Theology in Scotland
33.2 (2026): 34–52
https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v33i2.3265

Third spaces of belonging:
Multifaith chaplaincy, listening, and theological responses to forced migration

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Abstract

This article argues that multifaith chaplaincy offers a distinctive practical theological response to the crisis of personhood produced by forced displacement in the UK. Drawing on a relational account of the *imago Dei*, it examines how attentive listening enacted within deliberately cultivated 'third spaces' can contribute to restoring recognition, voice, and belonging to refugees and asylum seekers. Integrating practical theology, trauma studies, and migration research, the article develops a model of chaplaincy practice operating across individual, communal, and structural levels, positioning multifaith chaplaincy as a counter-witness to dehumanizing narratives of displacement.

Introduction

Forced displacement has become a defining feature of contemporary global life. According to UNHCR's Global Trends Report 2025, an estimated 117.8 million people worldwide were living in situations of

forced displacement, reflecting more than a decade of sustained annual growth driven by conflict, persecution, and environmental pressures.[1] The United Kingdom remains a significant host nation, receiving refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) through resettlement schemes and an asylum system in which many await decisions for prolonged periods.[2] Their experience is shaped not only by what precedes their arrival but also by the conditions that follow.[3] Policies that Frances Webber describes as constituting a 'hostile environment' introduce barriers that permeate daily life, generating insecurity and exclusion that extend displacement well beyond the point of arrival.[4] Public discourse compounds this, frequently framing RAS as administrative burdens or social threats rather than as persons.[5]

These conditions are not merely material. They constitute what might be called a crisis of personhood: the gradual erosion of self-worth, identity, and belonging. Renos Papadopoulos argues that forced migration disrupts the 'framework of meanings' through which individuals understand themselves and their place in the world, a rupture that is as much existential as it is geographical.[6] Empirical research confirms that RAS experience significantly elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress,[7] yet these clinical categories point beyond themselves to

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[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends Report 2025*, https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-trends-report-2025.

[2] Esme Kirk-Wade, *Asylum Statistics*, UK Parliament Research Briefing, 29 May 2026, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/.

[3] Jennifer Allsopp, Nando Sigona, and Jenny Phillimore, *Poverty among Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK: An Evidence and Policy Review*, IRiS Working Paper Series no. 1/2014, Institute for Research into Superdiversity, 2014, https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2014/working-paper-series/iris-wp-1-2014.pdf.

[4] Frances Webber, "On the Creation of the UK's 'Hostile Environment'," *Race & Class* 60, no. 4 (2019): 76–87. The term 'hostile environment' was first used in 2012 by the then UK Home Secretary Theresa May.

[5] Bridget L. Anderson, *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 2–5.

[6] Renos K. Papadopoulos, ed., *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place Like Home*, Tavistock Clinic Series (Karnac, 2002), 14.

[7] Mental Health Foundation, *The Mental Health of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK*, February 2024, 29–33, https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/MHF_Mental-Health-of-Asylum-Seekers_REPORT_A4_SINGLE-PAGES.pdf.

a deeper erosion of recognition: individuals reduced to case numbers and legal statuses rather than acknowledged as persons of inherent dignity.[8] Recent UK proposals to extend the pathway to settlement intensify this precarity, prolonging the suspended belonging many already endure.[9]

Responses to this crisis have tended to privilege material assistance, legal process, and psychological intervention. These are necessary but insufficient; they rarely engage the spiritual and existential dimensions of displacement, despite growing evidence of the role spiritual resources play in resilience and recovery.[10] This article argues that multifaith chaplaincy, understood as an inclusive practice of pastoral care that transcends confessional and religious boundaries to attend to individuals' spiritual needs regardless of faith tradition, offers distinctive theological and practical resources for addressing this neglected area of concern.[11] The multifaith context is not incidental to this argument: chaplaincy that operates across religious difference must engage the other without requiring doctrinal assimilation, and it is this quality that makes it a theologically and ethically significant site for questions of displaced personhood.

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[8] Anderson, *Us and Them?*, 2–5.

