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# Know your place: university chaplaincy in a large, secular university

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## ABSTRACT

University chaplaincy has undergone significant change in recent times as universities have been impacted by global events as well as cultural shifts and forces in the tertiary education sector. This article reflects on my experience as a Christian chaplain in two large civic universities in New Zealand and Scotland. It explores the disruptions and opportunities of this period of instability in those contexts and how these might concretely inform the practise of ministry with students and staff.

## KEYWORDS

Chaplaincy; ministry; university; pastoral theology; chaplain; contextual; mission

University chaplaincy has undergone significant change in the past decade, and even five years ago this article would have read quite differently. This intense period of global events and shifts in the wider tertiary sector has required adjustments in practice and thinking, both for universities themselves and for chaplaincies within them. So, this is an attempt to reflect on my experience as a Christian chaplain since 2013 in two large (30–40,000 students), civic, international universities: first in Auckland, New Zealand and most recently in Scotland. My own responses are still forming, embedded as they are within the realities of the work itself, so there is scope for more considered theological reflection, perhaps at some remove from those day-to-day pressures. For now, this is an initial attempt to interpret chaplaincy as a form of ministry, aided by others whose thought I have found helpful, thus far.

Since inception, universities have been shaped by and have shaped the environmental, socio-political, and economic forces of their time. The current situation is no different. But, in view of the frequency and intensity of global challenges and recent events such as the pandemic, it is worth acknowledging the effect of these on life and ministry in this setting. Life has changed for everyone in the university, so it is little wonder that the understanding and practice of ministry has also, especially if we bear in mind the background of church change and decline over some decades in the West. In secular universities within my lifetime the perception and practice of minister-chaplains, whether attached to a secular university established within the last 150 years or to an ancient institution founded by the church centuries ago, has altered dramatically. Yet, many aspects of ministry have not adjusted to accompany that change, so it is worth giving more focused attention to redefining our theoretical approaches to what this evolving practice, within fluid and complex secular settings. Chaplaincy must be nimble and adaptive, mindful of its theological and religious identity as well as its part within a longer story.

The more recent and marked instability has meant that at times this ‘ministry’ has been more like a crisis-response of reactions to pastoral emergencies, operational adjustments, internal and external pressures, than shaped by any prayerful or coherent practical theology. (Even the difficulty of writing this article over several months, and setting time set aside repeatedly interrupted, has brought this home.) It has helped to acknowledge and make allowances for the fact that *some* of these interruptions, rather than derailing the real work or being distant ‘issues’, are part of what concretely informs the approach to such ministry. One example is the way it has evolved to serve a wider, or different, sector of the university community. Whereas resources and leadership formerly focused on regular Christian worship in certain modes (such as daily morning prayer services, Sunday morning worship, or graduation services) have had to be reviewed in the face of dwindling interest, other opportunities have been forthcoming. This has allowed for new and traditional forms of Christian expression (such as Christmas or Ash Wednesday services, contemplative music, or art exhibitions) as well as gatherings for a broader sector of the University community, such as silent vigils or shared ritual moments held in times of loss and collective trauma or for significant international events and conflicts. As other chaplains and church ministers have discovered in experimenting with such forms, they are localised and organic, as well as being general – even global – in the concerns they reflect on and make meaning of. Plus, they exist within a tradition that has long adapted to change, a history of rich and creative cultural contextualisation. But especially in chaplaincy, such responses highlight that dual identity as existing between worlds, where forms come to life within the quotidian realities of a particular work-place and community. So, the culture, rhythms, and priorities of the (university) context are the setting, and provide some of the raw material, for the chaplain to reflect and act on. That chaplain inhabits and represents their own tradition with its living stream of life, its fabric of commitments. But, if that ministry has been shaped by theology and training with a view to other worlds and settings such as church congregational life in different times, it can be difficult to apply and may not be effective for vocations in such places. There is scope for further reflection on chaplaincy practise.

Working in a university at the present time does feel very porous, very engaged with the world. Large, prestigious, public universities pride themselves on being world-engaging and world-facing, so global challenges are palpable and present and those we encounter in pastoral ministry have lives directly enmeshed with significant things happening elsewhere. In my current setting, a couple of years ago COVID virus research was taking place in one department at the very time national news outlets led with photos of first year students locked in their dormitories whilst it circulated. COP26 events and world leaders were hosted in our historic buildings; past presidents and Nobel prize winners are awarded honorary degrees, and students come from everywhere: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ukraine, and Zambia. International students zoomed in for classes from Hong Kong whilst protests gathered outside their apartments. Turkish and Syrian staff and students gathered to mourn after the devastating February 2023 earthquakes. Jewish and Muslim students meet in the same buildings on campus as the bombardment of Gaza continues and Israeli hostages remain with their captors. The world’s conflicts and tragedies play out in the lives of individuals as they go about their day studying and teaching. It is deeply troubling, frightening, and interesting all at the same time.

