

HEALTHCARE CHAPLAINCY: TAKING OUR WORK TO CHURCH

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Abstract: The Christian church as traditionally constituted is facing grave decline. For many, the church is an inhospitable place in which to voice questions and to express pain. Do hospital chaplains have a role to play in creating a church in which people feel more able to express the varieties of their spiritual journey? The author suggests three ways in which chaplains might take their work to church: - by enabling more meaningful and varied forms of worship; by sharing their experience of honestly meeting people where they are; by encouraging a sense of 'sacred space'.

Keywords : church; hospital chaplain; spirituality; sacred space.

Introduction

In October 2001, a month after the atrocities of September 11th, Rev. David Denniston of Perth North Parish Church preached the following words: "In the face of all the uncertainties and challenges of life, of society, and of the world, the majority of people – still looking for comfort, security, meaning, significance, in the face of all that life and the world throws at them – have stopped looking to the Church for these things. They do not consider the Church can provide them with the answers to the concerns and questions that gnaw away within."

As a hospice chaplain, I would go even further. I would say that people do not find in the Church in general a hospitable place in which they feel able to ask their questions, voice their pain, and be supported as they make their spiritual journey. Nothing illustrates this so well as the "Alpha junkie" phenomenon: people join Alpha Courses, become Christians, then cannot make the transition from course to church. The course is open to inquirers, inviting, challenging; the Church is often none of these things. Many churches that have hoped to fill their vacant pews following an Alpha Course have been disappointed. In some, people return for course after course, yet never attend a service.

A chaplaincy perspective

The Christian Church, in all its branches, is facing grave decline. Yet within healthcare, chaplaincy is in demand. This is surely because as chaplains, we have had to redefine ourselves. We have had to recognise that there is a difference between spirituality, however we may choose to define it, and religion. We have had

to find a way to "be there" for patients and staff of all faiths and none. We befriend people, and seek to make of our companionship a hospitable space in which they can explore the meaning and purpose of their lives. Our fellow church members are often unaware of what we do, and may be shocked to find out. At the St. Columba's Fellowship Conference held at Lee Abbey in May 2000, one delegate had this to say in his / her evaluation: "At work, not many understand my Church; at Church, no – one understands my work." This can be a painful situation for chaplains. Yet with the problems facing the Church today, our experience might prove useful. Are we being called to take our work to Church?

Worship for the wounded

At the Marie Curie conference, "Spirituality – the Essence of Living" (October 2001), psychiatrist Dr. John Donohoe said that he thinks it is important to find a spirituality for life without God and the hereafter, first, and then to seek a spirituality which *includes* God and the hereafter. This could be echoed by many in our times. When people see hijackers fly planes into buildings in the name of God as they understand Him, and with the intent to win glory in the afterlife, it's little wonder they become suspicious of religion - all religion. If the Church wishes to increase in relevance to society, then it will have to meet people where they are, help them to ask their questions and find their way – even at the risk of that way not being the Christian way, or at least not the institutionalised way of the Church.

In my own church, Perth North, the Ministry Team, Kirk Session and congregation are working together to find new ways of "doing

church” and “being church”. We’ve sought to help those who can find no spiritual home in church after an Alpha Course, by holding “thursday@seven” in the hall, following the structure and ethos of Alpha. Perhaps this is an area in which we chaplains could take our work to Church – in meetings and services which veer away from the traditional, which allow for questioning and seeking. Within healthcare, services are not standard. They have to suit both the environment and the needs of those present. The weekly service I hold at Roxburghe House in Dundee is usually an intimate service, and this intimacy often leads to interruptions and disclosures. Grief may be poured out. Anger may be voiced in disagreement with something I’ve said, because of the intense suffering of the patient. I often have to admit to my own vulnerability and ignorance in the face of life’s mysteries. And sometimes that’s enough; people don’t always want answers; compassionate solidarity often suffices.