[9] UK Government, "Prime Minister Unveils New Plan to End Years of Uncontrolled Migration," 11 May 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-unveils-new-plan-to-end-years-of-uncontrolled-migration; Mihnea Cuibus, "Changes to Settlement: What Do They Mean?" *Migration Observatory*, February 10, 2026, https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/changes-to-settlement-what-do-they-mean/; Rajeev Syal, Sally Weale, and Peter Walker, "1.5m foreign workers already in UK could face longer wait for permanent settlement," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/14/foreign-workers-uk-wait-permanent-settlement.

[10] Samta P. Pandya, "Spirituality for Mental Health and Well-being of Adult Refugees in Europe," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 20 (2018): 1396–03; Lucy Grimwade and Christopher Cook, "The Clinician's View of Spirituality in Mental Health Care," in *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in Mental Health Settings*, ed. Jean Fletcher (Jessica Kingsley, 2019), 31–34.

[11] Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Mohammed Arshad, "Multifaith Working," in *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places*, ed. Christopher Swift, Mark Cobb, and Andrew Todd (Ashgate, 2015), 109–22; Christopher Swift, *Hospital Chaplaincy in the Twenty-First Century: The Crisis of Spiritual Care on the NHS*, 2nd ed. (Ashgate, 2014), 20–35.

Drawing on research that integrates practical theology, trauma studies, and migration research, the argument unfolds in four movements: from the theological foundations of personhood in the *imago Dei*, through listening as theological praxis and third-place theory, critically reframed for displacement contexts, to an integrated model of chaplaincy practice operating across individual, communal, and structural levels. The argument draws in part on my own positionality as someone with lived experience of forced migration. I fled West Africa under conditions of violent persecution, travelled through North Africa and across the Mediterranean, and was received as an asylum seeker in Italy, where I was subsequently granted refugee status. During this period, I founded a community organisation supporting refugee and migrant integration, which gave me a practitioner's understanding of both the possibilities and the limitations of institutional provision. I am now a lay minister in the Church of England, trained in theology, ministry, and mission, and my pastoral work has brought me into regular contact with displaced people navigating the UK asylum system. These experiences have shaped my sensitivity to displacement, recognition, and belonging, which informs the questions explored throughout this article. Nevertheless, I do not assume that my own experience represents refugees and asylum seekers more broadly; the argument remains grounded in critical engagement with the wider interdisciplinary literature.

Imago Dei and the crisis of recognition

The theological foundation of this argument rests on the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, which must be understood in relational rather than merely substantialist terms. Three moves are required: establishing a relational reading of the doctrine, distinguishing ontological dignity from its social mediation, and recasting the *imago Dei* as both affirmation and critique that demand an embodied pastoral response.

The relational *imago Dei*

The doctrine of the *imago Dei*, rooted in Genesis 1:26–27, affirms that all human beings bear the image of God and therefore possess an inherent dignity that is neither conferred by social recognition nor diminished by displacement. Christian tradition has read this doctrine variously: Augustine locating the image in rational capacity, the Reformers in moral

agency, Barth in humanity's relational capacity for communication with God and others.[12] It is this relational reading that matters most for chaplaincy among RAS, whose personhood is deeply embedded in communal relationship and shared identity.[13] This communal constitution of personhood is not a culturally specific phenomenon but a theological universal that Western liberal individualism has obscured; Mbiti's account makes visible what the Western tradition's own relational anthropology, from Barth through McFadyen, has independently established. John Calvin's insistence that one must 'look upon the image of God in all' and extend honour to every person renders dignity intrinsic rather than instrumental, directly contesting market-driven anthropologies that condition worth on productivity.[14]

Ontological dignity and social mediation

Yet the literature also exposes a critical limitation in purely doctrinal affirmation. While the *imago Dei* establishes an ontological claim, this claim does not automatically translate into lived recognition. John Kilner argues that dignity grounded in the *imago Dei* remains intact even when its social and functional expressions are violated; Miroslav Volf observes that exclusionary systems nonetheless conceal or distort this worth in ways that profoundly shape life and identity.[15] A distinction must therefore be drawn between ontological dignity and its social mediation. Alistair

[12] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (T&T Clark, 1958), 183; Jozef Jančovič, "Imago Dei: An Exegetical and Theological Reappraisal," *ET-Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 183–206, https://poj.peeters-leuven.be/content.php?id=3286799&url=article; Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2010), 28–33.

[13] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969), 108–09.