We are yet to understand how this heightened sense of exposure and the impact of global events is manifest, particularly in relation to the role of social media and live news feeds. We know it has something to do with current 'well-being' or 'mental health' challenges, and levels of anxiety. Chaplains, like any ministers or those who offer pastoral care, are confronted by and concerned with various expressions of human brokenness and vulnerability, but especially with those manifested in a particular location and milieu and shaped by that sub-culture and values. As a chaplain, I interpret those realities in relation to God in Christ, in whom 'we live and move and have our being'<sup>1</sup>; my identity and practice express that, as I interact with diverse others. I am both a servant of Christ and an employee of the University, and my job involves being present to students and staff without favour and whatever their belief commitments. Sometimes it is not easy to distinguish my role and my identity. But that tension is dynamic and often fruitful. It prompts me to ask in an open-ended way: where is God at work in this corner of creation? How might the Spirit be present here, manifest in goodness, truth and beauty? So, this range of encounters are also enriching and need not diminish my sense of self or faith *nor* the experience of those whom I meet, if our convictions are honestly owned and winsomely expressed, if they create room. As such, chaplaincy requires alertness and attentiveness: to the diverse and lived reality of being human, as well as to signs of God's presence in the world.

Any chaplaincy will reflect a particular milieu, whether hospital, army base, school, or university, so within that sphere of creation it is naturally shaped by its people and their work, as well as by the traditions and identities that chaplains inhabit. In a university, that work involves study, teaching, research, leading, administration, and running estates, student services, security, external relations, and other support systems. If the chaplain is employed by the university, they will be subject to and answerable to its policies as a colleague amongst others and so must operate within its procedures, lines of management and resource priorities. In some settings they may occupy a more midway position, more directly relating to the church as a minister but having some form of contractual agreement or partnership with the university. Either way, what the chaplaincy offers will mirror the swings and pressures of a university year, and pastoral interactions exist within those creaturely rhythms and constraints. So, whilst there are features in common with leadership in congregational church settings, it is shaped by different conditions and expectations. In the public or secular context, the pastoral space is never a given, but generally must be earned.<sup>2</sup>

Storm Swain's work on chaplaincy practice is helpful in. As a theologian, Anglican priest and ministry educator, Swain developed a three-fold framework of pastoral care which emerged from research and experience at Ground Zero, New York following the attacks on the Twin Towers in September 2001. Echoing trinitarian relationality, Swain describes three spheres of chaplaincy based on her observations and this theological framework.<sup>3</sup> In the first sphere, 'earth-making' or 'holding', Swain suggests the chaplain embodies the experience of creation and their own story; this is ministry within what is common to us all, and attuned to the beauty, fragility and ambiguity of the human

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<sup>1</sup>The Book of Acts 17: 28.

<sup>2</sup>Swain, *Trauma and Transformation*, 65.

<sup>3</sup>Swain, *Trauma and Transformation*, Introduction and Chapter 1.

condition.<sup>4</sup> In the second, chaplains might enter a space of suffering alongside others and their role becomes ‘pain-bearing’. For the Christian this has Christological resonance as an arena of ministry that engages with deeper or more intense losses and trauma, the extreme experiences of being human. Such work goes beyond the earth-making or holding aspects, and is painful, because ‘working with the pain of others means we open ourselves to our own suffering’.<sup>5</sup> Swain’s third category is ‘the life-giving, transforming’ dimension of chaplaincy, the sense of a ‘transformational space – that even in the midst of the space of destruction God is above this and within this, that the bush is burning but not consumed’. Chaplaincy in this space does not bypass the experiences of personal suffering but finds that within and through them it is also possible to find meaning and to discover what it is to be fully alive as human beings and make creative, reparative responses. This enables people not only to survive but to grow.<sup>6</sup>

Swain’s framework offers helpful insights for the university setting. The broadly trinitarian theological movements describe elements of chaplaincy here, although the balance varies from what would be expected in contexts such as Ground Zero and the temporary mortuary established there. Chaplaincy in a university does deal with experiences of difficulty, loss, and the painful effects of trauma, but the context is mostly within the sphere of ‘earth-making’, so we acknowledge how these spheres relate and overlap. The ‘holding’ role of the university chaplain does resonate with what is elsewhere described as ‘being with’ or a ministry of presence.<sup>7</sup>

University chaplains do witness and participate in much that is generative: the infectious sense of possibility in each new academic year, the joys and triumphs of graduations, academic awards and research achievements, and the sheer energy of young people living to the full. Chaplains may also enjoy the benefits of the university’s cultural richness and excellence in the arts, the high standards of its interesting built environment, and a stimulating academic milieu with research outputs in such fields as restorative justice, virus research, or ecological management. Within this environment, alongside able and motivated people from all over the world, the work can be rich and rewarding. But beyond merely participating and bearing witness to human experience, a chaplain’s role is also to *interpret* human life within a theology of creation, fall, redemption and the Spirit’s work in the world, to read the contextual realities in the light of that other story. Thus, a Christian approach to ‘holding’ may also involve interpreting what others consider ‘reality’, exploring other accounts of meaning and ethical positions that are overlooked or unspoken, but still important. It may be to shine light on less valued, less attractive aspects of the university and its history, within a theology of human frailty and sin. It is also to give thanks to God for the wonders and complexities of life within which achievements can be located and celebrated.

