Review


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The editors of this book come from both a humanistic science and a theological background rather than being chaplains themselves. Wendy Cadge is a sociologist with a focus on spirituality, health and religion. Shelly Rambo is a theologian who examines the intersections of Christian theology and the post-modern world. This brings a strength to the inclusion of several contributors linked to various chaplaincy sectors. The intention of the editors and contributors is to provide a teaching resource tool for chaplaincy in the North American context. The process for writing this book has been a successful collaboration between academic writers and researchers.

The book’s intended audience is those who are considering and seeking to serve as chaplains, and it features the work of the chaplain in different sectors. It aims to be a resource for those interested in chaplaincy and those currently serving, alongside those in training. It outlines three broad areas of competency within the rapidly changing landscape of American religion and spirituality. This includes an emphasis on chaplains having skills in religious literacy or “meaning-making”, the positive interpersonal competencies necessary both for interactions and for navigating systems and organizations. Significantly, the author refers to the importance of chaplaincy both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many within UK chaplaincy have read texts such as A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies, edited by Christopher Swift, Mark Cobb and Andrew Todd, which helpfully contextualizes chaplaincy in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Being a Chaplain, by Miranda Threlfall-Holmes and Mark Newitt, describes more locally to the United Kingdom what a chaplain does in a variety of sectors. I would suggest that those who are interested should read these books too.
With regard to Cadge and Rambo’s book, key questions are explored, such as: “How should chaplains navigate organizations? What should chaplains do when confronted by differential power dynamics? How can chaplains foster meaningful interpersonal relations with individuals of all backgrounds while remaining grounded in the chaplains’ own traditions?”

This book positively highlights how chaplains contribute towards people making meaning in difficult circumstances across a diverse range of beliefs, faiths and cultures. Even when someone’s past sources of meaning collapse, chaplains are able to support explorations of new meaning.

Some of the language used in the book requires an adjustment of thinking, for example, using the term “careseeker” for those the chaplain supports. For me, this might suggest that a person has to seek out chaplaincy care, rather than the chaplain offering it, or someone suggesting chaplaincy on a person’s behalf. There is also a lot of emphasis in the text on organizational competency. Although this was engaging, I would have preferred this section to be shorter.

The main topics of this book include “meaning-making” with reference to the COVID-19 crisis, and how it is possible for people to imagine a better future; “interpersonal competencies”, emphasizing the importance of the chaplain’s unique role compared with other approaches; and finally, “organizational competencies”, recognizing the inescapable link chaplains have to their organizations.

This book is a reminder to chaplains that it is possible to describe the benefits of spiritual care and chaplaincy in healthcare settings. It should enable chaplains to think differently about their work, especially as they read the section on interpersonal competencies, as I would suggest it is often about who the chaplain is that influences the quality of spiritual care delivered.

The final appendix includes a competency checklist for the provision of chaplaincy. This should be helpful for those coming into chaplaincy, or for those inducting and developing into the role. Although its remit is broad in order to cover different sectors, this book helps to position chaplaincy as a much needed provision, exemplified by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which chaplains creatively adjusted and learned new ways of doing things for the benefit of others.

References