[14] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.15.3, 183–84; Sam Neulsaem Ha, "Because of Who We Are: A Fresh Perspective on Calvin's Doctrine of the Image of God and Human Dignity," *Religions* 15, no. 10 (2024): 1162, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101162.

[15] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015), 25–28; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 129–34.

McFadyen's account of personhood as constituted through relationship with others, the environment, and God clarifies what is at stake: if identity is formed dialogically, then the denial of recognition does not negate dignity but disrupts its relational expression.[16] Charles Taylor's account of dialogical identity formation reinforces this: persons become persons through being seen and valued by others, and misrecognition causes real psychological harm.[17] This relational account does not render dignity conditional on recognition – the *imago Dei* establishes personhood as ontologically prior to all social mediation – but it insists that the lived experience of dignity requires practices of recognition through which what is theologically true becomes humanly visible. For refugees and asylum seekers, whose identities are routinely reduced to administrative categories, this disruption fractures precisely the conditions through which personhood is socially affirmed.

The imago Dei *as critique and imperative*

This reframes the theological task. Restoration is not the recovery of an isolated inner self but the reconstitution of relational identity within contexts where recognition has been withheld. The *imago Dei* thus functions not only as an affirmation but also as a critique, exposing the disjunction between what is theologically true and what is socially enacted, and demanding practices that bridge the two. Such convergence is not confined to Christian theology alone: the doctrine resonates with the Islamic concept of karāmah and with comparable affirmations of inherent worth across traditions, lending the framework particular relevance for multifaith chaplaincy.[18] An incarnational reading sharpens the point further: just as Christian theology affirms that God transcends abstraction

[16] Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5–10.

[17] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–74.

[18] Abdullah al-Ahsan, "Law, Religion and Human Dignity in the Muslim World Today: An Examination of OIC's Cairo Declaration of Human Rights," *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008–2009): 569–97; Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah, "Concept of Human Dignity in Islam," *MuslimSG*, 2020 https://muslim.sg/articles/concept-of-human-dignity-in-islam.

to become incarnate in Christ, entering human suffering, so too must dignity be enacted within lived contexts rather than merely proclaimed.[19] Chaplaincy provides a particularly significant context for such enactment. Situated at the intersection of healthcare, social care, education, community, and faith, chaplaincy is uniquely concerned with attending to persons in moments of vulnerability, disruption, and meaning-making.[20] Its relational, person-centred orientation makes it especially well placed to embody recognition where dignity has been obscured and belonging fractured.[21] For chaplaincy, this means moving beyond doctrinal assertion toward embodied practices, of which listening is the most fundamental.[22] Its capacity to accompany people across religious, cultural, and existential differences makes multifaith chaplaincy a distinctively appropriate form of ministry for those whose identity and belonging have been disrupted by displacement.[23]

Listening as theological praxis

If the *imago Dei* establishes the theological ground of dignity, listening is the primary practice through which that dignity is enacted in concrete pastoral encounter. This section examines listening across three interconnected registers: as a means of recognition, as a prophetic act of resistance against structural silencing, and as a trauma-informed discipline requiring both attentiveness and advocacy.

Listening and the recognition of personhood

If personhood is constituted through recognition, then listening becomes the primary means through which recognition is enacted. Within Western

[19] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 149–52.

[20] Swift, Cobb, and Todd, *Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies*, 3; Simon Harrison, "What is a Mental Health Chaplain For?" in Fletcher, *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in Mental Health Settings*, 23–30.

[21] Harrison, "What is a Mental Health Chaplain For?" 27.

[22] Harrison, 27–30.

[23] Pieter Dronkers, Joanna Wojtkowiak, and Geert Smid, "Why Chaplaincy at Asylum Centers Is a Good Idea: A Care Ethics Perspective on Spiritual Care for Refugees," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62 (2023): 4016–4031, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01889-2.

traditions of dialogue, speech has historically been privileged over listening. Lisbeth Lipari describes listening as 'the silent other' of communication – structurally marginalised within the very frameworks that claim to value dialogue. This dynamic mirrors the position of RAS within asylum systems, where bureaucratic processes routinely reduce individuals to case numbers rather than subjects with a voice.[24] Elizabeth Parks conceptualises listening as an ethical practice that creates the conditions for recognition, dialogue, and relational accountability, emphasising its active and transformative character rather than passive reception.[25] McFadyen's communicative account of personhood supports this directly: identity is formed and sustained through interaction and response, so that to be heard is, in a meaningful sense, to be recognised as a person.[26]