Swain’s approach is helpful now because the more pervasive confidence that might once have been applied to the context and described many within it, has diminished somewhat. Of course, at any time in the history of university chaplaincy, the work has involved bearing witness to, and interpreting, the full orb of human experience, to what is generative as well as the tragic and sorrowful. But especially in view of recent events, the

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<sup>4</sup>Swain, *Trauma and Transformation*.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>7</sup>Sam Wells, *Incarnational Mission*.

sense that things are getting better (or are even OK) is less palpable, and the shadows of suffering and loss seem more present. As a chaplain I have become more engaged in 'pain-bearing' ministry. This change seems to reflect both the growth in the size of many such universities, bringing together a vast number of students from many varied backgrounds, but also because so many of those young lives involve complexities and because a combination of factors has rendered them more vulnerable to difficulty and distress. A 2023 study by the University of Exeter showed that one in three students suffers from anxiety severe enough to require treatment. A similar proportion was revealed in a study of 11,000 students from six Russell Group universities, showing that 30% of students report anxiety disorders.<sup>8</sup> These increases are not only due to enhanced sensitivity, or reporting, or labelling; they show something has changed in the perception and experience of student life. Likewise, something has changed in university chaplaincy. Whilst it has always tilted towards being present in moments of disruption and the untimely and unexpected occurrences of loss or trauma, these have been magnified in recent years: when hopeful young internationals far from home find things go dreadfully wrong, when the numbers to be accommodated in halls or flats exceed what is available, or when addiction or anxiety levels stretch support services beyond manageable levels. During COVID, the positive experiences of students turned quickly into painful crises to negotiate, and whilst the mortality rate was lower in that community, the effect of a two-year interruption to a three- or four- year degree was significant and damaging in other ways. Likewise, the implications of a cost-of-living crisis and anxieties around the environmental emergency are intensely felt by students.

This unique combination of factors, and perhaps the extent of contrast, is worth noting. In any situation a sudden illness, death or suicide is distressing and shocking for families and communities and implicates pastoral ministry. Here, trauma and personal tragedy have unusual effects, and pastoral responses will reflect the fact that it is within a sphere of life and work focused on youth, creativity, intelligence – and sated with expectation (abetted by narratives of realising dreams and fulfilling one's potential). So, the shock and sorrow around a sudden or untimely loss of a student can take on particular narratives and express a sense of affront or grievance, magnified by the sheer number of participants and the situation. It is certainly the case that many university students are healthy young people from loving families whose sources of support can cushion them when they face difficulties. But, whilst there and studying, even privileged students are more than likely living independently, alongside other young or vulnerable adults, so are at least momentarily displaced from such support and face certain risks when in distress. In addition, any tragedy has potentially wide circles of immediate impact: large lecture classes, sports clubs, halls of residence, similar social networks that share quickly and develop skewed narratives. These social settings then, whilst positive and enjoyable features of university life, can magnify the risks and exacerbate unhelpful behaviours and responses in response to grief and trauma, such as binge-drinking, drug-taking or unprotected sex. Accidents, deaths, and conflicts will inevitably happen in a population the size of a moderate city, but as a collection of individuals together for a season, the institution is not normally attuned to or designed to focus on such occurrences. When crises occur, whilst professional lines of communication and

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<sup>8</sup>Cited in *The Sunday Times*, February 18, 2024, 7.

critical response teams are in place, there are not widespread or established communal forms able to make meaning of them. In a large university there is simply not the range of relationships to help to hold young people; the support offered by peers reflects their life experience and vulnerabilities, rather than the experience found within multi-generational families and faith or other communities.

Chaplains within this setting must therefore know their place. They cannot possibly promise care for everyone and need to find appropriate ways of helping students and staff to bear pain and loss. They will also work out what it means to assist the university in fulfilling its duty of care.

In all of this, chaplains themselves embody human experience and live within their own story and beliefs. If, as a Christian chaplain I interpret and hold the experience of others as one participating in the life of Christ, I also grapple with the fact that sometimes I am not able to express that directly to others. 'Pastoral care' in this secular setting is understood much more broadly and has no explicit connection to its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. If integrated into the university system, many or most university chaplaincies are inter- or multi-faith, and rightly so, if they adequately reflect their diverse communities and the worlds they inhabit. As well, in a post-Christendom and post-colonial era, they may be implicated in the institution's historic links with the church and so be viewed with some ambivalence, even hostility, by many university people. Christian chaplains, if they are to do the work of pain-bearing in this place, sometimes share with Christ the acceptance of anger and the bearing of others' pain in silence, at least until trusted or invited to do otherwise. Occasionally in public or private encounters such opportunities do come to speak into Christ's presence in suffering and death, and to witness to the power and hope of transformation.

