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Looking Forward
President's Address
TCMA AGM, 2007
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Over this past year as President I have been wondering how we see ourselves as a professional association of chaplains in (mainly) universities and where we would like TCMA to be in say 5 years time.

Can I say that I have really appreciated the programming of this conference, allowing plenty of opportunities to engage with colleagues while also providing stimulating input and affirmation from our guests. This deep engagement with each other in heart and mind is what I think TCMA has always treasured and cultivated.

In June this year I attended the Conference of European Christian University Chaplains, held in The Netherlands.

I was interested in the themes the Dutch chaplains had identified for exploration.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE!? was their question; this exclamation reflecting their struggle to remain relevant and vibrant in a dramatically changed religious and social context.

I was reminded of conversations in the late 90s we four (at that time) Christian chaplains at Flinders had with the Chancellor, Sr Diedrie Jordan, an afternoon tea with her each semester. At the end of the half hour or so, during which we would try to respond to her penetrating questions, she would invariably bid us farewell, beaming at us with great compassion, saying: "I have the greatest respect for what you are trying to do. You have an impossible task!"

Just before she retired, Sr Jordan gave us a piece of advice. "At the end of the Second World War", she said, "the Red Cross suffered a crisis. During the war, they were highly organised with food parcels, inspection of prisoner of war camps and so on. Once the war was over, they didn't know what to do anymore. They needed to re-invent themselves. And that's what you chaplains are facing – you need to re-invent yourselves."

During the conference so far it has been wonderful to hear stories of re-invention on campuses. But what of us as an organisation? Can we create a TCMA that resists the individualisation (that Ruth Webber talked about) of chaplaincy itself. Can we think and strategise collectively about what needs to be changed about TCMA if we, as a body, want to remain relevant to tertiary chaplaincy.

To help this process, I want to share some of my own perceptions of our landscape, as I see it personally, and as your President. Some of this has already been raised within this conference. I will also refer to the agenda the Dutch chaplains set themselves which have provided external points of reference in my thinking. I probably won't say anything new. But we all know how spiritually important it is that what may be hidden, the musings of our heart, is given voice.

1. SECULARISATION

Those of us old enough to remember can recall times when chaplaincies were at the forefront of ecumenical and liturgical experiments… exciting gatherings of energetic, intelligent young people, stretching institutional boundaries and often taking direct action against injustice.

To be a Uni chaplain was to really be someone!

Chaplaincy was born in Europe and there were times when the chapel was at the *centre* of the University.

So I felt some of the pain of the Dutch chaplains, constantly reminded by their physical surroundings and collective memory of a glorious past. But now there is no denial: they describe their current landscape so similar to mine. "Only a small minority of students have any relation to the churches. Those who do are mainly conservative evangelicals."

How often, when I first began chaplaincy, I felt like a old steam engine, all fired up to take students on a wonderful Christian journey – but no-one has turned up for the ride! They are somewhere else.

2. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

On the other hand, our religious centre at Flinders bulges with Muslim students every Friday.

They seem to have been vaccinated against secularism. Faith, and the practice of faith, integral to daily life, is important to them.

- What is my role with them?
- What does my sponsoring religious body think should be my role with them?
- What would the University like my role to be with them?
- And do they want anything to do with me anyway?

Back in the late 90's, this Christian chaplain felt like the proverbial fish out of water. I had no preparation for this engagement with other faiths and there seemed to be no precedent within my tradition to help me answer these my questions.

My conservative Christian colleagues already seemed to have circled their wagons!

If secularisation profoundly shook my initial understanding of my role as chaplain, when the students walked out, religious pluralism exacerbated and compounded my identity crisis.

TCMA is constituted as a body open to membership from people of all faiths.

- Where are they?
- What can TCMA do to redress this imbalance in its membership?

3. THE SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENT

As I began to try to find out where the Christians went, I discovered an even larger group "out there".

"I'm not religious, but I *am* spiritual", is their catchcry.

Latest research from the US suggests that this movement is much larger than we think. We are largely unaware of both its magnitude and significance.[1]

I think we are fortunate to have had David Tacey[2] in an Australian university to help us understand this movement here. But I think he feels a bit of a lone voice in the wilderness.

The Dutch chaplains put it this way – they sense "an intriguing search for the spiritual and religious dimensions of student motivation and academic research. All this calls for the development of a new language to communicate the core message of our faith in a secular context which, at the same time, is searching for a spiritual and motivational basis, and for new hopes."