The prophetic dimension of listening

Listening also carries a prophetic dimension. For those structurally silenced, attentive listening becomes an act of resistance against epistemic injustice, asserting their status as speaking subjects rather than administrative categories. The silencing of displaced persons within asylum systems operates through the very categories imposed upon them: as Heaven Crawley and Diane Skleparis have shown, the reduction of complex human experiences to fixed legal classifications – 'refugee', 'migrant', 'neither', 'both' – functions to constrain voice and agency, rendering persons legible to institutions only on institutional terms. Attentive listening resists this erasure, creating conditions in which RAS may narrate their experience on their own terms.[27] This is theologically resonant: Scripture urges believers to 'be quick to hear' and 'slow to speak' (James 1:19), and the Elijah narrative locates divine presence not

[24] Lisbeth Lipari, "Listening, Thinking, Being," *Communication Theory* 20, no. 3 (2010): 348–62.

[25] Elizabeth S. Parks, *Ethics of Listening: Creating Space for Sustainable Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 5–7.

[26] Parks, *Ethics of Listening*, 15–18; McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, 10.

[27] Heaven Crawley and Diane Skleparis, "Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe's 'Migration Crisis'," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 48–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224.

in spectacle but in 'a sound of sheer silence' (1 Kings 19:12). At its deepest level, theological listening reflects a kenotic posture, a deliberate suspension of self to make space for the other (Philippians 2:7), in which the chaplain resists imposing meaning and instead accompanies the other's own meaning-making. Edith Stein's account of attentiveness to the other as a primary expression of love offers a complementary phenomenological grounding for this posture.[28]

Trauma-informed listening and advocacy

Trauma, understood here not simply as a discrete psychological event but as an experience that disrupts meaning-making and relational belonging, shapes the context within which chaplaincy listening must operate. As Lucy Bond and Stef Craps argue, trauma can overwhelm established frameworks of understanding, rendering experience difficult to narrate coherently.[29] In the context of forced migration, Papadopoulos argues that this disruption is intensified by the loss of 'home' as a psychosocial anchor and is compounded by the continuing precarity of asylum processes and social exclusion.[30] A trauma-informed approach to listening therefore recognises that distress may be communicated through silence, fragmentation, ambivalence, or embodied expression rather than through a coherent narrative.[31] Rather than seeking disclosure or imposing interpretive coherence, it seeks to create a safe, non-coercive space in which meaning can emerge on the person's own terms. Trauma-informed listening is therefore concerned not only with hearing a person's story but also with safeguarding their agency and personhood in contexts where both may have been eroded. Yet recognition alone is insufficient. As Palmer-Mehta observes, listening unaccompanied by structural and relational response risks becoming performative, offering the appearance of recognition with-

[28] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (ICS Publications, 1989).

[29] Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma* (Routledge, 2020), 1–12.

[30] Renos K. Papadopoulos, *Involuntary Dislocation: Home, Trauma, Resilience and Adversity-Activated Development* (Routledge, 2021), 43–65.

[31] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 71–89; Papadopoulos, *Involuntary Dislocation*, 58–65.

out addressing the conditions that produce marginalisation.[32] For refugees and asylum seekers, whose marginalisation is sustained through legal, political, and social systems, this means listening must extend beyond interpersonal attentiveness toward advocacy, positioning chaplains as what Palmer-Mehta calls 'critical friends', capable of challenging institutional practices that diminish dignity.[33] Listening, properly understood, is therefore both restorative and prophetic, integrating pastoral care with the wider work of recognition. Sustaining this practice raises a further question: what kinds of spaces enable relationships of listening, trust, and recognition to develop over time?

Third spaces: Reframing Oldenburg for displacement

Such listening requires relational spaces in which trust can develop, stories can be revisited, and recognition can take root over time. Ray Oldenburg's third-place theory, developed to explain how informal social environments foster conversation, connection and belonging beyond home and workplace, offers a starting point for exploring the conditions that may sustain such listening. The following discussion critically reframes Oldenburg's model in the contexts of forced migration and multifaith chaplaincy.

