Chaplaincy in a New Scottish University: The Issue of Worship

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The Starting Point

My starting point is my experience as chaplain at Glasgow Polytechnic, later Glasgow Caledonian University, a post to which I was appointed in March 1992. I had previously served as the minister of St Cuthbert's Church in Clydebank, having been ordained to the ministry and inducted to that charge in May 1984. Almost as soon as I had been introduced as the first full-time chaplain to the Polytechnic, I began to sense uncertainties in my role. In retrospect, I believe I was actually fairly certain of my role. The Polytechnic authorities, however, saw my role differently, and the Church of Scotland, as whose minister I went to the Polytechnic, by virtue of my ordination (even if the Church was paying only a small proportion of my salary), differently again.

Two early experiences, one of which occurred almost right away, and the second taking place a year after the first, helped me to realise that these uncertainties, or tensions, focused on my role as a worship leader. In particular, awkward negotiations prior to two quite different worship events – both involving the university administration and church authorities - convinced me that these tensions were connected to complex problems related to structure and theology, which in turn were connected to the different expectations of university and church.

At the beginning of my study for the Doctor of Ministry degree in 1996, I was still wrestling with the problem of worship in the university setting, for it had become a problem, at least for me. I had made several attempts to establish worship as part of my role, but on each occasion this had been unsuccessful, and I had quickly abandoned it. The Doctor of Ministry Final Project presented, it seemed, an ideal opportunity to examine the expectations of the university with regard to the office of chaplain in light of a Reformed understanding of the office, focusing specifically on my role as a worship leader.

My awareness that there was tension about the nature of and expectations about worship in the university came almost immediately. It is important to describe in some detail how these tensions manifested themselves, so that the reader may understand better why this became an area for close study. There are two particular worship experiences, both involving the university and the Church of Scotland in planning, that point up these tensions sharply.

1. The Service of Introduction conducted by the Presbytery of Glasgow to mark my appointment as chaplain in the spring of 1992.

Readers may be familiar with the usual presbytery arrangements for services of ordination and /or inductions of Church of Scotland ministers to parishes. Different considerations apply when, as is increasingly the case, ministers are appointed to chaplaincy posts. It is usual, in those circumstances, for a service to be held within the institution to which the minister is appointed. Circumstances made the case of Glasgow Polytechnic, however, novel for two reasons: the Polytechnic had never previously had a full-time chaplain, and there was no obvious place within it in which a service might be held.

In my case, the Presbytery of Glasgow decided that a service of introduction should be held, but the question of venue immediately arose. It was eventually decided that it should be held in The Martyrs' Church, it being one of the two parishes within which the then Glasgow Polytechnic lay. The minister of The Martyrs' was one of the Polytechnic's part-time chaplains. The service duly took place in June 1992, a mere four months after I had taken up my post! It was conducted by the moderator of presbytery, the sermon was preached by the minister of The Martyrs' Church, the charges given by the presbytery clerk, and the readings offered by the Polytechnic's vice-principal, a committed Roman Catholic layman.

I recall that I was caught up in tensions between the presbytery and the Polytechnic over the arrangements for the service. They had different answers to two fundamental questions: should there be a service of introduction at all, and, if so, who should have ownership

of it. Presbytery, as is unfailingly the custom, took the initiative for the service, and the university went along with it. Because the presbytery had taken the initiative for the service, and because it was conducted by ministers of the presbytery in a church building within the presbytery, the presbytery concluded that it "owned" the service. The Polytechnic, whose chaplain I was, in whose buildings I had an office, and who paid the much greater part of my salary[1], equally felt that it owned it, and was understandably reluctant to relinquish control of it. In retrospect, this exemplified and crystallised a tension that existed, right at the beginning, over the ownership of chaplaincy.

2. The inaugural service for the new university pointed up tensions between church and Glasgow Polytechnic which was one of two, and by far the bigger and more influential, constituent institutions of the new university.

