Spirituality: A Keystone for the University Chaplaincy within a Multi-Cultural Context

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Abstract
Background: Many Irish University Chaplaincies were established by a specific religious tradition to serve members of that tradition. In that context University’s Chaplain role was defined in terms of the Chaplains ‘religious’ duties. More recently, due to the evolving religious, spiritual and cultural dynamics in Irish universities, the Chaplain’s role is less defined and is evolving.

Aims and Objectives: This paper examines the changing role of the university chaplain within the emerging multicultural context of university life.

Theoretical Perspectives/Methodology: An ethnographic design was employed. This involved one-to-one and observation interviews with University Chaplains in Ireland and in the UK. Policies and work-practices were examined to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the environmental culture of University Chaplaincy. Formal ethical approval was not required because we examine work-roles in the context of routine quality improvement. The study does not involve individual or personal data, and the rights of individuals and institutions are respected.

Topic: The provision of religious services remains a key aspect of University Chaplaincy. However, expansion of chaplaincy services is increasingly expected, to reflect the changed milieu of University life and to demonstrate relevance within a secular domain. Responding to such challenges, Chaplains strive to honour the university’s diverse needs and support people of all faiths and none. Consequently, the Chaplain’s role has expanded, incorporating a multitude of pastoral/spiritual components. The Chaplain’s wider portfolio incorporates non-traditional religious initiatives: mental health, volunteering, hospitality and one-to-one counselling. While these initiatives are compatible with chaplaincy, are Chaplains undermining fundamental elements of Chaplaincy?

Conclusions and Implications: The chaplain’s role remains a pivotal support to the University, that may, otherwise have no spiritual or religious reference. The role of the University Chaplain needs to be sufficiently flexible to adequately respond to the diverse needs of this multicultural population. While this flexibility may be seen to dilute the role of the Chaplain, the development of a core underlying spirituality will provide a secure foundation to the Chaplaincy. This will ensure that the work of the Chaplaincy, expressed in a multitude of ways, will remain relevant, religiously responsive and pastorally caring to all who need it.