



Canterbury
Christ Church
University

Final Report 2023



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**

June 2021-May 2023

Dr Ann Casson

Ms Ann Pittaway

Prof. Robert A. Bowie

Dr Sabina Hulbert (year 1)

Dr Rosanne Aantjes (year 2)

**National Institute For
Christian Education Research**



The National Institute for Christian Education Research

NICER is a University Research Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University. It undertakes research to inform the contribution of faith to the public understanding of education, to aid the mission of church schools, universities, and Christian education in communities, to develop and improve religion and worldview education, and to support the work of Christians in education and leaders in education. It uses qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research approaches in that work. It has developed novel approaches to investigating school ethos, character, and curriculum in Christian schooling.

NICER receives funds from charities and other grant-making research bodies, supported by the University's commitment to the centre. NICER collaborates with specialists from other leading institutions, schools, and research centres, including institutions of other religions and worldviews across the country and from around the world. It acts as a hub to promote international Christian education research at the highest level through seminars and conferences.

Contents

Summary of the report	4
Introduction	4
Overview of the research project.....	5
Practical outcomes.....	10
Difficulties & setbacks	11
Dissemination & sustainability	12
Recommendation for further research	14
Acknowledgements	14
References	15

Summary of the report

This report offers insights gained from

- 9 virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) sessions that occurred between June 2021 and May 2023.
- Online surveys explored the participant chaplains' experience of participation in the VCoPs and webinar participants' views.
- Five Webinars (2021/2023) with 152 attendees in total.

It shares details of the research process 2021 -2023, which led to four key insights.

- The invaluable role that the school chaplain has in nurturing the spiritual flourishing of year 7 students as they enter secondary school.
- The ongoing consequences of the absence of a smooth transition- induction process on the resilience of the 2020-year 7 cohort.
- The fragility and resilience of the chaplains in responding to the escalating rise of mental health issues among students and staff.
- A sense of hope among chaplains, who are now exploring different ways to nurture the spiritual flourishing of a school community.

It details the dissemination process that has been on-going since the end of 2021. All the findings and resources are available on NICER website (nicer.org.uk) and continue to be widely disseminated at conferences with chaplains, head teachers, teaching staff, academics, and representatives from Anglican and Roman Catholic educational contexts. The team continues receiving invites to share the research with academics and organisations working with chaplains.

Introduction

Consolation and Hope in a Time of Crisis: Bringing Chaplains Together to Cultivate Human Flourishing and Spiritual Resistance in Response to Covid-related Losses for Year 7 Pupils.

The research project "Consolation and Hope in a Time of Crisis" has generated rich data, providing fascinating insights into the importance of a smooth induction process for Year 7 school students, especially in times of crisis. It has provided valuable insight into the critical role and significance of school chaplains in accompanying students through this critical stage of life and highlighted the challenges chaplains faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaborating with the participant chaplains, the research team produced a resource, **Known by Name** (<https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience/known-by-name-resources>), offering practical ideas for school leaders and chaplains on engendering a positive induction that nurtures a sense of belonging and offers fertile ground for students' spiritual flourishing. This report offers an overview of the project, information on the practical outcomes, difficulties and setbacks, the on-going dissemination of the research findings and recommendations for future research.

Overview of the research project

The main insights

- 1. The school chaplain has an invaluable role in the induction process.**
The chaplain's role in nurturing a caring, compassionate community is critical to students' sense of belonging to the school. They have a unique role in nurturing the spiritual flourishing of the whole school community, ensuring a smooth induction process for students and attending to the spiritual wellbeing of the whole community, students, and staff.
- 2. The continuing vulnerability of the 2020-year 7 cohort has been a concern of the chaplains throughout the project.**
Early in the research, the research team recognised that an absence of effective induction into secondary school for the Year 7 2020 cohort had a negative consequence for many students in all the participating schools.
- 3. The resilience and the fragility of the participating chaplains in responding to spiritual wellbeing issues in the school community have been striking throughout the project.**
A sense of vocation and compassion sustained them through a challenging period. The project has highlighted a need for a strong support network for chaplains. Many chaplains encountered in VCoPs, webinars and conferences commented on the lack of such a network.
- 4. The beginnings of a sense of hope among chaplains.**
Many chaplains have taken the opportunities provided by the pandemic to explore different ways to nurture the spiritual flourishing of a school community. These ideas have shaped much of the content within our Known by Name resource, particularly the awareness of relationship building between school chaplains and potential students while still attending primary education. Reaching out to students before they transition to secondary school helps to foster a sense of belonging and being known, thus aiding a smooth induction process. Providing times of reflection and retreat for students was also high on the chaplains' agenda to support healing from the various encounters of loss imposed on young people due to the pandemic. The hope was tempered by an awareness of the challenges posed by school funding issues.

