

CONFERENCE REPORT - 'CHAPLAINCY FOR TOMORROW'

Georgina Nelson

Introduction

Between March 25th and 27th of this year, just over eighty participants gathered at Crieff, having been invited to attend the above conference. 'Chaplaincy for Tomorrow' was the fruit of long planning and preparation on the part of the Church of Scotland's Board of National Mission, and in his opening address, convener Rev. Jim Gibson expressed the hope that it would prove to be 'a school for listening and learning together'. Its stated aims were, to provide an opportunity for those involved in every aspect of chaplaincy to meet together; to address issues concerning chaplaincy; to assist the church to address the opportunities and challenges of chaplaincy in the 21st century; to explore ways in which chaplains might be better supported in their frontier task.

The phrase 'frontier task' has a vaguely heroic ring to it. I hadn't thought of my daily journey to St. John's hospital as an expedition to the frontier. To me, it is home; a familiar place where I find a good measure of welcome and acceptance. But, light heartedness aside, 'frontier task' is an interesting way for a board of the church to describe chaplaincy. Working at the frontier implies distance from the centre, from the place where committees consult and policy is devised. Frontier work suggests innovation, difference, creativity, constant engagement with what is new and challenging; negatively, it may also carry with it the sense of apartness, the threat of isolation, the blurring of role and purpose – and, to quote a phrase which cropped up at the conference – the danger of 'going native'. Echoes of all these things could be heard in the discussions at Crieff, as frontiersmen and women, and representatives of 'the centre' (if 121 George Street can be so described, in all Christian love), listened to each other and, hopefully, learned together.

Themes in common

Preparation began before we arrived at Crieff. In order to prepare the ground for the meeting of chaplains from diverse fields, participants were sent a

series of brief and illuminating papers summarizing the philosophy and work of chaplains in healthcare, prison, university, the armed forces, the police force, school and industry. I came to the conference with a sense of at least some of the differences that exist; for example, chaplaincy to the armed forces is perhaps the most structured, the most closely defined in terms of its role, while chaplaincy within the workplace is much more in a position to carve out its own niche and discover its own relevance to the particular setting; healthcare chaplaincy is long established and generally accepted, if not always entirely understood, while chaplaincy within the police force is at a much earlier stage in its development., and in the eyes of some, still in the process of proving its worth.

And yet, many themes, it seemed to me, were held in common, and this sense was reinforced in the course of the conference itself, as speakers from various branches of chaplaincy gave us their insights, and representatives from the areas in which we serve, notably Hector Mackenzie, head of patient focus and quality at SEHD, Sir John Arbuthnott, Chairman of Greater Glasgow NHS board, Professor Bernard King, Principal of Abertay University, and Colin Mitchell, head teacher of Dumfries High School, told of their expectations of and valuing of chaplains. Themes in common include: the building of relationships in whatever setting in which the chaplain works; affirmation of the worth of the individual; contributing to the life and ethos of a community; symbolizing, helping promote, instilling certain values, alongside colleagues of other disciplines; being available to all, regardless of rank, status or standing; modelling teamwork, ecumenical and multi-faith relations; being 'a safe space'; having a concern for justice; and not least, accompanying others on a journey, whether it be the prison chaplain who offers accompaniment 'to those prepared to make the painful journey away from that which is false towards that which is true', or the forces chaplain who accompanies servicemen and

women in their emotional and physical preparations for war, or indeed the hospital chaplain who accompanies the patient on his journey through that strange and sometimes terrifying terrain of illness and hospitalisation. In our various settings, part of the chaplain's task is connected with 'promoting operational effectiveness', and yet the paper produced on behalf of the Royal Air force Chaplains' Branch surely speaks for all when it explains that 'the guiding principles of the Pastoral and Spiritual Care Policy are to be most clearly seen in the out-working of the kingdom of God'

