

Churches as Chaplains

One of the things that turn people off ecumenical cooperation is that instead of increasing the capacity for mission through combined strength, it too often seems to just make every decision twice as difficult to make. Most churches spend an inordinate amount of time picking over their internal workings, consulting, making strategies to replace the old strategies that were never implemented anyway and worrying about money to pay the bills. In union parishes you just have more denominational committees who are willing to worry with you. It's easy to diagnose the illness of introspection, but it's not that easy finding a path for overcoming it and looking outwards beyond ourselves.

Well, I wonder whether the chaplaincy model of ministry might offer us a way forward. By its very nature, chaplaincy is about the light set on a hill, or the leaven in the dough sort of ministry. Chaplaincy assumes the work is not internal to the Church but about the Church working where it is designed to work – in the world.

Chaplaincy is about engaging in the *Missio Dei*, God's outreach to the world; chaplains are the Church that has left the building. Through the Body of Christ, God reaches out to the world in love and service. Chaplaincy tries to build community, release gifts, and share resources because that is how humans thrive and God wants us to thrive. The Church must be about helping people and society to thrive by applying our Christian understanding of the true, spiritual nature of our existence to society's political and economic models of being human.

One of the most definitive characteristics of Christianity is our belief that God has come to the world in Christ. The incarnation is a huge affirmation of humanity in an inconceivably vast universe. Jesus wept for his friends, celebrated a wedding, cooked breakfast for his disciples, defended the persecuted, chastised the powerful and affirmed the poor. He was prepared to go anywhere, even to Samaria, mix with anybody, even with tax collectors and prostitutes. Most of his work was done beyond the synagogue. That doesn't mean worship doesn't matter; it just means the worship must meet its purpose to equip believers for mission.

Jesus didn't need to be the one who always started the conversation about religion. People were eager to do that for themselves and he knew how to turn a request for a drink of water, or for something to eat, or a passing funeral procession into an opportunity to open up the deeper questions of human experience. Being present, being willing to listen sensitively to others, and being confident in the message he brought, sufficed. The seed was sown and it grows to this day – where we are still prepared to sow.

Chaplaincy is about presence. It does not worry about the results, nor constantly question the cost, but gently, over time, through building relationship and trust the seed is sown. Many parishes engage in chaplaincy style ministry already, but without naming it so: services for residential homes, food banks, homework clubs, op-shops, and holiday clubs. Let us stop fretting about ourselves so much and spend more time connecting with others.

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