Year 1 (June 2021–May 2022)

During the first year of this research study, a virtual community of practice (VCoP) network of chaplains was established. The VCoP provided a shared context for professionals to work collaboratively in response to interrupted systems (Amaratunga, C. A., 2014), such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It facilitated a space where the participant chaplains and research team could come together to:

- Discuss issues arising in school.
- Reflect on concerns in the research digest provided by the research team.
- Share excellent practices.
- Offer support to one another.

In addition to providing insight for the research team, the VCoP engendered a sense of on-going support for the chaplains, as one said, *'I think this sort of collective group sharing can be, I don't want to use the word therapeutic, but it can be really helpful'* (VCoP 3, December 2021).

Each of the nine VCoP sessions was supported by a research or practice digest compiled by the research team to inform and guide the focus for discussion. To ensure that these are readily accessible to a wider audience, they are available on the NICER website (<https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience>).

A total of six out of nine VCoP sessions were delivered in the first year with a focus on listening to the chaplains' experiences of student secondary school transition post-lockdown. Each meeting was recorded, and the transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO 12 software for analysis. What follows are the key findings of these discussions.

Evidence of Impact on Students

Disadvantaged students

The research findings revealed that although the pandemic impacted everyone, and so in this sense, all were vulnerable to the consequences of this global situation, the effects and impact were exacerbated for those who were already disadvantaged and challenged with hardship.

Disadvantage and vulnerability can be manifested in a variety of ways. Children who are identified as vulnerable and disadvantaged may not be susceptible to academic underachievement or face learning barriers (Welsh Government, 2020). Equally, students not formally identified on the school database can still be vulnerable and disadvantaged by life's challenges. This was especially apparent during the outbreak of Covid-19. With a specific spotlight on Year 7 transition and induction students, school leaders said that these students arrived at school taking longer to settle in and establish themselves (Ofsted, 2021). The VCoP chaplains suggested that it is important to see students as individuals with their own needs, challenges, skills, and talents, as this is core to establishing a culture where all have the support and opportunities to achieve their potential and flourish. Students will have different starting points and hurdles to overcome. There is no 'one size fits all' solution. Still, with sustained commitment from all who are invested in nurturing a child's full potential, the chance to succeed is tangible.

“““

“Covid has exposed a lot more vulnerability in children who maybe would not have appeared on the school radar before.”

(VCoP 4/ March 2022)

“““

“I'd say students recognised by the school as disadvantaged and vulnerable are getting better access to external support.”

(VCoP 4/ March 2022)

The Year 7 Cohort of 2020/2021

Chaplains perceived a Year 7 cohort arriving at secondary school who did not seem secondary ready, having lost much of their Year 5 and Year 6 primary education, where preparation for transition should be a key focus.

“““

“It was as if they were waiting to start secondary school and that the transition and induction process had been put on hold.”

(VCoP 1/ Sept. 2021)

“““

“Year 7 didn't get an amazing primary school sort of pathway, did they? It was the most important years towards the end that were just completely eradicated for them.”

(VCoP 2/Sept. 2021)

These students also seemed far more immature than in previous years and more dependent on adults for support. They were less willing to take risks and carry out tasks independently.

“““

“Just little things just, like asking so many questions rather than solving problems themselves. ‘I’ve lost my timetable. What do I do?’ Yes, just those sort of small things really. And perhaps more dependency on adults really.”

(VCoP 7/ Sept. 2022)

The chaplains spoke of increased anxiety and mental health issues amongst Year 7 students.

“““

“What we’ve noticed in bucketloads is the mental health needs of the Year 7’s has 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 it’s just hit us like a juggernaut really.”