Oldenburg's model and its limits

Ray Oldenburg's concept of the 'third place' describes informal, accessible environments distinct from home, the first place, and work, the second place, in which relationships, conversation, and community develop outside hierarchical constraints.[34] Characterised by relative neutrality, inclusivity, and the suspension of formal status, such spaces have long been understood as anchors of community life. For RAS, whose experience of displacement disrupts both the first place of home and the structured

[32] Valerie Palmer-Mehta, "Theorizing Listening as a Tool for Social Change: Andrea Dworkin's Discourses on Listening," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 4176–92, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5862/1764.

[33] Palmer-Mehta, "Theorizing Listening," 4187.

[34] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Marlowe, 1999), 20–22, 37–42.

participation of the second, third places offer environments in which identity might be expressed beyond restrictive legal or institutional categorisation. UK-based research confirms that such spaces support wellbeing precisely by enabling the re-establishment of meaningful relationships.[35]

Applying this theory to forced migration, however, requires critical adaptation rather than straightforward transfer. Oldenburg's model presumes freedom of movement and access that are frequently unavailable to RAS, who face legal restrictions, economic precarity, and social exclusion. Danielle Littman's account of 'collapsed' places is instructive here: spaces that appear open in principle may remain inaccessible in practice, their apparent neutrality concealing barriers of language, status, and resources.[36] Nor are third places inherently neutral in a deeper sense. They may reproduce dominant cultural norms and existing power dynamics, particularly where institutional structures continue to shape who may participate and on what terms.[37] This is acutely significant in chaplaincy contexts, where displaced persons already encounter systems of control and categorisation; without critical attention, ostensibly open spaces risk replicating the very exclusions they are meant to overcome.

Cultivating third spaces in chaplaincy

For multifaith chaplaincy, this means third spaces must be intentionally cultivated rather than assumed. They require co-creation with RAS themselves, cultural responsiveness, and sustained attentiveness to power, so that participation becomes a matter of agency rather than mere presence. Where this is achieved, third spaces become more than social environments: they function as relational spaces in which recognition, presence, and participation can be restored. Emerging examples of chaplaincy-adjacent practice in the UK gesture toward this potential, from informal

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[35] Susie France, "Calm in the Eye of a Storm: Exploring How Third Places Nurture a Sense of Belonging for People of Refugee Backgrounds in London," King's College London, October 15 2025, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/how-third-places-nurture-a-sense-of-belonging-for-people-of-refugee-backgrounds.

[36] Danielle Maude Littman, "Third Place Theory and Social Work: Considering Collapsed Places," *Journal of Social Work* 21, no. 5 (2021): 1225–42.

[37]Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 20–22, 37–42; Setha Low, *Why Public Space Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 32–36.

community hubs established for displaced communities to refugee-led cultural associations that create accessible points of encounter between newcomers and host communities.[38] Theologically, such spaces resonate directly with the relational account of personhood developed above: if dignity is mediated through recognition, then the deliberate creation of spaces in which persons are encountered beyond imposed identities becomes a practical expression of that theological claim. Third spaces thus provide the spatial context within which listening, as theological praxis, can be embodied and sustained, moving chaplaincy from episodic encounter toward communal practices of recognition.

Multifaith chaplaincy: Possibility and constraint

Multifaith chaplaincy provides the institutional context within which listening and third spaces can be integrated into a coherent pastoral practice. This section examines the distinctive promise of that context, its structural constraints and representational imbalances, the constructive theological framework capable of holding them together, and the condition of prophetic liminality that defines the chaplain's position within institutional life.

The promise of multifaith chaplaincy

Chaplaincy occupies a distinctive position from which to enact this integration of listening and third-space-making, precisely because it operates within pluralistic, institutional contexts rather than the boundaries of a single faith community. Mark Cobb describes chaplaincy as attending to 'the sacred dimension' of human experience, enabling individuals to interpret and navigate suffering regardless of religious affiliation.[39] In an increasingly diverse Britain, this has given rise to multifaith chaplaincy, reconfigured as a collaborative and dialogical practice in which chaplains

[38] Human Appeal, "Human Appeal Launches Birmingham's First 'Third Space' Community Hub in Sparkhill," *Human Appeal UK News*, October 1, 2025, https://humanappeal.org.uk/news/2025/10/human-appeal-launches-birmingham-s-first-third-space-community-hub-in-sparkhill; Refugee Workers Cultural Association, "Together, We Build Hope," https://rwca.org.uk/.