By the time I took up the post of chaplain to the Polytechnic, talks about a merger with a neighbouring institution, and a change to university status, were already at an advanced stage. The merger and change of status became effective on 1 April 1993, and it was decided to mark the creation of the new university with a programme of events on 2 June 1993. I invited one of the vice-principals to consider my suggestion that I conduct a service of inauguration and dedication as the first event of the day. Again, a process of negotiation followed. The vice-principal – an avowed atheist – disagreed that an act of specifically Christian worship be held. He proposed what he termed a "multi-faith and no faith service". In the end, after acrimonious discussions, a compromise was reached, on my part most unwillingly. This was a difficult time for me, used, as I had been as a parish minister, to making decisions on my own about the content of worship. Eventually senior colleagues were able to persuade the vice-principal that the idea of a "no-faith" element in the service was incomprehensible and illogical, and he and I agreed that a service should be conducted involving the late Cardinal Thomas Winning, and representatives of Glasgow's Jewish and Muslim communities, besides myself and the then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Immediately the planning of the service began, it became clear that there were two significant considerations: how to manage the "multi-faith" element, and where to hold the service.

The second consideration was more easily dealt with, despite the multi-faith nature of the service. Glasgow Cathedral, the city's most famous and most historic building, was, in the opinion of all, the most suitable venue. In the event, none of the participants from the non-Christian faiths had any difficulty worshipping in the cathedral; the only objections to its use came from ministers of the Church of Scotland who objected to the Koran being read therein. Besides a reading from the Koran, the Jewish community's representative read from Proverbs. The then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, James Weatherhead, and Scotland's leading Roman Catholic clergyman, Archbishop Thomas Winning, offered prayers.

I was very surprised by the reaction to the service. In general, it met with much approval from those who attended, and not a little criticism from those who heard about it from others, or who read about it the following day in *The Herald*. Later, a letter appeared in the correspondence section of that newspaper, from the minister of a church in a presbytery not far from Glasgow. He criticised the fact that there was a reading from the Koran, the holding of a multi-faith service in Glasgow Cathedral, and the sermon, which he had not heard. His criticisms are best summed up by quoting his final paragraph:

> I believe that the inauguration of a new university is a cause for thanksgiving for everyone, but I do believe that, in terms of your report, the Christian Church and the claim that Jesus makes for himself have been compromised[2].

Criticism came from other quarters too. Another Church of Scotland minister wrote directly to the vice-principal who had replied in correspondence to *The Herald* to the letter referred to above. This minister railed against what he termed "anti-Christian propaganda" coming from the Islamic Propagation Centre in Birmingham.

Thirdly, there was criticism addressed to the Presbytery of Glasgow from another west of Scotland presbytery, which came in the form of an extract minute. The matter was taken up with me by the convener of the Presbytery of Glasgow's Business Committee, which wanted the World Mission and Unity Committee of presbytery to issue guidelines. After an exchange of letters between myself and the convener it was decided that the matter should best be dealt with by being ignored! In retrospect, my way of dealing with this matter led to the missing of an important opportunity to make the church and the university confront issues between them concerning the role of the chaplain and the conduct of worship in the university context.

As was the case with the service of introduction, there was tension between church and university, not, on this occasion, just overtly over the ownership of the service, but over its content. Again, it was an issue of control. This was, of course, related to the multi-faith nature of the worship, and is significant because, in my opinion, it exemplified a failure by those who criticised it to appreciate that there is a difference between an act of public worship and an act of worship conducted in the very specific context of the university.

A further example may be offered to illustrate the uncertainties and tensions surrounding my role as worship leader within the polytechnic/ university. It demonstrates the same theme of the inaugural service and the need for worship to be inclusive, rather than exclusively Christian. The example is the reaction of the polytechnic/university authorities to the epilogue I offered the very next time I conducted worship on a public occasion for the institution, which was at a graduation ceremony in the autumn of 1992. Prior to taking up my post as chaplain, I had attended a graduation ceremony, at the end of which the part-time Roman Catholic chaplain delivered a short address to the congregation. Once I had taken up my post, and in the absence of any guidance on the matter from those in control, I set out to continue in the practice I had observed, and which I supported. In one of my addresses that first year, I spoke of the need for a shared sense of community, mentioned as an illustration the story of the good Samaritan, and indicated that compassion for others was at the heart

of the three monotheistic faiths. Information later came to me indirectly that there was criticism within the institution because I had been selective in not mentioning all the major world faiths. Following this, but without any discussion with me on the matter, I was told that I would not be invited in future to make any contribution to the graduation ceremonies, and neither were any of my part-time chaplain colleagues. In correspondence on the matter, the only support I received at senior management level was from a vice-principal who was an elder in a Church of Scotland congregation. Here was further evidence of differing expectations from university and church, and inconsistencies within the university itself.

