

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 7 | MAY 2023

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

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INTRODUCTION

The research team met with the chaplains involved in the virtual community of practice (VCoP) for the final time in spring 2023. At the outset of this project in June 2021 the researchers naively thought by the time we came to the end of our project with the chaplains, the pandemic would be completely relegated to the past and usual school life, particularly Year 7 transition and induction procedures would have resumed. How wrong we have been. The consequences of the pandemic are still present and while certain school procedures may have been reinstated, some young people are even now carrying with them the impact of the Covid crisis. However, as one chaplain said:

There have always been times of history where there's been anxiety and fear... there's always something in our history where we are challenged and where we can be floored and derailed by what's going on and I think that our history is quite important to share with young people, to say look, you know, we've got through Covid and, yes, there've been casualties along the way but look, we're still here and we're still working through it and what have we learnt by this? And look at how we've grown. So I think there is something about acknowledging that this is part of life, it's part of things that happen across the generations, you can go back to the biblical times and what was happening to the Israelites and them having lost their homes and all these different kind of scenarios, it's part of life, the ups and downs of life. And I think that kind of listening and acknowledging and reassuring is a huge part of chaplaincy in terms of hope.

(Chaplain, VCoP 7, Sept 2022)

Despite the pandemic's consequences in young people's and their families lives, schools are engendering a sense of hope as we emerge from this global crisis. Our initial research findings have demonstrated that school chaplains have a significant role in this journey. This digest sets out some key recommendations to ensure chaplains are recognised fully for what they can bring to school induction procedures and effective accompaniment through crisis situations.

The following recommendations are taken from conversations with chaplains who were part of our VCoP sessions as well as leaders and chaplains from our webinar series.

Recommendations for School Leaders

1. Ensure chaplains have adequate training and support

Chaplains come into the role from such a range of different backgrounds and with a range of different training. Some people may never have had any training that really is specific to being a chaplain or indeed working in schools. (Chaplain, VCoP 9, March 2023)

You cannot assume a certain background of training with chaplains in the way that you would assume a certain background of training with teaching staff. (Chaplain, VCoP 9, March 2023)

Chaplains don't necessarily go into chaplaincy thinking they are going to deal with mental health issues, they go into chaplaincy thinking they are going to deal with Jesus and faith and spirituality, and often we find ourselves unskilled. Unlike a counsellor and some other school staff who have supervision, we don't have supervision. Where do we carry that too, where do we take that to make sure we are safeguarding us and ensuring we are not making things worse through lack of understanding. Recognise and formalise (write it into the job description) that chaplains should have on-going training around mental health. (Chaplain, VCoP 9, March 2023)

Chaplains are often on their own in their role... make sure a network of support is around them. (Chaplain, VCoP 8, December 2022)

2. Recognise the distinctive role of the chaplain

Value Chaplains as Chaplains – having a chaplain in schools is bringing to the community a form of modelling that isn't seen anywhere else – respect the incarnational and prophetic role of the chaplain. (Chaplain, VCoP 8, December 2022)

Chaplains have a distinct role and need to be allowed to do that distinct role and not just be used as a plug for everywhere else. Safeguarding the chaplain's role is crucial and while they should not be used routinely for cover... the occasional pitching up in front of the class actually could be hugely important, both with the way the students see you as the chaplain but also actually in informing the chaplain about what it's like to be in a classroom, and that enables you to appreciate what the students are saying more when they come to see you. (Chaplain, VCoP 8, December 2022)

It's making sure that there's an understanding that our time is flexible, our time is not to be taken up with timetabled things necessarily. SLT...like lists and they like knowing who's available when and as chaplains our life isn't like that. You can have all the intentions to get X,Y and Z done and then a child rocks up at your door and you're like "This is what I've got to do today. (VCoP 9, March 2023)

Chaplaincy is different from being a pastoral leader, I do more of the creating space. You know I've done quite a few different things in terms of my own learning which is around ... just giving students strategies to help to create that sense of peace and calm within themselves which chaplaincy sort of lends itself to anyway because it's not an academic space...I think it's quite important that we're distinct from being part of the pastoral team.

