

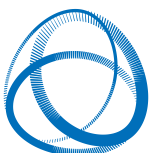
Consolation and hope in a time of crisis:

Listening to Year 10 students'
response to Covid-Related losses



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What is a Church School Chaplain?



**Canterbury
Christ Church
University**

**National Institute
for Christian
Education Research**

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What is a Church School Chaplain?

The chaplain is the embodiment of the Christian school ethos, the authentic witness that lives their faith boldly, yet communicates the language of faith and spirituality respectfully and in a way that connects appropriately with the context and situation they operate in. That said, there is no one-size fits all when it comes to defining the school chaplain. Their role within the school context is diverse and they are often called upon to address the various facets of the school community's needs. The ability to be adaptable and responsive to the needs of others is an essential character trait to possess. Creating and fostering an environment where a climate of hope exists and relationships can develop, built on trust, underpin a chaplain's role. Furthermore, chaplaincy is at its very core relational by nature. A chaplain needs to be able to connect with students, staff and families in a way that fosters trust and offers accompaniment.

Through our research we have come to appreciate the disparate nature of the school chaplain. Some chaplains are teachers or staff members taking on additional chaplaincy duties, while others are linked to external organisations like churches or charities. They can be full-time or part-time, ordained or laypersons, and their responsibilities range from worship and liturgical duties to acting as school counsellors. Chaplains may serve a single school or multiple sites within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), and their positions can vary from senior roles on the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to more peripheral roles in the school community.

What this report sets out is an understanding of the school chaplain seen through the lens of the chaplains, students, and staff that we have encountered during our two-phased research projects. We know that there is more we need to know about chaplains. For instance, we need to know more about the number and work of school chaplains to understand this area of work, and how they seem to be reaching across different boundaries in the provision of care, including the opportunity for spiritual support. However, what we do know is that chaplains are a significant part of school life for those who encounter their care and spiritual accompaniment:

I think chaplains ..., are called to feel some sort of still centre in them, they need to be rooted and grounded in Christ first of all. And you might lead busy lives and have a busy role within the school and be involved in lots of different things and, you know, just literally sit in one room the whole time, but I think there needs to be something that a chaplain can communicate about the fact that they have a still centre, that they are rooted, and their role within school is about providing for the school that still centre.

(Chaplain, 2022)

Insights from Chaplains

Comments from our Virtual Communities of Practice, (VCoP) in Sept 2022 when we reflected upon the role of the church school chaplain amid the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Each VCoP session during our first phase research had an overarching theme that guided our conversations with the chaplains attending. As researchers, we were keen to explore how these chaplains understood their role within their school context, and what follows are their perceptions, spoken in their own words, of what it is to be a chaplain:

We're in the business of hope aren't we, we're taking these young people and hoping the very best for them. Sometimes we have to push, sometimes we have to pull a bit, but that's what we do.

The chaplain... needs to be able to embody the hope that we talk of as being a distinctively Christian hope. And it's the intangible stuff, the soft stuff that you couldn't put on a job description or a job advert necessarily but you know when you've been in contact with someone who embodies and inhabits some of that, there's just something about that person that makes life seem better ...or draws something in you back to where you need to be, and I think that's part of our calling as chaplain.

Why is it that we are called to be chaplains, well it's God has called to that still centre inside us and said "I want to speak out of that to others and you're the person I'm doing that to"... So, something about that calling of the individual person to embody the hope of the Christian faith. As I say, you can't quantify that, you probably couldn't sack a chaplain for not having that, but we know when it's there and when it's not.

There's a significant role for chaplains to inhabit the ministry, by which I mean it comes down to your personal capacity to communicate with others and I don't mean just verbal communication I mean you're being, the way in which you engage, your presence, both your presence within a public space and your presence also on an individual basis.

I think there's something about chaplaincy where you are the unruffled one.

Chaplaincy is about listening and acknowledging and reassuring, and from that reassurance we can point the direction to hope.

At the end of our first phase project in 2023, we asked some of our participant chaplains: what is distinctive about their role from other pastoral roles in school? Below are some of the responses we received:

Chaplaincy differs from other key roles in school in a number of ways. It probably isn't going to be a major part of the academic conversation, but it may be crucial to supporting the academic success of the students and the school. Heads of Year will take the lead on matters of academic progress, but the chaplain will be brought in to help explore why academic performance may have slipped. Similarly with discipline: chaplains probably don't administer discipline but may be instrumental in addressing poor behaviours. In this regard, Chaplaincy is a resource or tool which supports the good functioning of other areas of school life. Chaplaincy needs to be more than this though, otherwise it's just 'student welfare services.

