

CONSOLATION AND HOPE IN A TIME OF CRISIS:  
BRINGING CHAPLAINS TOGETHER TO CULTIVATE  
HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SPIRITUAL  
RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO COVID-RELATED  
LOSSES FOR YEAR 7 PUPILS



RESEARCH DIGEST | ISSUE 6 | DEC 2022

REFLECTIONS ON LESSONS LEARNT

# ABOUT NICER

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# INTRODUCTION

Over the past 18 months, our journey with the chaplains involved with the virtual community of practice (VCoP) has been one of reflection, insight, and hope. They have shared the consequences of working in secondary schools during the pandemic and the journey towards renewal post lockdown. The clear message from the VCOP meetings is that all lives, on different levels, have been impacted because of the COVID- 19 disruption.

As we move towards the latter stages of the VCoP meetings, we can reflect on what we have learnt about transition and induction during a crisis situation, through the eyes of the chaplains, and how these experiences can shape future procedures. This digest captures the thoughts of the chaplains from June 2021 to November 2022 and has been ordered into 5 main sections:

- Year 7 transition and induction experiences from the academic year 2021 and 2022.
- The escalation of Mental Health issues from 2020 through 2022
- Vulnerable Students
- The Role of Chaplains
- Spiritual Flourishing and Worship

Each section concludes with the reflections of the chaplains; however, it is hoped that some readers of this digest may use the comments and reflections as prompts for consideration within their context. It has been structured so that readers can dip into the various sections that are of priority for them and their context.

*Before we think about the future, we must acknowledge the past...Lament is a huge part of the biblical tradition: God is big enough to hear our anger and stand with us in our sorrow.*

Archbishop Justin Welby, 2021<sup>1</sup>

*Voicing lament and pain can be a ... path to healing.*

*Then hope can dare to be expressed actions.*

*The public practice of lament is a way of keeping hope alive amidst the despair.*

Ross, C., 2021<sup>2</sup>

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1 Welby, J, (2021) 'God's vision for a post-pandemic world'

2 Ross, C. (2021). Hope is tough: Reflections in a time of COVID-19. Practical theology, 14(1-2), 86-97.



# 1. YEAR 7 TRANSITION AND INDUCTION EXPERIENCES FROM THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2021 AND 2022.

## a) June 2021 (Chaplains reflect on September 2020 induction)



*I think one of the main things from the students' point of view is that it hasn't felt that secondary, because they're having to stay in... that one room.*

*They're a still a bit like primary kids. They've been kept together for a long while in one room with teachers coming into them. They kind of haven't had that full experience and they haven't been interacting obviously with older years.*

*We had vertical tutoring for 10 years, so we had to abandon that and so that's totally changed the whole structure of our school and how our school works. So, everything has changed but what I've also noticed is that the older ones are less caring for the Year 7's because they haven't been introduced to them.*

*It's just they're in their building and they just think they've really become accustomed to secondary school and I don't think they realise that next year it will be like a double transition.*

*Since half-term, we have just started to circulate through the whole of school. So there's now a delayed anxiety about, "I'm going to get lost", "How will I know my way?" etc, that we would normally have dealt with by the end of September. It's coming now.*

*We had our first collective worship that was a real one, it wasn't a virtual one. Up to now it's been individual tutor group worships or the whole year via Zoom. So, it's the first time Year 7 were together in the hall, and I opened it with, "Have a good look round because this is our Year 7". I'm not sure they even know each other that well.*

*They just haven't had that kind of normal experience of being around people of different ages, which is one of the beauties of secondary school.*

## b) December 2021



*Year 7 didn't get an amazing primary school sort of pathway did they? It was the most important sort of years towards the end that were just completely eradicated for them. And I think personally in our setting that they're just, as I say, just floating in...*

*They still haven't settled; they are needy and afraid of taking risks...they seem younger than Year 7s somehow collectively*

## c) September 2022

*I think [transition this year is] more relaxed. It's just blown through very naturally... there is a marked difference between previous cohorts.*

