial value of a degree (a shift from public to private benefit)
• Student-led finance – the move to service provision as a model of education
• Constrained competition – the curious market economy of higher education (fees and quotas; overseas students)
Context 1

Indicators of commodification:

- Department as cost centres
- Measurable outcomes (and QA)
- Student feedback (and litigation)
- Transferable skills and employability
- Impact (and the REF)
- Teaching qualifications for lecturers
Discernment needed:

• A move from a poor education for the elite to an elite education for all?
• A move to an instrumental approach to education and the loss of wisdom?
• A move away from universities as centres of public culture?

Discernment requires:

• A theology of education (of public excellence)
• A theology of competition and the market
The world of political liberalism

Secular norms shaping the university:

• Respect for diversity
• Equal opportunities for all
• Human rights
• Pluralism as public good
• Tolerance and fairness as driving values
The limits of tolerance, diversity and free speech

• The concern about (violent) ‘extremism’
• Prevent
• ‘Cohesion’/’integration’
• Religion as ‘problem’ (and as resource)
• Religion speaking within the public space
Reflection

The challenge – to work with the strange mix of opportunity and constraint (religion as problem and resource), for example:

• The ambiguity of religion as ‘protected characteristic’
• The great taboo – proselytisation
• The religion-spirituality dichotomy
• The emergence of multi-faith teams and spaces
• The unspoken parameters of publically acceptable religion?
Implications

Positioning university chaplaincy:
• Engagement, dialogue and a distinctive voice
• Between collusion and separatism (entrepreneurialism; subversion?)
• Thinking educationally (with others)
• Knowing one’s mind on pluralism
• Resisting dualisms
• Understanding the ‘sacred’ – imaginaries (and counter-imaginaries)
• Being publically coherent
Implications

Chaplaincy as mission:

• Two-way dynamic – mutual feeding
• Contributing to the educational work of the university requires dialogue – to be informed by the best views on education, the economy and the best ways of stimulating critical and imaginative responses
• This dialogue needs to happen in public – governed by secular norms (which also need to be understood to be critiqued)
• What theology of mission enables this approach?
Mission

• Not the boundaried mission of the church, but the encompassing mission of God (*Missio Dei*)
• Not the illusion of ‘Christendom’ but the reality of the Kingdom
• Not the either/or of evangelism or something else, but an holistic understanding of the richness of mission
• Not the understanding of mission; but one distinctive approach
If university chaplaincy has educational, pastoral, spiritual, ethical and ritual dimensions, then certain ‘marks’ of mission are apparent:

• Identifying truth, nurturing faith; person-centred pastoral care; a perspective on justice
• But also acting as a symbol of the ‘sacred’
• Chaplaincy is a particular kind of proclamation (Perhaps more effective than ‘Evangelism’? An opportunity created by the taboo on proselytisation?)
• But what theology makes that possible?
Theology of mission

• Being alive to the mission of God (Missio Dei) – discerning God’s presence and action (e.g. in the development of HE; in the Economy; in secular public institutions)

• The church’s responsibility is not to be the Kingdom of God, but to identify it and announce it (‘in the midst’)

• Where the discovery of the Kingdom creates the possibility of metanoia – transformation that is life-giving

• And where the church’s participation in that transformation is sacramental – a sign of the kingdom
I propose that the ‘third space’ of dialogue offers a distinctive model for mission:

• About holding commonality and difference
• Allows for proclamation and listening
• About taking the next step in sharing truth
• Deferring the (modern) decision about whether truth is plural, exclusive, or inclusive
• Relocates ‘Evangelism’ as the shared identification of the encompassing Kingdom of God (rather than primarily about...
Implications - overview

• Rebalancing the centripetal congregational dynamic (with the centrifugal dimension of ministry)
• Focus on how the church can be distinctive pastoral presence, do public engagement, offer critical ethical friendship, create inclusive rituals and spaces and hold plural personal and institutional responses within dialogue
• Embrace dialogue as a way of holding together listening, proclamation, interpreting and Kingdom finding
Implications – church & chaplaincy

• Listening to chaplaincy and learning from chaplains
• Balancing the dynamic of expectation
• Reviewing what we mean by ‘core purpose’
• Offer chaplains the chance to develop skills related to dialogue – listening, attentiveness, reflection, discernment, interpretation, inter-disciplinarity, imagination
• Support chaplains as they identify and articulate the ‘sacred’ – a theological, ethical and ritual task
Implications – church and university

• Develop a contemporary theology of higher education – wisdom in the marketplace
• Develop underpinning theologies (in dialogue with others) – anthropology and teleology
• Explore what it means to engage in evangelism as dialogue, and in dialogue
• Connect the university and the congregation
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