Chaplaincy needs to add something distinctive, which is going to be the faith element. This is most clearly articulated in a church school which celebrates its Christian identity and can therefore be relaxed and open about the Christian ethos of the school. Chaplaincy takes a prominent lead in promoting and articulating this. But even in schools which, for whatever reason (e.g. multi-faith population), are more reticent about proclaiming the Christian faith, the Chaplain needs to know why s/he is working to promote a particular ethos and to be able to articulate this. Articulating the ethos involves, for example, being able to root the aims and strategies employed in a biblical and theological framework, to centre the work that they do in prayer, and to be located in a community of worship, whether that's within the school, or in a local parish, which supports the work of the Chaplaincy in prayer.

Chaplaincy can involve distinctive qualities in other respects... There's a ministry of 'holy lingering' i.e. being available in the right places and at the right time, ostensibly 'hanging around', in order to be visible and available.

Chaplains, like priests, are often consulted at times of crisis but will be seen on other occasions too. Chaplains therefore need to be adept at switching modes, at sensitive remembering and tactful forgetting of intimate conversations. They need to be able to add reassurance by their presence but not awaken old wounds by reminding others of crises shared in confidence. Whilst a Head of Year may have some similarities in this way, the ongoing relationship with a Head of Year may mean that this is naturally achieved, plus a Head of Year may refer to a Chaplain for the really deep parts of support so some of the most painful stuff may have been bared to a Chaplain and no one else.

Unlike other pastoral roles in school, which are about giving advice and solving problems, the role of chaplain is to a large extent a mission of listening. This is not doing less however; listening is very much doing something active and positive. So many of our children, young people and indeed the adult staff want someone who will listen to them, and often just being listened to with a few questions being offered to help organise their thinking is enough.

Creating a safe space which feels different from the rest of the school - a chapel rather than an office. In reality these are still rooms in the school building, but children and staff do say these spaces 'feel different' and this can be powerful.

Chaplains represent faith and spirituality - another dimension in addition to pastoral care.

Chaplains are there for the adults in school as well as the children and we are neutral, accessible to all levels of staff and at the same time we are not leadership, management or rank and file.

The second phase of our research in 2024 was focused primarily on listening to Year 10 students reflect upon their school experiences of transition and induction during the pandemic, but we also spoke to chaplains about their role:

The pastoral care that a chaplain of a school might expect to give about all the ups and downs of teenage life and working out who I am and how I fit in the world etc and it was becoming very clear quite quickly and many conversations that these were mental health needs, they were conditions and illnesses that needed really significant clinical support that I obviously wasn't equipped to deal with...what is pastoral care and what steps beyond pastoral care, and within any given setting, what do you want the chaplain to do in that situation?

If you need the chaplain, the chaplain is here, and you get the chaplain's attention. If you don't need the chaplain there may be a kind of 'we have got a chaplain who is that?' I don't think anyone would quite say that, but you would get a very disparate view because that is I suppose the nature of the work, there is a lot of input with individuals rather than a lot of time spent with whole cohorts.

In the first couple of weeks when they [Year 7] arrive in September we make time in assemblies, and have a group at a time in here to introduce them to the chaplaincy and this is the room and this is what goes on here and this is what my role here for you is and explaining to them that I am a person that is available to talk to if you are feeling a bit sad sometimes and just literally putting it out there.

Insights from Students

The second phase of our research (2024) was undertaken in three church secondary schools from across the country. This project included a study of 394 Year 10 students and involved a survey and focus groups. From the survey we found that 73% of Year 10 students rate the school chaplain as significant to their wellbeing. In the focus groups students spoke positively of their school chaplain and would actively seek them out for support:

The chaplain, obviously the head of years and teachers they offer support and advice, but I think with the chaplain, they've got many things that they do... the chaplain, they can give you guidance, spiritual advice, what they can say can really help you whilst still learning about your religion or something like that.

If anything, I go to my head of year or the chaplain to be fair because even without her being a chaplain I quite like [name], she's really nice. ...I feel like I can have a trustworthy conversation with them.

Like, for the people who I would go to for support I would say the chaplain is someone who I would consider...my Year 8 head of year, my Year 10 head of year, I would go to those people.

I know that I talk to the chaplain quite a lot.

When I talk to [chaplain], I feel like she does give me a bit of Biblical knowledge and it's like I can view things from perspectives that I haven't viewed it from before which I think is good and I think it's a great way to you know see things from different points of view.

I think with the chaplain, they've got many things that they do. For example, like Year 9 cell group they do that for like most of the younger years I think as well. I think it offers, gives a place where people can make friends ... like the people that might be shy and not want to come out their shell even without the covid stuff like it's all very well for Year 7s now they can come here and be more confident. It is like smaller groups of people getting advice like worship and stuff like that, so I think it has different things to offer than year, head of years.