Chaplains are also implicated in difficulties that arise when working in such a context; they are not super-humans detached from the challenging realities within any sphere of creation. They too will know the frustrations associated with complex systems malfunctioning, such as when centralised lighting or heating breaks down or fire alarms misbehave . . . and the building is evacuated, again. Like others, chaplains are vulnerable to the implications of others' decision-making; they can share the sense of powerlessness when poor decisions undermine their effectiveness and get discouraged when important work is lost, or communication fails. What they do with that vulnerability and how they react to situations, is a particular challenge. Whilst some detachment or equilibrium is desirable in this role, as employees of the university chaplains exist within it. They must therefore negotiate the degree to which they conform to its cultural norms and are subject to certain rights and responsibilities (should they claim 'overtime' or join a union? How do chaplains deal with conflicts around ethical positions or with other staff?). Being an employee affects how much detachment is possible, so the understanding of ministry as vocation or a 'call' needs to be reconsidered. Likewise, a chaplain's pastoral availability or ability to form considered responses to crises can be compromised when they too are caught up in work-place stressors.

To be sure, there are many privileges and advantages in working in such a richly resourced and (generally) well-managed environment. But universities can feel like pressure-cookers and chaplains constantly negotiate that duality inherent in their position: of being within the institution yet also having a unique role that not only enables them to serve others, but somehow helps the institution to be its better self, to live

according to its stated values and standards. In higher education, large civic universities place high value on measurable achievements in academic and service performance which inform rankings as they hold their place within a competitive sector. This environment also affects chaplaincy (which has its own part to play in that marketplace), in view of a university's understandable concerns for reputational risk and in any pastoral encounters and responses. A chaplain should be aware of their own sense of call to ministry and personal limits, but also has a job description and lines of accountability that shape their priorities. Being embedded within university employment structures also means it is moulded and supported by those standards of pastoral practice, supervision, diversity training and safeguarding, so the sense of vocation and one's approach will be fleshed out in that duality and tension. 'Maintaining the sense of presence can be a delicate act, which is why it has more to do with creation than application, as much with art as with skill.'<sup>9</sup>

In relation to this, if as Swain suggests chaplaincy 'provides that relational space where the person's true self has a chance of being revealed',<sup>10</sup> given the youthfulness of the community an important aspect is the emergence of self and exploration of identity. This relates to the expression of faith and belief as well as gender identity and other aspects and there are several ways chaplains may hold this space or accompany such experiences.

One recurring conversation with students and staff is around gender identity or same-sex attraction, especially when this is seen as conflicting with one's faith or belonging to a family or religious community. Chaplains can help unpack this tension and find a way forward in pastoral conversations, but might also, as an accepting and attentive presence help provide a space allowing for the possibility of integration. They might also help to bear pain, supporting a person through conflict or relationship dis-integration, such as when someone becomes estranged from their family or excommunicated from their faith community. Of course, any chaplain employed by the university will need to reconcile their beliefs and commitments with its affirming of diversity in various forms. The situation may differ for those associated with chaplaincy teams who are not university staff, but careful boundaries should be in place to ensure students and staff have the confidence to explore such issues safely and honestly, whilst acknowledging the distinctive beliefs and varied stances that exist in the wider landscape of faith communities.

The physical location of chaplaincy services or a chapel building, if owned by the university, means it stands outside of and has a different relationship to other religious and denominational spaces. This may give some freedom (at least informally) to affirm and validate vocations or relationships that may not be possible for leaders in churches or other faith communities. Chaplains can offer those of different faiths an opportunity to explore aspects of religious observance and practice, such as Christian rite observance or hijab wearing, in a relationship that is accessible but also slightly detached, knowing they will not be censured or reported back to parents or authority figures, but also acknowledging the importance of these relationships to the individual. Difficult questions of doctrine and meaning can be discussed at some remove from explicitly religious settings. This can open the way for honest discussion around ethical issues and taboos, about pornography, alcohol, or drugs. Plus, chaplaincy will have access to university resources

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<sup>9</sup>Swain, *Trauma and Transformation*, 65.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.



of therapy and counselling to refer students concerned about addictions, mental health, or other troubling issues. In this important respect, holding the painful realities of being human, and seeking healing and flourishing, is not the work only of chaplains. Distinct to a chaplain's approach might be the implications of their theological understanding of each person as created by and precious to God.