The key words repeated are "search" and "new".

- Can we as TCMA encourage each other on this search for new language and new channels of expression (as Ruth Webber has suggested)?
- Dare we share what is *really* happening for us in our individual chaplaincies?
- Can we find ways to become more open about sharing ideas, hunches and provisionality without fear of being put down by those conditioned to think in terms of "correct answers"?
- Can we find a way to accept our diversity, to put to death any competitive spirit, and feel that we are all in this together?

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[1] Robert Forman. *Grassroots Spirituality: What It Is, Why It Is Here, Where It Is Going...,* 2004

[2] David Tacey. *The Spirituality Revolution.* Harper Collins 2003

4. SPONSORING RELIGIOUS BODIES

I can only speak of my own, racked with division over the so-called "sexuality debate", increasingly inward looking and seeking its own survival in the face of "the walk-out", which, it turns out, has not been confined to the university!

Quoting the Dutch again:

> Losing members and money, the churches in the Netherlands tend to formulate their core business in terms of gaining new members and funds. As this is not the central aim of University chaplaincy, the number of university chaplains has been reduced in the last few years, and the tendency is downward. Trying to open up the churches for *Dialogue without gain*, searching for *the meaning of post-church Christianity* and looking for new ways to *fund* university chaplaincy have now become urgent tasks. Though most of us have to perform these tasks with diminishing teams and means, we consider it an exciting experiment.

So do I.

But now I am paying more attention to how I might contribute back to my sponsoring religious body in ways other than that which compromises my chaplaincy.

I am reminded of a workshop conducted at the Global conference in Brisbane. A former North American university chaplain presented his research, supporting the thesis that the issues which present themselves among students on campus show up in churches five years later. That is, Universities can act as early warning devices for emerging issues.

- What may we offer our sponsoring religious communities if it is not "bums on seats"?
- If University chaplaincy is declining in Australia, and I suspect it is, what is TCMA worth if it stands idly by as the demise of university chaplaincy takes place around it?

5. UNIVERSITIES

Universities themselves, as we know, are continually undergoing rapid change.

Let us remind ourselves that we can no longer assume that they are the learning communities of the past, but multi-million dollar, globalised, corporate businesses, driven for survival in a free- market, competitive, dog-eat-dog world. Education has become commodified.

- Where is the spiritual life in this?
- We must find it there and nurture it.

But how to go about it?

Walter Brueggemann put it, "no longer seeking to be privileged insiders, but no longer willing to be trivialised outsiders".[3]

- When everyone at the University seems to know what they're doing, how can we keep reminding ourselves that it's OK not to?
- …that in fact while our contribution may be modest, it is special and profound - as Leunig would suggest?
- …that it is precisely because of our independence and unconditionality that we may fulfil our unique role?
- How do we keep reminding ourselves that it is enough, in the language of Prof Steel, to be a *beacon*, a *presence*, not an achiever attempting status and gain?
- Yet how do we *connect* while remaining independent?
- What might TCMA's role be in support of all this?

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[3] Walter Brueggemann. *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*. SCM

I wonder whether the story told by Prof. Steel on the opening night is the kind of story we need to have told to every Vice-Chancellor in Australia, and whether we need to engage at that level in a conversation about how chaplaincy might be more helpfully employed in Australian universities.

- Or are there other ways TCMA might promote the ideals of chaplaincy among universities?

6. OUR OWN SPIRITUAL LIFE

Who we are is always going to be more important than *what we do*.

Yet I also have to *do* something about who I am.

If I hold a grudge, I must deal with it.
If I hold a prejudice, I must confront it.

Our lives are the message we bring.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE!?

Perhaps.

But let's work together on it.

Is your issue **secularisation** – nobody's interested in what you have to offer?
Or **religious pluralism** – not sure *how* you can offer what you have to offer?
Is it the **spirituality** revolution – not sure how to connect outside of your own religious framework?
Or the **university system** – too busy to give you the time of day?
Is it your **sponsoring religious community** – they really don't understand your situation so you feel unsupported?
Or is it your **own spiritual battles** – you need to work on some unresolved personal issue that is blocking effective chaplaincy?

Mission Impossible!?

No more than that which confronted Moses, Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed (Peace be on them all!)

I invite you to make your own unique contribution to enrich us all through TCMA.

I look forward, the Executive looks forward, to your engagement to make TCMA an effective channel of support for our own "Mission Impossible's!?"