I would say that a chaplain is very good at giving spiritual advice and overall advice on life. Whereas I'd say a teacher that's like your Year 8 head of year, a sound fella and everything, I'd say better at giving like grounded personal advice. For example, if I'm having an issue with someone or something then I'd go to him, whereas if I just needed advice on you know like guidance, if I need guidance on life like overall, I'd say a chaplain would be a good place to go.

I feel like with being a Christian, like being a Christian school it is good to have a chaplain because if you're ever feeling either in doubt or something with your religion, those are the people that you can go to.

For me I think spiritual advice is more like your mind because everybody's mind, nobody knows what everyone's thinking. So, I think spiritual is kind of like what's inside of you because everyone sees you as you, but no one knows what's really you apart from yourself... If you're not comfortable in your spirit, then you're not going to be comfortable with yourself... that's what the Chaplain does for everyone here.

Not everyone is Catholic but whatever you do believe in, whether it's time to be with yourself and focus on yourself and whether you have doubts or if you need support, you can go in there [the Chapel] and just do whatever you need whether it's praying or just speaking to a Chaplain.

The chaplain looks out for people.

Insights from Staff

During phase one of our research, we spoke mainly with school chaplains, but if a participant chaplain left the school or was unable to attend, another member of staff would stand in, usually a Head of Year or Lead teacher for RE. We also held several webinars that attracted chaplains and other school practitioners. This is what they had to say about the role of the chaplain:

I have come to realise that as chaplains you often take 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?... no one was offering you support as the school gradually opened post lockdown. I can't imagine how hard that would have been. So, you're all saints (Head of Year).

The chaplain reminds us in the busy school schedule to stop and be still. This is so important for student and staff wellbeing (RE Lead).

That's the role of the chaplain, the pastoral team, subject leads to make sure that they're challenging staff and ensuring students get the time to reflect and think...as we've said, more than ever that opportunity and time to reflect is paramount, isn't it? For some students to actually stop and think is huge, isn't it? (Head of Year).

Phase two of the project gave us the opportunity to speak with senior leaders and pastoral leads about the role of the chaplain and this is what they revealed:

The chaplain is available in a way that often tutors, and other pastoral leaders are not (Headteacher).

Our chaplains provide for all students the opportunity to go to the chapel, during tutor time for prayer. They [students] all have the opportunity during a RE lesson to go and experience something in the chapel. The chaplains lead acts of worship. They organise, like today we've got house mass so the chaplains will have worked with the students on organising different parts of the mass (Headteacher).

Chaplains provide a safe space for students to be.... they make themselves visible (Headteacher).

It's no longer just the transitions manager or the new Year 7 lead who goes out to primary schools to do those [transition] visits. The chaplain now takes a role in that... (Pastoral Lead).

The chaplain is normally the only member of staff if they [students] are allowed where they can actually use the Christian name for the chaplain (Pastoral Lead).

Final Reflection

We hope this resource has provided a glimpse into the world of the school chaplain. From the chaplain's perspective, they see their role as a calling or vocation stepping beyond an appointed job. They speak of being authentic witnesses to the ethos of the school, meeting people in their needs with a willingness to acknowledge, accompany and bring hope to those in their care. Students recognise that the school chaplain brings an extra level of pastoral support that speaks to their innate spiritual core. The school chaplain for them is approachable and provides space to be listened to and heard. Staff equally value the significance of the chaplain recognising their presence, their availability, and their ability to bring moments of stillness and reflection within the busyness of the school day.

The research raises many questions. We have learnt much about these chaplains and the schools involved in this qualitative project. More work is needed to complete the picture:

1. We need to develop a fuller picture of chaplaincy in Church of England or Roman Catholic secondary schools. There is a great deal of turbulence in the school sector due to the long effect of COVID 19 and financial pressures in public services. Given that we wonder about the provision of chaplains across the secondary school sector as a whole.
2. We also wonder how the different elements of the chaplain's role discerned here are found across the body professional as a whole. How are the varying demands placed on chaplains felt? To what extent is the full richness of the dimensions of chaplaincy sampled here, found in all school chaplains?
3. We also wonder at a time of huge pressure on schools to improve the wellbeing support for pupils, if the full richness of school chaplaincy is being sidetrack by other pressures? *If chaplains are going to have that prophetic role in the school – value their role as chaplains – do not use them on a regular basis to fill other gaps* (Chaplain, 2023)
4. We also wonder if school chaplaincy offers an important spiritual flourishing dimension that more schools could benefit from in the way hospitals and prisons have recognised? Perhaps school chaplaincy should be considered for all schools.

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