(VCoP 1/Sept. 2021)

Evidence of the Impact on Chaplains

When the research team first met with the chaplains from June 2021 through to December 2021, it was clear by their responses that the consequences of the pandemic were having an impact on their disposition. The chaplains spoke of the relentless firefighting of issues, particularly student mental health and anxiety concerns. Chaplains faced challenges and changes in their roles without procedures or protocols to fall back on.

“““

“Whereas previously with pastoral care I engaged with the student, and I would meet them after, and build up a relationship and support them... I’m not tending to have such satisfying and fulfilling pastoral encounters. I’m seeing someone, I do a referral and off they go... I am more like a triage service.”

(VCoP 1/ Sept. 2021)

“““

“I’m exhausted now and actually it’s getting me down. I’m not coping as well as I would normally cope.”

(VCoP 2/Sept. 2021)

“““

“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?’”

(VCoP 3/ Dec. 2021)

They experienced greater demand from the staff for chaplaincy support.



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

(VCoP 3/ Dec. 2021)



“There is a notable appreciation from non-practising Christians, members of staff who have said, “This is really good, this is meaning something.”

(VCoP 3/Dec. 2021)

Following on from the December 2021 VCoP, the chaplains spoke more with a sense of hope despite being stretched in their role. Gradually, many of the procedures in school returned, bringing some stability to the working environment. Still, in some instances, newly established procedures meant an increase in workload for some of the chaplains.



“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... 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.”

(VCoP 7/ Sept. 2022)

The ongoing data analysis identified trends and challenges, and these were regularly disseminated through scheduled webinars, conferences, and one-to-one meetings. The feedback received informed future VCoPs and Research Digest material.

Year 2 (June 22 – May 23)

The remaining three VCoP sessions were held during the project’s second year, with the focus being more on looking forward in practice and creating a transition and induction resource. In collaboration with the participating chaplains, feedback from webinar attendees, and the advisory group, the research team produced an interdenominational transition and induction resource, *Known by Name*.

Known by Name

The resource unpacks the idea of induction as a journey of being known. It focuses on the notion of different stages of being known, from the introductory stage of transition, where the school community come to know about their new cohort of students, to the personal sense of being known individually. Being Known by Name is rooted in Biblical tradition. The Bible speaks of the intimacy of belonging to God and of being loved. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Moreover, as God has loved us, so we should love each other and welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us (John 13:34 & Romans15:7). Chaplains are rooted in the wisdom of faith and spirituality. They can call upon this rich heritage to support and invite young people to belong to their new school community by being personally known. As well as offering various ideas for chaplains to use with induction students, each section is supported by evidence from research and the voices of chaplains. This structure has been intentionally included to offer strength to chaplains who can feel isolated in their school context. This resource is now available on our NICER website via

<https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience/known-by-name-resources>

The resource was successfully launched at NICER's Conference Day (July 2022) and has since been disseminated through our participant schools, webinars, and conferences. It has received some excellent feedback:

[Name] showed me a copy of the resource and I am sure this will prove to be incredibly helpful for schools...Please could I order 10 x hard copies to share with our main feeder schools to support with transition.
(Headteacher, November 2022)

I think you've covered loads. I really like the idea of parent presence. I've written that down as something we might start looking into doing.
(Head of Key Stage 3, June 2022)

I love this resource because our whole transition team is new.
(Chaplain, June 2022)

I really enjoyed it [Known by Name Resource]. I liked the conceptualising of the Chaplain's role...liked that each page of examples and ideas was backed up with a page of research. I found it nice and clear to navigate and helpful even for myself!
(Lead area chaplain, Kent 2022)

Listening to the inner voices of the chaplains

Each VCoP session was recorded and transcribed. A vital part of the data analysis was to apply Brown and Gilligan's 'I-Poem' approach (1992). I-poems methodology uses guidance from the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015). Applying this method, we were able to reach through the voice of professionalism and institutional expectations to reveal the personal and the often-missed voices underlying the surface comments of individual chaplains as they worked through the crisis. The rationale for using this analysis tool was to listen deeply and bring to the fore the inner voice of the chaplains. These I- poems can be seen via our website <https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience>