This theological anthropology was, until relatively recently, much more significant as a belief undergirding the life and work of the university. Now, religion is more marginal in these secular, public institutions. For many the expressions of faith belong only in the private sphere and the Christian faith is viewed with some ambivalence. The assumption, that religion is in terminal decline, has been a prominent narrative not adequately addressed or re-examined, and still shapes policies and approaches to chaplaincy. This is despite data that indicates a sizeable proportion of students continue to declare some kind of faith identity or religious allegiance. Whilst the Human Rights Act of 1998 and the Equality Act of 2010 ensure recognition and the freedom to manifest religion and belief, in some important respects these freedoms are not fully acknowledged or are unevenly applied in universities.<sup>11</sup> Such provisions include sufficient, accessible, and suitable spaces for students' religious observance on campus between lectures or breaks, or the provision of suitable foods, and reasonable accommodations for religious days and rhythms of fasting. These can be contested and fraught given the stretched resources and priority given to teaching and study, so the university's own diversity legislation and legal frameworks around Religion and Belief as protected characteristics are important baseline measures.<sup>12</sup> Chaplains might question whether these minimal legal requirements allow for the flourishing of people within the institution, and such advocacy may be an unexpected way of participating in 'earth-making' in that realm of creation.

The shape and expression of religious affiliation on our campuses is certainly changing, and this necessarily influences the shape and expression of chaplaincy. Student data indicates that whilst a significant proportion of students continue to identify as Christian in one form or another, chaplaincies' support and services should reflect other faith identities and acknowledge the majority who have no faith or religious affiliation. How chaplains who hold their own identities and beliefs relate to this diverse population and participate in this realm of creation requires adaptations beyond what was anticipated in training for ministry.

There is a further, deeper challenge in such debates about resources which chaplains can help to articulate: what are the actual, lived implications of religious diversity, and how are these understood and expressed in a secular university? These questions were highlighted in the aftermath of the mosque massacres in Christchurch, Aotearoa-New Zealand in 2019, an horrific event and act of terror, when 51 people were killed whilst at prayer. It was traumatising for Muslims, and deeply shocking for the wider population, unsettling assumptions that NZ was an easy-going, 'secular country, where there is little concern about religion'<sup>13</sup> and that diversity was not only tolerated, but welcome.

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<sup>11</sup>London School of Economics, 'Multi-Faith Spaces at UK Universities Display Two Very Different Visions of Public Religion', Religion and Global Society, [lse.ac.uk](https://lse.ac.uk).

<sup>12</sup>See for example <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/chaplaincy/worship>; University of Glasgow – MyGlasgow – Human Resources – Equality & Diversity – Understanding Racism, Transforming University Cultures.

<sup>13</sup>Morris, 'Religious Diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand', 5. 012494\_2019-Religious\_Diversity\_PRINT\_2019-11July2019.pdf ([amazonaws.com](https://amazonaws.com))

For many chaplains that event marked a dramatic shift in awareness and experience and led to a developing sense of call to be ‘willing to take or bear some of the pain of the other’.<sup>14</sup> Muslim and other students sought help after inadvertently opening the video of the massacre: ‘it is often the case that in pastoral care, be it at a disaster site, or in the daily sufferings of what the world and we inflict on each other as humans, that we are called to suffer, to bear the pain of others and in that bear our own.’<sup>15</sup> Still, even in that situation the bearing of pain was not the only work to do. There was also an opportunity to help re-narrate, to bring students together, to participate in transformative actions afterwards.

That event also highlighted how chaplains must inhabit and negotiate their own identity in contexts that can be personally challenging, costly, and painful. As a white Christian clergy person in university discussions on racism and Islamophobia, or in mosques discussing the colonisation of New Zealand, it was hard not to feel like the target of frustration or anger, a focus for grievance. But in each of these rather contentious situations there was also honest and respectful dialogue, and the opportunity to share the experience of loss naturally opened the way for repentance. So there emerged something not unlike the transformation Swain describes: a sense of what might emerge after being together in a dark or difficult space where truth is spoken and the injustices of shared human stories are heard, borne, and hoped-for change is imagined. In that sense, a chaplain who knows *their* place might be invited into others’ spaces, to be fully present to and with them. That might require parking one’s own feelings, bearing silent witness, praying, and waiting for an invitation to contribute, if it comes at all. But sometimes it does, and in those cases the readiness to be present – as painful as it can be at first – bears trust and opens opportunities and possibilities for transformation. I suppose this is the hard and precious work of peace making which others undertake and describe in conflict situations. It might be a surprising setting for such work, but in large contemporary universities where so many complex histories and identities collide, chaplaincy might find its place.

Even the worst of times can have life-giving moments and outcomes. These are often described in terms of resiliency, or post-traumatic growth, but Swain offers a theological reading: ‘in the midst of the space of destruction God is above this and within this, that the bush is burning but not consumed’.<sup>16</sup> As Swain observes, chaplaincy in this space allows for creative, reparative responses, enabling people not only to survive but to grow. This outcome requires ‘paying attention . . . to what is life giving . . . attending to those seemingly elusive but often powerful aspects of transformation’. Unlike the task of holding, which can be intentionally created and practised, these moments ‘blow where they will’<sup>17</sup> like the Spirit that inspires them. They ‘can be discovered, captured, and delighted in but not manufactured’.<sup>18</sup>

The mosque massacre of 2019 was a moment of crisis in so many ways: as well as the killings themselves, there were many lamentable incidents of hate and the trauma was widespread. But Muslim friends and colleagues also saw how it generated much good will, heightened awareness of their community and its needs, and issued in many random

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<sup>14</sup>Swain, 17.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>17</sup>The Gospel of John 3: 8.