[39] Mark Cobb, Chris Swift, and Andrew Todd, "Introduction to Chaplaincy Studies," in Swift, Cobb, and Todd, *Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies*, 3.

support individuals of differing faiths and worldviews without coercion. Sophie Gilliat-Ray argues that multifaith chaplaincy teams enable institutions to respond to growing religious diversity while sustaining professional standards of care, a model of particular significance for RAS, for whom spirituality often functions as a key resource for coping and identity reconstruction.[40]

Structural constraints and representational imbalance

This potential, however, is not without tension. Chaplains operate from within particular theological traditions while being expected to serve individuals whose beliefs may differ significantly from their own; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen identifies this as the central challenge of holding together theological particularity and genuine openness to difference.[41] Empirical studies of UK chaplaincy reveal that the overwhelming majority of chaplains continue to identify as Christian, with limited representation from other traditions, a structural imbalance that raises real questions about whose beliefs are centred and whose remain marginal within ostensibly multifaith provision.[42] Comparative research by Jolita Vveinhardt, Mykolas Deikus, and Lindsay Carey identifies a related dynamic across European contexts, describing an 'inter-institutional vacuum' in which responsibility for chaplaincy is diffused between religious and organisational structures,

[40] Gilliat-Ray and Arshad, "Multifaith Working," 109–22.

[41] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Ashgate, 2004), 8–10, 29–30.

[42] Aziz Sheikh, Abdul Rashid Gatrad, Usman Sheikh, Sukhmeet Singh Panesar, and Shuja Shafi, "The Myth of Multifaith Chaplaincy: A National Survey of Hospital Chaplaincy Departments in England and Wales," *Diversity in Health and Social Care* 1 no. 2 (2004), 93–97, https://www.ovid.com/journals/dhsc/abstract/01212971-200401020-00003~the-myth-of-multifaith-chaplaincy-a-national-survey-of; Network for Pastoral, Spiritual, and Religious Care in Health, *Fit for the 21st Century? Spiritual, Pastoral and Religious Care in the NHS: The State of Inclusion for Acute NHS Chaplaincy Pastoral, Spiritual and Religious Care Services in England* (NPSRCH, February 2020), https://network-health.org.uk/documents/NPSPCH_report_web.pdf; Hattie Williams, "Report Criticising 'Damning Inequality' of Health-Care Chaplaincy Is Too Poor to Endorse, Says C of E," *Church Times*, 28 February 2020, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/28-february/news/uk/report-criticising-damning-inequality-of-health-care-chaplaincy-too-poor-to-endorse-says-c-of-e.

leaving pastoral response dependent on individual moral sensitivity rather than systematic institutional support.[43] For RAS, such constraints may restrict access to culturally and religiously appropriate care, undermining the inclusive aims multifaith chaplaincy claims for itself.

A constructive theological framework

Kärkkäinen's own response offers a constructive way through this impasse, rejecting both theological exclusivism, which restricts truth to explicit confession, and relativism, which dissolves theological distinctiveness altogether. Instead, he proposes that practitioners may affirm the particular convictions of their own tradition while simultaneously recognising the dignity of all persons as bearers of the *imago Dei*, irrespective of faith affiliation.[44] On this reading, multifaith chaplaincy is not a compromise of theological identity but its ethical outworking, rooted in hospitality and relational presence rather than doctrinal dilution. A complementary resource is found in care ethics, which reframes chaplaincy as a fundamentally relational practice rather than an instructional or evangelistic one; Pieter Dronkers, Joanna Wojtkowiak, and Geert Smid describe care as rooted in human interdependence, a 'life-sustaining web' of relationships that must be continually maintained and repaired.[45] This framework enables chaplains from diverse traditions to collaborate around shared commitments to dignity and flourishing without requiring theological uniformity, and it locates listening as a practice genuinely shared across traditions: Islamic teachings on attentive presence and *adab*, as expressions of mercy and ethical responsibility, offer a clear parallel.[46]

Realising this potential, however, depends substantially on formation. Effective engagement with RAS requires competencies in interfaith

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[43] Jolita Vveinhardt, Mykolas Deikus, and Lindsay B. Carey, "A Model of Chaplaincy Assistance for Victims of Workplace Bullying: A Qualitative Study Exploring New Resources to Support a Healthy and Safe Work Environment in Lithuania," *Journal of Religion and Health* 65 (2026): 1604–34, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-026-02590-w.