The Life Tree

I’m sure we all have different ways of “meeting people where they are”, and accompanying them, from that point, on their spiritual journey. An exercise I sometimes use to help people, and also to help myself understand where they are is “The Life Tree”. We sometimes come across patients who profess profound religious beliefs, yet who are totally confused and angered by the situation in which they find themselves. Rev. Tom Gordon, in his book, “A Need for Living” describes such patients well under the heading, “The Broken Contract”. Such patients have not let faith touch their hearts. They have taken on someone else’s faith, wholesale, just as it was taught to them, and have not worked it out for themselves. I think of it as rather like buying a Christmas Tree package. You get the tree and all the trimmings, in the colour co-ordination and thematic design of your choice. It certainly pleases the eye; but will it satisfy the heart as much as a tree with baubles bought the first Christmas you were married, or on holiday, or gifted by friends, or made by your children?

I sometimes use this illustration to encourage people to think through their own spirituality, as well as to help me make an assessment of where they are. On the branches of their metaphorical Life Tree, they can hang the things that are important to them, and we can explore these areas in conversation. This is healing, as we stand on the common ground of humanity, talking about the kind of things in which most of us will find meaning and purpose. Moving to the top of the tree can be uncomfortable for some.

On the top of my Christmas Tree, I have a star. I couldn’t have anything else. It represents my faith and my personal spiritual quest. But not everyone could subscribe to my truth, even if they feel they ought somehow to be able to. It’s important to be honest about what’s at the top. No chaplain would judge a patient who couldn’t put a star on top, nor would they abandon them. To quote another illustration from Tom Gordon’s book, he likens Christianity to the best umbrella in the world, but asks what is the point of offering it to someone whose shoes are leaking. Chaplains have a lot of experience to bring to any church which is honestly willing to meet people where they are.

Sacred space

We might also have something to teach about “sacred space”. Congregations can pull out pews, install multi-media, even knock down and rebuild; and this is radical and valid as far as it goes. But some people will never find an echo for their soul in a building which is alien to their way of thinking. At the end of November 2001, the staff of our Day Care Unit asked for a Christmas Remembrance Service to be held for the benefit of patients, volunteers, and themselves. They felt this had to be done before they could go on to celebrate Christmas. We opened the folding doors between The Retreat, as we call our little chapel, and the lounge, and held it there, in the place where we had shared so much with those who had died. The lighting of candles helped to create an ambience, but the atmosphere was charged with the memory of shared experience. “I could almost see them sitting in their old places,” said one person; “I wouldn’t set foot in a church, but I needed that,” said another. We had truly been on sacred ground. Chaplains know that sacred space comes into being whenever there is sharing on this level. The Church needs to recognise that the church building is not always the appropriate place to reach people. As well as doing more to explore the common ground of our spirituality, the Church needs to go to where that spirituality is lived out.

These ideas aren’t new. We find strong echoes in our own Celtic heritage. The ancient missionaries knew that they were among a people who were already spiritual. They didn’t see themselves as taking God to them; they sought to find common ground, both metaphorically and literally – as when they took over pagan places of worship for Christ – and they revealed that God was already there. Sometimes, it is possible to help people put that star at the top of their tree. Chaplains know this. As Margaret

Silf says in her book, "Sacred Spaces": "For all of us, the only beliefs to which our deepest heart and soul can consent are those which our personal experience endorses."

Conclusion

In conclusion, we chaplains have a lot to offer our individual churches and denominations. We may be standing on the margins because we are uneasy ourselves at the redefinition our profession has taken. We may fear what our fellow members would think of us. But the Christian Church is facing a serious situation – just as chaplaincy itself would be if chaplains concentrated solely on the religious needs of the few. Sheila Cassidy, in "Sharing the Darkness," has

this to say: "It seems to me that hospices have unconsciously taken on a prophetic role in the church and in society at large. They evangelise in the most effective way – unconsciously – by living a faith that is credible to unbelievers."

References

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