These three examples show awkward negotiations about my role at university events, an awkwardness which highlights the differing expectations of church and university administration. They have also revealed a compounding difficulty, internal inconsistencies within the university itself. Some of these inconsistencies were probably inevitable, given two important contextual factors. The first is that the institution had never had a full-time chaplain previously, and had clearly never thought through, carefully and comprehensively enough, the role such a person might fulfil, not least in relation to worship. The second factor is that the institution was, at the time of my appointment, in a state of major change. Two different models of university chaplaincy applied in the two other existing universities in Glasgow – indeed there is no "model" for chaplaincy in the universities in Scotland, a matter which may have added to my own institution's uncertainty. These factors worked together to ensure that, from the beginning, there was a lack of clarity within Glasgow Caledonian University about what its chaplain might do. On the other hand, the Church of Scotland, which, at the time of my appointment was arguably even more thirled to a parish-based model of ministry than it is now, had a set of expectations related to its understanding of the minister as minister of word and sacrament. Clearly, there was much to be done to try to understand how a Church of Scotland minister, ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament, would conduct worship in the setting of a new university. It was my determination to make some sense of the confusion, and to find a way of working within the tensions

created by the differing expectations of the church that had ordained me and of the university that employed me and paid me. That led me to my dissertation topic, the full title of which was "A Consideration of the Nature of and Expectations about Chaplaincy in the New Scottish University Using Worship as a Focus".

What I learned

The D. Min. Final Project required a piece of field research. It seemed obvious, given the difficulties mentioned above, that mine should focus on my role as worship leader. I decided to plan a worship experiment to try to find out about people's expectations of the chaplain as a worship leader. This worship experiment proved beyond doubt that there was minimal demand for worship conducted by the full-time chaplain within the university week. Although initially disappointed, it was significant for me nevertheless to have some clarity about the conduct of worship, which I had always seen as part of my role. Beyond that, the D.Min. Final Project enabled me to learn three important things.

First, I learned a great deal about the university's expectations about chaplaincy, and much about the Church of Scotland's, and discovered that these were not just different, but at odds with each other. Second, I learned that worship is and always has been a central expectation or feature of the office of chaplain in the eyes of the church. Third, I was able to offer a brief theological analysis of chaplaincy as a particular form of ministry related to, but distinct from, the ministry of word and sacrament.

The University's Expectations about Chaplaincy

From a careful examination of documentary sources, I was able to discover three things. First, there were differing expectations about the role of the chaplain within the university itself. The existing chaplains wanted a coordinator and someone to offer spiritual counselling and help. The manager of the department within which the chaplain would be based understood this, but wanted someone

who would assist with student counselling. The university's senior management stated that it wanted someone who could offer "non-spiritual help", and who would facilitate worship for non-Christian groups. Second, I learned something about the nature of these expectations themselves: no rationale for them was expressed by the university – only the existing chaplains justified their expectations. Third, it became clear that (I think in order to secure a contribution from the churches towards the funding of the new appointment) the university was willing to bow to the churches' insistence on appointing an ordained minister, but this was clearly in tension with the university's desire that the chaplain offer'"non-spiritual help" and facilitate non-Christian worship.

In order to check what I had learned from the written records of discussions about the nature of the chaplain's post, I set out to interview the three key figures involved in setting up the post. From this I learned that three different views were expressed, confirming what I had learned from the written sources. Concisely, the chaplains recognised a spiritual role for the full-time person, whereas the university expected something much more secular, in short, an additional counsellor. In relation to worship in particular, there was, surprisingly, a convergence of views. Worship had apparently been discussed, but not significantly. All three people interviewed revealed that the expectation was that worship was to have a fairly low priority.

The Church of Scotland's Expectations about Chaplaincy

In discovering the church's expectations about chaplaincy, I concentrated on the annual reports of the Board of National Mission (the Board responsible for overseeing chaplaincy work), and on a report produced by that Board in 1998 entitled, "A Policy for the Church of Scotland in relation to University Chaplaincy". Three inescapable conclusions were reached. The first was that chaplaincy is considered of secondary importance to parish ministry, the second, that it is not considered worthy of financial backing, and thirdly, that beyond that, the Church of Scotland's view is uncertain. What concerned me most in my considerations was that decisions about chaplaincy had evidently

been reached on purely pragmatic, economic grounds, and in the absence of any theological reflection.