[44] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (IVP Academic, 2003), 23–45.

[45] Dronkers, Wojtkowiak, and Smid, "Why Chaplaincy at Asylum Centers Is a Good Idea," 4016–31.

[46] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (McGill University Press, 1966), 222–28.

dialogue, cultural literacy, trauma-informed care, and a critical awareness of power; without these, chaplaincy risks becoming well-intentioned but insufficiently equipped, reproducing the very patterns of exclusion it seeks to resist. Frameworks such as the Scottish Government's Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016–2030 reflect a growing commitment to culturally responsive care, but these commitments remain insufficiently integrated into chaplaincy education and practice.[47]

Co-production with RAS themselves offers one corrective: Julian Raffay, Emily Wood, and Andrew Todd demonstrate that involving service users directly in the design of pastoral and spiritual care produces provision that is markedly more responsive and person-centred than models designed without them, shifting chaplaincy from institutional provision toward shared relational practice grounded in lived experience.[48]

Prophetic liminality

Chaplains nonetheless remain embedded within institutional systems – healthcare, detention, asylum accommodation – whose priorities of efficiency and control can sit uneasily with a relational practice oriented toward dignity.[49] This generates what might be called a condition of prophetic liminality: chaplains operate 'on the edge' of institutional hierarchies, neither fully inside nor outside, a position that both constrains and empowers their capacity to witness relationally and ethically.[50]

Yet this liminality should not be romanticised. Chaplains operate with real but constrained power: embedded within institutions they cannot fully

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[47] NHS England, *Patient and Carer Race Equality Framework (PCREF)*, 2023, https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/advancing-mental-health-equalities/pcref/; Scottish Government, "Health and Home," in *Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016 to 2030*, 21 March 2016, https://www.gov.scot/publications/race-equality-framework-scotland-2016-2030/pages/14/.

[48] Julian Raffay, Emily Wood, and Andrew Todd, "Service User Views of Spiritual and Pastoral Care (Chaplaincy) in NHS Mental Health Services: A Co-produced Constructivist Grounded Theory Investigation," *BMC Psychiatry* 16 (2016): 200, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-016-0903-9.

[49] Christopher Swift, *Hospital Chaplaincy in the Twenty-first Century: The Crisis of Spiritual Care on the NHS* (Ashgate, 2014), 20–35.

[50] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Aldine Transaction, 1969), 94–130; Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3–25.

direct, their influence is frequently exercised through relational presence, listening, accompaniment, and advocacy rather than formal authority.[51] Moreover, access to institutional recognition is not equally distributed across faith traditions. In many UK contexts, chaplains from established Christian denominations benefit from greater institutional legitimacy and organisational support than representatives of minority faith communities.[52]

Liberation theology sharpens the stakes of this position. James Cone insists that any gospel detached from the liberation of the oppressed is fundamentally compromised, while Helen Cameron argues that pastoral practitioners are called not only to care but to act as prophetic witnesses against injustice.[53] Applied to forced migration, this challenges any chaplaincy model that remains purely pastoral; restorative chaplaincy must operate at both relational and structural levels, supporting individuals while also naming the conditions – hostile policy and exclusionary public narrative among them – that continue to fracture personhood.

Towards an integrated practice of restoration

The preceding sections have established the theological, pastoral, and institutional foundations of this argument. Brought together, they suggest a chaplaincy practice capable of operating simultaneously at individual, communal, and structural levels, held together by listening as a unifying praxis. This section develops that integrated model and identifies its specific contributions to practical theology.

Three interconnected levels

Brought together, these elements suggest a chaplaincy practice capable of

[51] Julian Raffay, Mike Firbank, Mike Haslam, and Louise Yaull, "Chaplaincy Within a 'Mixed Ecology'," *Practical Theology* 17, no. 6 (2024): 551–66 (pp. 552, 555, 564); Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 31–35.