<sup>18</sup>Swain, 177.

acts of kindness. It also spawned policy initiatives and galvanised action, not least on the part of university leaders. It led to the fresh realisation that universities, like other public institutions, were *not* that hospitable to religious diversities nor were they equipped to pastorally engage with people in such specific ways, at such points of need. It forced a reconsideration of institutional provisions for Muslims and other religious minorities, and whether doing little or nothing was equitable or responsible.

So, in New Zealand important lessons were learnt about diversity, and this became a critical juncture in redefining debates around religion and secularity. It helped clarify a common concern or misconception: ‘setting out the rights and responsibilities of people and communities who profess a religious belief . . . in no way diminishes the rights and responsibilities of others who profess no religion’.<sup>19</sup>

Similar shifts and growing awareness have also occurred in the UK university sector, as evident in a recent Universities UK publication on Islamophobia.<sup>20</sup> Increasingly, it is acknowledged that institutional policies may reflect unexamined assumptions within a dominant cultural mindset or an earlier preoccupation with Muslim extremism. Decision-makers might prioritise historic Christian beliefs and culture or, alternatively, western secularism, and be unconsciously ambivalent towards or even dismissive of the religious expressions of others and their commitments. But, addressing this in concrete ways can be hotly contested; it is certainly inconvenient and costly. Devoting stretched resources to something commonly misunderstood and historically marginal is much harder than policy statements affirming that the curriculum be ‘de-colonised’ or that the university stands for ‘diversity and inclusion’ or strongly values its inter-faith chaplaincy. Even positive gestures made in good will can fail to meet expectations if they are inadequately defined or managed. One common example is the debate around setting aside reflection space (often called a ‘reflection space’ or ‘sanctuary’), for all to use within a building or school. Research and experience show that if such a space is undifferentiated (so doesn’t have specific facilities required for washing or prayer), is small, and not managed carefully it can inadvertently exclude certain users and make others uncomfortable.<sup>21</sup> I visited one such ‘Reflection Room’ on another campus recently. Typically, it was in an unused storage area in a basement and attempted to combine space for prayer, a First Aid station, and a chair for breastfeeding with a raised sink in the corner to serve all functions. One space simply cannot support so many diverse and embodied dimensions of being human.

A chaplain may find themselves having to clarify and educate, to mediate and facilitate, holding in tension both the given realities of the context: the ‘true selves’ of the diverse embodied people within it, *and* the system, with those who make the difficult decisions and disperse resources. The chaplain thus occupies a relational space between various interests and potential conflicts arising from religious or anti-religious views and behaviours. In this respect, as ‘earth-making’ it is active vital work, but the capacity for experiencing pain is never far away. For a chaplain these challenges can present troubling complexities and internal conflicts, such as in relation to positions on Israel and Gaza: what is the place one inhabits? whose pain is to be held? External consultation will shed light on the issues and

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<sup>19</sup>Morris, ‘Religious Diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand’, 5.

<sup>20</sup>Universities UK, ‘Tackling Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred: Practical Guidance for UK Universities’, 5. See also [Connecting-with-Faith-Interfaith-Communities-report-A.docx](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/interfaith/interfaith-report-a) (live.com)

<sup>21</sup>Churches Higher Education Liaison Group paper, ‘Developing and Managing Faith Space in Universities and Colleges’, <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1684001/>.

expert mediators might help to hold those tensions, along with the university's own lines of accountability and management within which the chaplain practises.

These challenges mirror the realities of lived experience in the world beyond the university. Senior decision-makers and those who manage contested resources have much to consider in adapting the limitations and reconciling the different calls on them. Chaplains are often in direct communication with such leaders, and thus weigh up pastoral, prophetic, and even priestly dimensions of their roles. A degree of detachment and a careful distancing from other group interests may be required, even if a relatively junior staff member within the system. Pastorally, a chaplain can play a unique role in any such relationship: acknowledging the pressures on leaders' time, energy, and resources, and respecting their humanity and personal limitations even when in disagreement. Chaplains are often party to specific information and hold positions of trust, so honesty, discretion and confidentiality are to be honoured; this too is relational presence. Whilst in many respects a minor player, the chaplain can have a disproportionate role or impact and this aspect of chaplaincy is enhanced by professional supervision. In universities I have worked in or observed, chaplains are often called upon during crises or when external events impact the university, or difficult tensions arise. Even within elite and avowedly secular settings there endures a recognition, perhaps a belief, that someone should *be* there who is intentionally present and able to hold that space of human fragility and ambiguity. And sometimes even to pray.