Practical outcomes

The supportive network of the Virtual Community of Practice

The Chaplain participants have been supported through the VCoP sessions and provided with theoretical and practical information regarding their professional development and vocation. In a short written questionnaire, the participant chaplains revealed that they found the VCoPs to be *'uplifting! Inspiring. Giving hope in difficult times' and being 'valuable, incisive stimulating, enjoyable, worthwhile'*. One chaplain explained the value by stating, *'These meetings leave you feeling part of a wider community of people all striving for the same goal.'* Another said, *'New ideas have developed for Year 7 transition and have already been introduced this year.'*

Through the VCoPs, the chaplains established an ecumenical network to refer to and inform their practice, especially in times of crisis. Their responses from the survey indicate they gained 'new ideas' about supporting the transition and induction process. For one Chaplain, the value was in hearing about 'other contexts' and 'shared best practices.' Another chaplain noted that the VCoPs have *'sharpened my focus on the importance of transition, especially post-pandemic. We have made changes so that Chaplaincy has a more significant input in transition events and processes'*. All the chaplains remarked that being part of the research process had raised their (and their school leader's) awareness of the benefit of paying attention to the school community's needs regarding spiritual flourishing in times of crisis. Some chaplains found opportunities to build other new networks by participating in the VCoPs.

Accessible resources

The research project has produced six research digests, which are available at <https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience/research-digests>. The first resource was a rapid review of relevant research published in the first months of the pandemic. Subsequent digests were developed in response to the concerns and needs of the participating chaplains.

1. Identifying critical issues for induction 2021
2. Back to school challenges, initial strategies & first reflections
3. Nurturing spiritual resilience in Year 7 students during their induction year
4. Meeting the needs of those disproportionately disadvantaged by covid-19
5. Hope in the shadow of loss
6. Reflections on lessons learnt

A practical resource to inform the transition and induction process is available at <https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience/known-by-name-resources>

Difficulties & setbacks

Staff shortages in schools

As schools gradually reopened following lockdown, significant issues related to the pandemic remained. COVID-19 sickness among staff was commonplace, and many of our participant schools had a shortage of teaching staff. This resulted in chaplains being called upon to cover lessons, and thus, sometimes, our planned VCoP sessions were affected. Similarly, teaching strikes also meant planned VCoP sessions needed to be rescheduled. We overcame these difficulties by rescheduling where we had prior notice or arranging one-to-one sessions.

Changing personnel

For some schools, chaplaincy is a stepping-stone to something else. For example, during this project, two of the chaplains moved on to prison chaplaincy and ordination. Before a replacement could be found, another staff member, usually the person responsible for Year 7 induction (often the Head of Year), would step in until the school employed a new chaplain. This added benefit as these individuals contributed new insights and gained a deeper appreciation of a chaplain's significant role in the transition and induction process.

Dissemination & sustainability

Dissemination of this research has been a continuous and ongoing process. As the Covid pandemic was a time of rapid change, it was essential to disseminate critical findings to schools as soon as feasible. The research team focussed on practitioner-facing dissemination as it was critical to inform practice during rapid change. However, it was also essential for the research team to receive rapid feedback to shape the research going forward. Much of this was captured through our scheduled webinars.

I just wanted to say how brilliant the work you are doing is. Chaplains are so under-estimated, under-valued, and under-resourced and yet what they do is amazing, and your work is so validating of what they do. It feels like God is raising up the work of the chaplains.

(Secondary RE, Chaplaincy and Collective Worship Adviser, London Diocese)

Throughout this project, the research team created a pool of resources to inform policy on induction and spiritual resilience in times of crisis. Our nine research and practice digests have been issued to all participant chaplains, who distributed them within the school community. They have also been disseminated at our conferences and webinars and continue to be available to a wider audience through our website. One participant chaplain noted:

The VCoP digest 3 has really helped. When I know people have time to read it, I will be sharing this. The last digest was good, but this one really helped.

(Chaplain, December 2021).

Another said:

It's been helpful to share the fruits of our discussions and digests with wider leadership teams in school.

(Chaplain, November 2022)

The resource, *Known by Name*, has influenced transition and induction processes:

I love the videos idea. It's such an easier way to get a greater reach to students. And that doesn't have to be just a Year 6 thing.

(Head of Year, June 2022)

I really liked what you were saying at the beginning about linking it to research and for chaplains to be able to use that to back up their planning... I've heard from chaplains who are not in church schools, and they perhaps have a bit more of a battle. So, I think that it is really a wonderful resource for them.