(Chaplain, VCoP 9, March 2023)

3. Recognise a chaplain's significant role in the transition from primary to secondary school

Chaplains should be at the heart of the planning of the transition process, working with the pastoral team ... So being in those planning meetings as well as the times when we meet the children and the parents who go to schools and so on.

(VCoP 8, December 2022)

4. Recognise chaplains as experts

Teachers in a school are seen as experts in their field and often chaplains are not seen as experts in the field and so not listened to or acknowledged in this way by SLT. See them as professional and experts in their field and draw upon their wisdom.

(Chaplain consultant, March, 2023)

5. Give space and time for chaplains to journey spiritually with others in the school

Time for self-reflection is important for chaplains to discern their role, their needs and their limitations.

(Chaplain consultant, March 2023)

Recommendations for Chaplains

1. Protect your own wellbeing

In times of crisis...it's that spiritual nurturing, recharging of the spiritual batteries ... that's what gets squeezed out because that's time when I could be doing something else. I am having to get stricter with standing back and saying "no" ...I need to protect my own wellbeing.

(Chaplain, VCoP 3, December 2021)

We kind of put our own needs to one side and maybe that comes back to bite us.

(Chaplain, VCoP 3, December 2021)

Although I was tired at the end of term and had no energy, I wanted to ensure fun activities for the students, so I pulled in visiting organisations to do this, and it helped loads as the onus was not on me to deliver.

(Chaplain, VCoP 3, December 2021)

2. Encounter stillness and reflection in your day

Something else that I've learnt is the real value of prayer and if you do nothing else, pray. (VCoP 8)

So many of our staff now are coming to the weekly staff prayer meeting. It's only for about 10 minutes before school, and they're just saying this is, you know, recharging the batteries, it's good for them. Yeah, there's such a need there I think with reflection and prayer and stillness. (Chaplain, VCoP 7, Sept 2022)

3. Create a network of support around you

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. (Chaplain, VCoP 7, September 2022)

I would say yes, I do feel very supported and that is partly because I'd say there's a good relationship with the senior leadership team. And I think that's really important that I feel supported from the top so to speak, that I feel I have their confidence that what I've been doing as chaplain has been well received and approved of and such like. (Chaplain, VCoP 2, September 2021)

I'm in a group of Christian teachers and we pray together once a week. We support each other and I think that's a great source of support. Also we have a diocesan group of chaplains and we meet obviously due to Covid online, sometimes we meet in physicality, and again we support each other as well as chaplains. (Chaplain, VCoP 2, September 2021)

We've got a weekly staff prayer meeting which is well-attended, colleagues I can talk to. I meet with the head teacher, who's a committed Christian, once a week solely to talk about the Christian ethos in the school. And we've got the same thing, a network of chaplains in the diocese that meets on Zoom regularly. Also I'm in regular contact with our local vicar. (Chaplain, VCoP 2, September 2021)

4. Have a ministry of presence in your role

I make sure that every morning I do a tour of the whole school so that I can speak to staff at the start of the day and then I'm out every breaktime talking to students around the school, I'm not just in one place.

I try to get into the year 7 classes regularly, just to say hello.

It's developing those relationships and they've got to be long term, and not just in a couple of months while this is transition season.

5. Inhabit the ministry of hope

As adults working in schools, whatever our role, we're in the business of hope, we're taking these young people and hoping the very best for them.

NEXT STEPS

Further research

- There is a lack of qualitative research into students' perceptions of the role of chaplains, in supporting their spiritual wellbeing.
- There is a need for a particular focus on the year 7 2020 cohort whose induction into secondary school was significantly affected by the government restrictions in schools at the time.
- It would be beneficial to explore the chaplain's role further and identify what support is available for them to assist them in their vocational roles.

Practical recommendations

- Recognise the significance of the chaplain's role in transition and induction procedures.
- Formalise within the chaplains' job description the need for them to have on-going training around mental health.
- If chaplains are going to have the necessary prophetic role in the school, this needs to be valued and protected rather than relying on them regularly to shoulder other roles within the school.

**NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
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Canterbury Christ Church University
nicer@canterbury.ac.uk
www.nicer.org.uk