*I don't know if others of you have found this but the ones who were, who are Year 9 now who were then Year 8 last year, that was probably our most complex year group where we saw the most impact from Covid... I've had so many of that year group coming to my groups, catching up with me, collaring me in the corridors and in their different places and it feels like I've got a relationship with them that I haven't had with a year group before.*

*I know what you mean, there is that sense of connection with those that went through the greatest period of trauma with us that we're not obviously replicating now.*

*This year's Year 7s aren't so traumatised or they're easier to deal with maybe.*

*Certainly, compared to last year it's pretty wonderful actually. I'd say that it's normal in a way that it can be. It just seems calmer. I feel calmer, I think because I'm not anticipating what's going to happen next, not knowing what's happening next.*

*They [Year 7] seem to be more settled, a little bit more mature than the previous year groups have*

*Last year's Year 7 had a reasonable year, it wasn't brilliant, but the year before didn't and the year before didn't really, didn't know us well enough to trust us. I feel it's all about trust. .. I just feel like 9 and 10 have been so disrupted they don't have that trust of us.*

Some teachers are concerned about the ongoing impact of increased mental health issues that they can see in their pupils. This is contributing to higher absence levels and poor behaviour in some settings.

<https://theicg.co.uk/5-key-concerns-for-uk-schools-in-the-22-23-academic-year/>

## **Reflections on lessons learnt**

*I think the issue with crisis...we know now what to expect, whereas before we didn't, which in a way makes it more frightening.*

*I would now prioritise making certain that the chaplaincy was having frequent contact with all students. I think previously, I sort of slightly sat back waiting for an opportunity. Now, I would make certain that the chaplaincy was having a very proactive and direct contact with students, particularly with the Year 7 cohort that's new and needing to find their way around and of course the chaplaincy is one of those parts of secondary school that they're not familiar with in primary schools, so they don't know what to expect.*

*I would say that we have to realise that we can't just go straight to addressing the academic because the impact on social skills, on friendships... I think schools could be much more focused on rebuilding the people, the human beings, rather than the students that they presently do.*

*Schools need to be prepared...there are many schools who do not take the chaplain's role seriously and they combine our role with teaching... chaplains can make a huge impact.*

## 2. THE ESCALATION OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES FROM 2020 THROUGH TO 2022

Data in blue boxes below comes from:

<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>

### a) June 2021 (Chaplains reflect on academic year 2020-2021)

Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were more likely to say that lockdown had made their life worse (54.1% of 11 to 16 year olds, and 59.0% of 17 to 22 year olds), than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (39.2% and 37.3% respectively)

*What we've noticed in bucketloads is the mental health needs of the Year 7's have been on a different scale from previous years and we've noticed some really very complex needs around eating disorders, OCD, struggling to attend school at all and, you know, the whole plethora of needs which we might be more familiar in emerging in Year 9 and particularly Year 10 & 11.*

*We are concerned about both what is happening with our Year 7's but also about what the future impact is given how young they are when they're going through some pretty extreme experiences.*

### b) December 2021

10.6% of 6 to 16 year olds missed more than 15 days of school during the 2020 Autumn term. Children with a probable mental disorder were twice as likely to have missed this much school (18.2%) as those unlikely to have a mental disorder (8.8%).

*This Covid, post-Covid situation is so very very different. I feel like we could do with a whole new tranche of mental health specialist staff in because those of us who were dealing with these sorts of things on a relatively manageable level previously can't do that with all the other responsibilities now.*

*It's of a different level from the mental health needs previously and that's quite scary, I think... There's that real worry about what students are going to do to themselves when they go home at night and that, we're carrying on a bigger level I think than we used to. Well, that's certainly what I'm finding in my setting.*

*There's an awful lot of development still to go and I suspect we're going to be experiencing the effects of this throughout their school career... I think when they're in Year 11 we're going to be finding Year 11 problems are a bit different from what they used to be.*

### c) March 2022

I think some of the issues around mental health for the whole country has been significantly impacted in terms of services not being available, GP appointments not available.

We have also heard from young people who have urgently needed help but not looked for it, because of concerns about being a burden on services, uncertainty about what is available, or because of stigma.