Another fruitful area of engagement, where spirituality and meaning are explored, is in relation to academia and certain disciplines. In recent years, various scientific and arts-related fields have acknowledged the limits of academic research and theoretical understanding. Some have even faced the shortcomings in past practice and the harm done to indigenous people and other cultural values. One such controversy centres around the use, collection, and storage of the remains of human beings, in disciplines of anatomy, dentistry, and other research on donated bodies, as well as within historic collections in laboratories, libraries and museums. Western education has a rich history and has contributed much to understanding human life and its significance. But its beneficiaries can no longer claim innocence in the face of materialist and scientific approaches' dominance, and the fact that certain groups have exercised hegemony in accessing and using knowledge.

This means we are in an era in which a chink has opened to the possibility that even our finest educational traditions have obscured or overlooked certain other important values. Some aspects of faith, spirituality, and rituals around human life, such as in the study of medicine, are now being reconsidered and taken seriously. One well-established protocol in the University of Auckland Medical School is undertaken in partnership with Māori leaders. Students are initiated into the first year of anatomical study in a ceremony to acknowledge and bless the bodies, those who will become 'objects' of study, to honour their identity as once-living human subjects. This 'Whakanoa' ceremony is described as lifting Māori spiritual restrictions to open a way for respectful and holistic study of them as deceased persons. Chaplains, faith leaders and even psychologists participate in prayer and songs and speak about how beliefs relate to the care of people. This dignified, deeply moving ceremony has now influenced generations of students and graduates. It has become a defining moment in their identity as fledgling doctors, and helped shape a more considered, personal relationship with their 'first patients',<sup>22</sup> and within their profession, echoing Hippocrates description of

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<sup>22</sup>Payinda, 'Lifting the Veil: Tapu, Whakanoa and a Medical Student's First Human Dissection'.

medicine as a 'sacred art'. At the other end of the process, when students complete their degree programmes, many medical schools have ceremonies or services of thanksgiving for the body donors and their families, often planned or advised by the chaplain. This is not so much a pastoral role undertaken in the traditional sense of directly engaging with death and those who suffer loss, but a specific instance of creating a container for human experience, of interpreting life and death in that setting, and framing the contribution of those deaths within a bigger picture involving life and research. In such settings there is space for thinking theologically about life in the world, and even expressing a Christian anthropology, Christology and hope, in ways that are creative and respectful of diverse accounts of reality.

It is in these unusual and privileged contexts that university chaplaincy is fleshed out. It thus has something to offer when reconsidering other forms and spaces of ministry that hold, bear, and transform human experience in an era of profound change. During the pandemic in that frightening time, traditional forms of ministry and faith leadership required rapid adjustments to continue. That crisis also called for creative adaptive responses: in approaches to pastoral care, in the forms attending suffering and loss, in the ways meaning is framed in a community, when the majority are not religious. Pioneering and experimental church settings had already explored some of these challenges, as had chaplaincy, having long lost its privileged status in many universities. Creative ministry, the tasks of earth-making, pain-bearing and life-giving can thrive in difficult settings and even in a post-church wilderness.

In this regard the pandemic brought a re-evaluation of existing ministry forms; not least how, or even if, to hold a service of worship. After some experimentation in our chaplaincy, a monthly Taizé service was found to be appropriate and valued in the community: it provided a focused opportunity that was enhanced by our Chapel building, it was easy to put online, and it deployed existing musical strengths. In fresh ways we discovered Taizé prayer to be accessible, simple, and gentle; it felt true for the time of complexity and disruption. Later and in response to fresh crises, forms emerged for the holding of collective grief or confusion and existing ones were given new life: silent spaces or vigils, religious iconography and music, non-religious candle-lighting, participatory art installations and exhibitions. In various ways the physical space and existing resources were repurposed, to offer generous and safe containers of human experience, overseen and curated by chaplains.

Sometimes, the work is to be present with others when they face personal and existential challenges, to hold and accept the limits of being human, the things considered failures and the inexplicable losses, to bear with them, and to acknowledge that life and renewed hopefulness may come, but not yet. This might be the work of allowing silence, of holding a pause with gentle authority, when efforts in dialogue and reconciliation stall. It might be a moment to mark the end a project that has not been fruitful, or the untimely death of a much-needed research collaborator. It might be a meeting with an individual who has lost a friend to suicide. If a chaplain is invited into such spaces or gatherings, the response is an exercise in restraint, avoiding unwarranted claims for resolution that may not be achievable. But nevertheless, something is given and actively contributed by simply being present in that place with those people in a sensitive, empathic pastoral relationship: 'what is unbearable alone may become "bearing the unbearable". Presence, therefore, is not to be negated, even if it appears inactive.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Swain, 97.