[52] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Muhammad Mansur Ali, and Stephen Pattison, *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy* (Ashgate, 2013), 1–18.

[53] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed. (Orbis Books, 1986), 1–5; Helen Cameron, *Just Mission: Practical Politics for Local Churches* (SCM Press, 2015), 1–5.

operating across three interconnected levels. At the individual level, chaplains offer trauma-informed presence and active listening that affirms inherent dignity through sustained relational accompaniment, honouring silence and resisting theological platitudes that minimise suffering.[54] At the communal level, chaplaincy fosters and sustains third spaces, informal, inclusive environments co-created with RAS communities, in which belonging and mutual recognition can be experienced through relational and spatial interaction rather than assumed. At the structural level, chaplaincy serves a prophetic function: naming the dehumanising effects of hostile-environment policy, advocating for equity within chaplaincy provision itself, and resisting the reduction of pastoral care to managerial efficiency.

These three levels are interdependent rather than sequential. Individual care offered without communal space risks isolating persons within a one-to-one dynamic incapable of sustaining identity alone; communal space without structural engagement risks becoming merely symbolic, an affirming environment that leaves the underlying conditions of marginalisation untouched; and structural advocacy without individual pastoral presence risks abstraction, losing contact with the particular persons whose dignity it claims to defend. Listening functions as the unifying praxis across all three: it is the relational mechanism through which dignity is recognised at the individual level, the communal practice through which third spaces are sustained, and, when extended into advocacy, the prophetic act through which structural injustice is named.

Contributions to practical theology

This has implications beyond the immediate pastoral encounter. It suggests that practical theology's engagement with forced migration cannot rest on doctrinal affirmation of dignity alone, however theologically sound, without attending to the relational and spatial conditions through which that dignity becomes recognisable and lived. It also suggests that multifaith chaplaincy, precisely because it operates across religious boundaries within pluralistic institutions, occupies a distinctive position from which to model the kind of intercultural encounter that hostile public discourse

[54] John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (SCM Press, 2020), 87–94.

forecloses, offering, in its own modest and unglamorous way, a counter-witness to narratives of threat and burden.

The contribution this makes to practical theology is threefold. First, it challenges approaches that treat chaplaincy as a primarily individual and reactive service, showing instead that the disruption of personhood among RAS is structurally produced and therefore requires chaplaincy to engage critically with the wider systems that shape displaced people's lives, rather than confining itself to the meeting of immediate spiritual needs. Second, it advances an embodied understanding of the *imago Dei* within practical theology, in which dignity is not only doctrinally affirmed but relationally enacted through presence, recognition, and listening, with direct implications for how theological anthropology might be applied more broadly across pastoral and chaplaincy contexts. Third, by integrating listening and third-place theory, both well-established independently within their respective literatures, the article offers a single framework for understanding how chaplaincy can create spaces in which belonging, identity, and agency are restored together rather than in isolation. Taken together, these contributions reposition multifaith chaplaincy as a practice that is responsive to immediate need and transformative of the wider conditions of displacement, with relevance for chaplaincy formation, institutional policy, and the theological self-understanding of faith communities responding to forced migration in the UK and beyond.

Conclusion

This article has argued that multifaith chaplaincy, understood through the integration of *imago Dei* theology, the practice of listening, and a critically reframed third-place theory, offers a distinctive practical theological response to the crisis of personhood produced by forced displacement in the UK. Where displacement fractures the relational conditions through which identity is sustained, and where public discourse compounds this fracture by reducing RAS to administrative or political categories, chaplaincy-led listening and the deliberate cultivation of third spaces offer concrete, relationally embodied means of restoring recognition, voice, and belonging. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* grounds this practice theologically, insisting that worth is intrinsic and prior to all social recognition; yet, as this article has shown, that grounding becomes meaningful only when enacted relationally, through chaplains willing to

listen attentively, to create and protect spaces of genuine encounter, and, where necessary, to bear prophetic witness against the structures that obscure the dignity they affirm. Multifaith chaplaincy, approached in this way, is not a peripheral or supplementary service but a substantive contribution to contemporary theology's engagement with migration, dignity, personhood and the vocation of faith communities amid forced displacement.