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/355gyqcd/coronavirus-report-summer-2020-final.pdf>



## **d) September 2022**

*We still have quite a few students wearing masks because they feel anxious.*

*I would say that we've seen a significant increase in young people needing support around mental health.*

*I do still feel that a significant part of my pastoral interaction with students is triaging for mental health support, so it's rare that I have a conversation with a student that is what I would describe as sort of pastoral care and general sort of support for young people as they're growing up through adolescence...*

*We've catapulted it seems into diagnosable mental health illnesses rather than dealing with just the general rough and tumble of life.*

*It's as though there's no space just for those kind of gentle conversations ... whether people feel they can't ask for help unless they are self-harming or doing something pretty horrific... So just those general questions about why the world is the way it is, perhaps are not being asked now, you can only ask a question if it's a really serious question. It's a bit like we don't go to our GPs when we've got a cough or a cold, you know, we only go if we feel it's really, important.... We engage with them at crisis level and because we're constantly dealing with crisis, we're not allowed the space for just normal healthy development and so normal healthy development is compromised for many more students than it should be.*

*We're just seeing lots and lots more students seeking a diagnosis and I don't know if that's part of the way the culture's changed. Because obviously we want people to be able to talk about mental health but just to recognise that we all have mental health and it's normal that we all have seasons, I guess, that are good and not so good. I suppose that's part of the seeking of a teenager to have an identity, to be part of a tribe, has morphed into an identity that is associated with mental health and the labels that go with it.*

### **Reflections on lessons learnt**

We were already in a mental health epidemic for young people before Covid hit. Covid has accelerated what was already happening, having students presenting with diagnosable mental health disorders. That was already on the rise, but it's just been a bit more sort exponential during this time. So, there wasn't a golden era before Covid. This has intensified, speeded up but it was what was already happening.

In terms of chaplaincy, there might be a further conversation to be had within the world of chaplaincy about whether part of the skill set, part of the training of school chaplains, almost sort of written into the job description is to be mental health support professionals... actually having more tools at their disposal. There should just be an understood part of what chaplaincy is all about, because I think chaplains are very well placed to be involved in this way and almost certainly going to be, so why not almost formalise it more, and have ongoing mental health training for chaplains. It's not going away.

### 3. VULNERABLE STUDENTS

Data in yellow boxes below comes from:

<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>

#### a) June 2021

Children aged 5 to 16 years with a probable mental disorder were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with payments (16.3%), than children unlikely to have a mental disorder (6.4%)

*I would say we are still seeing the vulnerable in more need. I think just the volume of what some of these children are dealing with, because whether it's pandemic induced or whatever, there's so much going on at home and outside of school and that seems to have escalated, so any issues in school just seem to be on top of another load of issues.*

*Since we've been back into school, some of the things that their Head of Year was talking about was that right from the beginning the vulnerable students as well as the others didn't have any actual face-to-face meetings. Some of them were likely to have been initially the students that might not have access to the internet and so, although some of that has been picked up more now that we're back in school, pretty much all of our teaching was online for a really big chunk and I know that the safeguarding team are doing a lot of home visits for particularly vulnerable students but then the others wouldn't have that.*

#### b) March 2022

The proportion of 6 to 16 year olds with a laptop or tablet they could work on at home increased from 89.0% in 2020 to 94.4% in 2021. The proportion receiving regular support from school or college also increased, from 73.7% in 2020 to 79.9% in 2021.

*I'd say that the pupil premium disadvantaged students are accessing more support than those in need but not specifically identified on school data as such.*

*We were all looking at everyone having laptops and making sure pupils were accessing learning and probably not having those other conversations as much as maybe schools and other services should have been.*

#### Reflections on lessons learnt

Talking about vulnerability, I wonder whether students feel more vulnerable now. Whereas one time they were invincible and with the pandemic suddenly we're all vulnerable and we've got to be wary of who's next to us. I don't know. I'm thinking on my feet here but I just wonder whether students suddenly feel more vulnerable.

We've already said that they're talking more about, "I've got this issue" or "My mental health is bad." I mean we see it before exams or mock exams, "I'm really suffering with my mental health" "No that's exam stress, that's isolated. And that is normal." Yeah, so whether they're feeling more vulnerable.