Exploring Issues

As is usual in a successful conference, much of the work of exploring of issues went on in the course of lively and animated discussions outwith the formal sessions. Within the conference proper, one plenary session and a session of group discussion was devoted to an analysis of a questionnaire which participants had filled in beforehand. This questionnaire was described as a 'snapshot' piece of research, and invited us to identify among other things key issues, problems and frustrations in our chaplaincy, our views on supervision, training and career structure, our suggestions as to how the church might best affirm and support chaplains, and our vision for the future. Results were analysed and presented to us by Dr. Iain Barclay. I was interested in the sense that emerged that many working in chaplaincy feel a kind of liberty and release from the structures and expectations of the institutional church and its parish ministry, as we work alongside those of many faiths or none. There is a perception of lack of understanding and support from a church which still views parish ministry as the norm and the gold standard, as it were. (Dr Barclay posed the question as to how the board of ministry would react to someone with a definite call *not* to the parish but to chaplaincy.) Interesting too is the demand among chaplains for training in management, perhaps more especially training in managing change.

For healthcare chaplains, much hope for the future is invested in change arising from the publication of the NHS Guidelines, and a vision emerges of a chaplaincy service which is ecumenical, person centred, professional, and staffed, trained and funded adequately. Issues highlighted include on call commitment, whether we should be employed by Trust

or by the Church, and how we are to develop as a profession.

Responding to Issues: points for action

The final morning of the conference was devoted to further exploration and response. This was led by conference reporters Dr Alison Elliot and Sir Neil Mackintosh, who gave us their overall impressions of all that they had heard, and distilled its essence into several 'points for action'. Dr Elliot commented that the Board had 'loitered creatively' as it were, but that 'loitering has to become leadership, as the church articulates where it is going.'

The points for action are six in number, and I reproduce them below. To each of them representatives of the board made preliminary response at the time, and pledged to pursue them in further discussion and consultation.

- That the board should reflect upon this conference and look for ways of building upon the connections made here.
- That the board should address inconsistencies in the treatment of Chaplains and other ministers
- That the board should facilitate close working and joint development of all varieties of Ministry within the Church
- That the Church should ensure that Chaplains are equipped to do a professional job
- That the Board should undertake developmental work to assess training needs and how they can best be addressed
- That Chaplains should have the opportunity and encouragement to make available to others, in the Church and in the community, the skills and insights they develop in their work.

Highlights and Memories

The above makes no pretence to being an exhaustive report of what was a stimulating but intense conference. Other highlights included the opportunity given to participants to visit areas of chaplaincy outwith our own; venues included RAF Leuchars, Polmont Young Offenders Institution, Ninewells hospital, Lintrathen water treatment Plant and Dundee City Council. John Swinton provided us with some challenging thoughts on the identity and pro-

fessionalism of chaplains. Ivan Middleton, who may have felt, if he will excuse the biblical allusion, a little like a lion in a den of Daniels, gave us a valuable humanist perspective on the proceedings. Gillesbuig Macmillan led our worship inspiringly, and left us with the humbling but strangely comforting thought that perhaps our identity consists more in how we are perceived than in how we perceive ourselves. David Wilkes, Deputy Chaplain General to the army, related to us Studdart Kennedy's advice to Theodore Baillie Hardy, i.e. 'Work in the frontline, and they will listen to you' and 'take fags in your rucksack' (adherence to the latter would increase the cred of the healthcare chaplain no end in some quarters, but in others a dim view might be taken – but the point is still well made!). We sang the 23rd psalm unaccompanied, to the tune 'Stracathro'. Bill Speirs sang to *us* (not a psalm, I hasten to add, but 'The Scottish Breakaway') And, for those struggling at this very moment with the ramifications of HDL(2002)76, Sir John Arbuthnott explained to us that in some quarters HDL is said to stand for Hell, Damnation and Lamentation. What more can life hold?

The Board of National Mission intends to produce its own report for participants, to which I refer any who would like a fuller overview.

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Note:

Dr. Alison Elliot is preparing a conference report which will be circulated to all participants.

Dr. Elliot has also been engaged in producing a booklet called, provisionally, 'Frontier Spirit'. This is to be published by Scottish Christian press, and hopefully will be ready in time to be launched at the forthcoming conference 'A Seamless Transition' organised by the Scottish Executive. The latter will be held on November 26th, at the Inchyra Hotel. Polmont.

Readers might also be interested to see the chapter entitled 'On Other People's Territory : Chaplaincy', which she contributed to 'Inside Verdict' edited by Steve Mallon, Scottish Christian press, 2003.