In our fraught times of intransigent global and regional conflicts, small initiatives do not seem to solve anything practically or make peace in any significant way. Nevertheless, even silent gatherings when different parties join in a communal setting can be important when there is so much that polarises, isolates, and dehumanises. If chaplains help create space and opportunities to be human with one another, to find the courage to hold the worst of what we know and our shared experience of loss and regret, that itself enacts hope and even faint possibilities of restoration. There is no evading the potential for pain-bearing, but we cannot get stuck in the suffering and need to move towards a place of transforming. Dorothee Soelle writes that ‘in pain bearing in solidarity with Christ in the incarnation and crucifixion . . . the Christian chaplain (is) not simply to be present to others in suffering but acts in ways that are transformative of the situation or the personal experience of it. This speaks of resurrection – the ultimate transformation from death to life’.<sup>24</sup>

Even so, in the time in-between, such tasks are not easy to sustain when energy and resources are stretched. Ministers and chaplains have since reflected on the pandemic, and how some aspects of ministry seemed less urgent and effective, almost a waste, within the swirling confusion of that emergency. The situation required further clarifying of approaches to pastoral and spiritual care within, and sometimes in conflict with, universities’ culture and ways of working. In my situation, preserving a large, well-maintained space to be simply ‘empty’ for reflection at regular times and to allow for chaplains to be present without scheduled activities, could be hard to justify. But also, as a minister and from that side of the equation it was hard to accept that the many operational tasks required in the situation were priorities, or even valid as ‘ministry’: hours spent re-writing risk assessments as guidelines changed, updating building and staff procedures, resources devoted to signposting and sanitising space.

There are many such ambiguities and tensions for chaplains to navigate in their place, existing as they do alongside others who seem to beat to a different drum. The upside-down values of Mary’s words in the Magnificat can feel at odds with the curated images and marketable success stories of elite universities, the focused and pressured work ethics that shape people’s interactions. When financial pressures and career trajectories require self-promotion, a preoccupation with rankings and comparisons with competitors’ achievements can be hard to swallow at times. For sure, chaplaincy can be part of the story of success, and might even contribute to the suite of services on offer within the package. Indeed, its very presence may require demonstrating what contribution it makes to positive, measurable outcomes and the all-important ‘student experience’. Stephen Hunt reflected a decade ago on the practical and theological implications for university chaplaincy of this marketised milieu, even though its survival may depend on it.<sup>25</sup>

But none of that is the whole story. The theological category of ‘earth-making’ reminds us that the university exists within a world that belongs to God, and chaplaincy is a vocation undertaken by human beings: ‘a little lower than angels and crowned . . . with glory and honor’.<sup>26</sup> This allows for realism and hopefulness,

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<sup>24</sup>Cite Swain, 96.

<sup>25</sup>Hunt, ‘University Chaplaincy Provisions: Taking the Religion Out?’

<sup>26</sup>Psalms 8: 5.



accepting the actual situation with its constraints, and all the ambiguities of the human creatures within it, including chaplains themselves. For it is precisely in that environment the gems of ministry occur, when the pearls of great price reveal themselves buried in the midst of very ordinary fields, and the lost coins are so long in the finding, after false starts and mistaken projects. This is the earthy work of chaplaincy in this place: noticing and engaging, attending to the small, unfiltered realities of being alive in the in-between moments, holding human frailty and suffering alongside the aspirations and joyful achievements. This work, the unsolicited and unexpected conversations which open to fresh possibilities of God's presence occur within and not in spite of the secular context. Reiterating Swain's comment: the pastoral space is never a given, but generally earned.<sup>27</sup>

Chaplaincy, if it occupies that place, will engage with the personal and bespoke challenges that come with the territory of being an academic community within an educating institution. There are some academics and researchers whose work explores and reveals the raw material of human conflict and suffering, who aid understanding and contribute to a body of learning and teach students in their field of expertise, yet who themselves find themselves caught up in the painful experiences and costly personal implications of such work. Specialists in Eastern Europe, whose work interprets the background of the war, now find themselves pastorally supporting students and staff actively fleeing the invasion of Ukraine. What might chaplains offer them? What can we possibly say to researchers and students on exchange programmes with colleagues working in Gaza? Or individuals with families in Israel? In such situations, debates around academic freedom, on the control and manipulation of information, the ethics of war and the causes of terrorism, all these intellectual issues have human stories. The university is a place where the people implicated in global conflicts must share dormitories, or staff lunchrooms, or walk past others' protests on their way to work or lectures.

If, as Swain suggests, 'pain-bearing is both anthropologically and theologically grounded in the tension between the best and worst of humanity',<sup>28</sup> university chaplaincy negotiates and occupies that tension. But it is an environment where death and suffering are not usually part of the deal; they do not feature in the aspirations or the recruitment drives. They are not expected, and rightly so; they are interruptions that shock and disorientate. Chaplaincy mirrors and holds those human realities, the lows and highs in that place. But it also articulates another story and embodies other possibilities for human life, both in the bearing of pain and in expressing hope.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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<sup>27</sup>Swain, 65.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 89.

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