## 4. THE ROLE OF THE CHAPLAIN

### a) June 2021

*I've recognised is that, whilst I'm giving so much more time to the whole pastoral and mental health support and very little to worship at all, partly because we can't gather together for worship but partly because there isn't the time.*

*...what I'm experiencing now is that what's needed is not so much or not exclusively pastoral care, these are specific diagnosable mental health needs which need to be dealt with by trained professional counsellors. So, I've turned into a triage service.*

*Before Easter I started drop-ins, I got Covid money for doing mental health drop-ins and I've been playing games and quarantine bonding matters and all that sort of stuff but doing things to create a more therapeutic area. So, I've changed the Chaplaincy completely into more of a Chaplaincy and wellbeing space and just, doing it within year group bubbles. It is creating something that catches the kids ... when they can't cope in a classroom.*

*It's been trying to think about how we use the skills and the spaces that we've got...that meets the almost emergency needs that we are in.*

*I found that my role has changed to support the staff who are working with the students, and many more adults are coming to the chapel to talk about their days.*

### December 2021

*It does feel like there's a lot to do, more than normal and all eyes are chaplaincy, from adults, from students as well.*

*I'm exhausted now and actually it's getting me down. I'm not coping as well as I would normally cope.*

*I'm not really carrying, I'm dropping rather than carrying. Or giving periods of carrying as far as I can, if that gives support to other people, but I know that emotionally and practically I've kind of gone almost beyond a point of really healthily and helpfully managing. So, sort of limping on till the Christmas holidays and I hope to regroup a little bit.*

*Nobody checks up on you. So, you're taking everything on your shoulders but then who's the person there at the end of the day who's going to go, "Right, what do you need to talk about because that must have been tough?"*

*I think the difference this term is that it's just become even more busy, so actually that point of contact with colleagues is evaporated... you know, all those means of communicating just seem to have been squeezed and shrunk and I don't feel so well connected and supported, not support for me but just sharing the load.*

*I wonder if I'm just getting a bit of compassion fatigue.*

*I kind of went into this with fighting spirit and "Right, this is an opportunity and we're going to do this, and the Lord is with us". But yes, it's the relentlessness.*

*I think from a spiritual point of view an external spiritual director is really valuable, just someone who isn't school who can just come in and you can just have an hour praying, talking, just reconnecting.*

## September 2022

*Normal is not what normal was, so there is more to fit in... it's, what, 3 years since we've had a normal start to the year. So, you'd expect changes to happen in that time.*

*I'm finding with chaplaincy that we're kind of going back to how it was before Covid but there have been some changes which have stayed which have increased workload. So, for example, now in one of my schools we have a lower school lunch break and then we have an upper school lunch break which just means I have to run two groups... So that increases the amount of work that you're doing from group work.*

*We know what's coming now, we can plan, we're not kind of on tenterhooks just waiting for the next announcement. And that's got to take a lot of pressure off.*

### Reflections on lessons learnt

*I thought I was invincible, and I learnt that I'm not.*

*I think I'm feeling quite aware of my limits which is a new learning curve for me. But you can't do it all. I think that self-preservation is important.*

*I think in situations like this the chaplain perhaps needs to speak to the whole staff, train the whole staff and just share some of that responsibility. Rather than staff sending everyone to one person if that one person can share with staff, I think that's been a big learning point. I have a slot on chaplaincy in every staff meeting and, in every staff meeting I have something to say, just putting it wider.*

*Almost every school that has a chaplain, there will only be one chaplain in that school. And yes, you might belong to an academy and there might be other chaplains in your academy, but to a large extent as chaplain you are working solo. Yes, you've colleagues in school obviously but the sort of chaplaincy role of things is solo. And I think we need to pay attention to that, that we're asking a chaplain to do a role that is distinct and different from all the other roles in school. Chaplains need to be supported in an ongoing way with meaningful relationships with other people who are doing the same role. And also, other people who have some sort of facilitating role or oversight role for chaplains as well. So, you know, a diocesan figure say who can have some kind of convening or facilitating role. It's not enough just to leave chaplains on their own and hope that somehow or other they might link up with another chaplain, they might meet somehow or other.*