(Chaplain, June 2022)

I think you've covered the majority of the transition process and getting them in for school and trying to engage all the key stakeholders. It's brilliant.

(Chaplain, June 2022)

Our conferences and webinars have attracted attendees from schools with and without chaplains. The research digests, webinars, conferences, and *Known by Name* resource have had and continue to significantly impact a wide audience of chaplains and other interested stakeholders.

Thanks for today, it was really useful to meet you all and hear from what yourselves and others have learnt about bringing and being hope in a time of loss and how we lament with our school communities. I would love to carry on being part of this network of learning together so let me know of future meetings.
(Email response following webinar, November 2022).

Our website (<https://nicer.org.uk/spiritual-resilience>) is kept updated, signposting academics and practitioners and all connected with the NICER research community to the Chaplains project. Our work is also promoted on external educational websites. For instance, the Centre for Chaplaincy in Education (working in partnership with other organisations and denominations in the field of Chaplaincy and offering a network of support and resources), have included some of our work on their website <https://centreforchaplaincyineducation.co.uk/resources>

We are committed to ongoing dissemination to ensure our research reaches a wide audience. We are keen to sustain the network of chaplains and organisations who engaged with the project—responding to a need identified by many of the chaplains who have engaged with the research.

Chaplains need to be supported in an on-going way with meaningful relationships with other people who are doing the same role. And also [with] other people who have some sort of facilitating role or oversight role for chaplains as well, [such as] a diocesan figure. 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.
(Chaplain VCOP 8, December 2022)

It has been an invaluable and humbling experience for the research team to accompany the participating chaplains through their pandemic experience, and we thank each of them for sharing their many insights, opportunities, and challenges during this time.

Recommendation for further research

Transition from the perspective of Year 7 (2020) students

We have explored, through the perception of chaplains, how the fragmented transition and induction procedures during the pandemic crisis impacted Year 7 students. A study surveying and interviewing these students and capturing their reflections of transitioning to school through the pandemic crisis would offer a deeper insight of the impact crises can have on students' transition experiences and their spiritual flourishing.

Who is Listening to the Chaplains?

It would be beneficial to explore the role of the chaplain further and identify what support is available and how it can be enhanced to assist them in their vocational roles.

Acknowledgements

The research team gratefully acknowledges the support of the participating schools, chaplains and school leaders, as well as the contributions and insights of the advisory group during the project.

The Advisory Group members

Revd Kay Blackwell	Chaplaincy Team Leader, Oxford Academy School
Raymond Friel	Chief Executive Officer, Caritas Social Action Network CSAN
Revd Mike Haslam	Chaplaincy Development Adviser and Acting Mission Development Team Leader, Diocese of Bath and Wells
Jane Burton	Chaplain at St Gregory's Catholic School Representative from The Association of Catholic Chaplains in Education (ACCE)
Kathryn Kane	Secondary RE, Chaplaincy and Collective Worship Adviser, Building Bridges between Schools and Churches, London Diocesan Board for Schools
Revd Charlie Kerr	Chaplaincy Adviser, Oxford Diocese Board of Education
Revd Dr Jeremy Law	Dean of Chapel, Canterbury Christ Church University
Doug Mongan	Lay School Chaplain - De La Salle School Basildon. The National Co-ordinator of The Association of Catholic Chaplains in Education (ACCE)
Andy Wolfe	Executive Director of Education, Church of England Education Office

References

Amaratunga, A, C. (2014). Building community disaster resilience through a virtual community of practice (VCOP). *International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*, 5(1), 66-78. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDRBE-05-2012-0012>

Brown, L. and Gilligan, C. (1992). *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674731837>

Gilligan, C. (2015). The Listening Guide method of psychological inquiry [Editorial]. *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(1), 69-77. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qap0000023>

Ofsted, (December 2021) *Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021*. Accessed via <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-recovery-in-schools-autumn-2021/education-recovery-in-schools-autumn-2021> on 17/11/2023

Welsh Government (October 2020) Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners (Updated November 2021). Accessed via <https://gov.wales/guidance-supporting-vulnerable-and-disadvantaged-learners-html> on 17/11/2023



**Canterbury
Christ Church
University**

canterbury.ac.uk

**National Institute For
Christian Education Research**
Canterbury Christ Church University
nicer@canterbury.ac.uk
www.nicer.org.uk