*If the direction of traffic from the rest of the school is trying to drag you into doing, I don't know, lunch time duties and filling in reports here and covering that lesson there, what's distinctive about the chaplain gets lost in the functioning of the school. And if the chaplain is going to have that prophetic voice in the school community the chaplain needs to be fed as a chaplain and that's only going to happen in the context of other chaplains and other kinds of spiritual nourishment.*

# 5. SPIRITUAL FLOURISHING AND WORSHIP

## a) June 2021

It has enriched worship in a way, by being more creative.

I think talking about loss, talking about death and illness has become more of the vocabulary, I think we as adults in schools were very wary about talking about death and our hand has been forced somewhat.

I think particularly in my school anyway in terms of worship liturgy, we're going to have to have a rethink. I think we're going to have to do things differently now.

## b) December 2021

With new restrictions coming in last week, we've stopped all of our collective worships.

There's much more openness to spirituality, there's much more value being placed on prayer and in a way that's wonderful because chaplaincy's really come into its own and it's valued, and people want it.

In terms of spiritual resilience, we're trying to sort of make a distinction there between spiritual resilience and any kind of resilience. I think that's referring even more to that inner sense of who I am and what my worth is. And so, I think that is at the heart of the resilience...I think we're at a stage where we're seeing much more of the total meltdown and inability to go any further.

I do wonder what role models are our young people seeing when it comes to resilience. Are they seeing politicians, celebrities having meltdowns, making a mess-up, doing things very wrongly? Where are those solid stable role models? And whether they're seeing the adults floundering a little bit and panicking and that's unsettled them. In which case that's where faith comes in as the solid, you can rely on this, this is there.

We changed the worship programme to really focus on the issues of the moment and there's lots in there about identity and about hope and faith and stopping and thinking and how we behave towards each other as well.

We start and end every day with prayer so there's that opportunity...to obviously reflect on what they want to do throughout that day and then reflect on how it's gone

Something that has really surprised me with our Year 7 students is how they've dealt with loss. We've had a lot of students throughout the whole school who've lost grandparents ... The Year 7 students... come into the chapel, they're lighting a candle on our remembrance tree and they're saying prayers ...sometimes they say prayers on their own and then they'll talk about happy memories, and they walk out of the chapel and say, "Thank you Sir". It's quite a positive experience.

### **c) September 2022**

The assemblies are going back, it's a bit of a phased return to in-house assemblies because we've got such big year groups. We can only have one year group at a time in the hall for assembly. So some of them are still virtual and then some of them still live.

I think staff are finding that they quite like not having to do a live assembly but there is something about that connection that you have with the students when you're there being able to connect with them and feel their energy really.

People are really enthusiastic to be getting back to live services, planning for harvest festival services, you know, we have a Founders' Day service for Year 7s, and where they were all virtual before I've found that actually that's taking up a huge amount of time to get back to all of that and we seem to have more than we used to have because people are very excited about it

#### **Reflections on lessons learnt**

Something else that I've learnt is the real value of prayer and if you do nothing else, pray. It's been so valued by students, students that normally wouldn't engage with chaplaincy, "Can I come and pray Sir?", and it just fulfilled an immediate need.

It [the pandemic crisis] certainly demonstrated the value of chaplaincy and the value of worship like your prayer. We've learnt new IT skills. It's enhanced the way that we can worship, the way that we can communicate with people.

The new SIAMs framework from next September is, are you who you say you are? And I think that just gives us the way to say, look, all of you, all of us have to be able to talk this year about the biblical...next year the theological...so we've got to be able to not just understand the Bible, but be able to put it into practice. And I know, my Head is so included by this, my Head's just signed up for Bible Society stuff on being a Head in a Church school. Fantastic. Because he's recognised it.

With grateful thanks to all the chaplains who have shared their thoughts and reflections with us over the course of the last two years.



**NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH**

Canterbury Christ Church University  
nicer@canterbury.ac.uk  
www.nicer.org.uk