Alongside these disappointing discoveries about the Church of Scotland's view of chaplaincy, it must be noted that worship is and always has been a central expectation or feature of the office of chaplain in the eyes of the church. This is because, as a brief theological analysis of ministry from the Reformed tradition will show, "word and sacrament" persists as the key to identifying the nature of ordained ministry.

It was, however, in attempting to articulate a theological understanding of chaplaincy as a particular form of ministry related to, but distinct from, the ministry of word and sacrament, that I learned most. Although the greater work of formulating a "theology of (university) chaplaincy" was beyond the scope of the dissertation, I was able to formulate theological questions that the Church must address if it is collaborate in future with the universities in the appointment of chaplains. Two of these theological questions were paramount.

First, the Church of Scotland needs to reconsider its understanding of "community" if it is to address seriously how it exercises a ministry in non-congregational settings. The nature of the community in which I exercised my ministry was one of its major defining contextual factors. There is a fundamental difference between parish and university that cannot be overlooked if the church is ever to minister within the latter. University chaplaincy is ministry carried out within a secular community, and, more particularly, an institutional one; parish ministry is fundamentally done with and through a church community, and the church itself is the institution. The defining factor of the church community is that it is a community that meets to worship; when the university meets, it meets to consider the purposes of education. In the university it was impossible to establish a worshipping community. The church will have to ask itself how, in the university context, it understands community, and whether, and how, it can make a meaningful relationship with that community. In particular it needs to try to understand whether or not it makes sense to speak of a specifically

Christian community within the university, and, if such exists, how best the Church relates to it. This may not be via the existing chaplaincy model.

This leads to the second major theological question: is the church willing to find a model of the church that takes seriously ministry within non-church institutions. Working with Avery Dulles's ideas of explanatory and exploratory models of the church[3], I realised that until now, the Church of Scotland has entertained only explanatory models. On this basis, the traditional pattern of chaplaincy at the older, established university, with worship at its foundation and core (and continuing because of historical and architectural factors, for example, the existence of divinity colleges and chapels) has been accommodated without too much discomfort. As Dulles points out, such models are backward looking. Using C K Barrett's terminology, it is possible to speak of the church being in retreat, retreating from the periphery to the centre[4]. In my words, my discovery has been of a church talking about mission (through its Board of National Mission), but at the same time retreating into a maintenance mentality. The question for the church is whether, in the face of financial and personnel resource pressures, it wants to continue to see parish ministry as paramount over commitment to providing ministry within institutions, where, arguably, it has far greater opportunity to meet those outside its sphere of life and membership. In other words it must confront the question of whether it has the will, and the vision, to imagine new models of itself.

Conclusion

Much as I found value in the many theological questions that study for the D.Min. Final Project prompted, of even more value were the questions that undertaking the D.Min. itself, and most particularly, discussion with my class colleagues, provoked. For the interest of readers who may be considering embarking on this method of theological study, I wish to outline those areas of personal learning that I found so valuable. The proof of their value was the fact that,

even before I completed the Final Project, I ceased to be a university chaplain.

The most significant matter that I had to face was my difficulty with always having to conduct worship constrained by the institution's ideas of what was appropriate. Strangely, it was an incident in relation to the conduct of worship, which I attended in a representative capacity at another university, that finally made my personal difficulties inescapable. While I found it a reasonably straightforward matter to offer pastoral care (although I was frustrated by the university's insistence that it be reactive rather than proactive) in the university, worship, especially on public occasions, was always a complicated affair. In the end, I simply found it impossible to reconcile my understanding, as a Christian, of what was appropriate worship, with the understanding of members of senior management (who claimed no Christian faith). I often felt my professionalism and personal integrity was threatened. When, after seven years in post, I found myself no nearer to reconciling these opposing understandings, it seemed time to move on. The conduct of worship was so integral to my understanding of the role of the minister that I felt increasingly bereft as it became an increasingly peripheral aspect of my ministry.

Although, by comparison with worship, pastoral care was a less contentious matter, it too presented areas of conflict. There were two in particular. First, whereas as a parish minister I had been ready (indeed, expected) to take the initiative in pastoral care, the university insisted that I could only visit people at home or in hospital when invited. Toward the end of my D.Min. study, an incident occurred which crystallised the frustration of this insistence. A student (a Christian) with whom I had been in a counselling relationship throughout her university course, rang me one day, shortly before her final exams, in great distress. I offered to travel to her home, some 100 miles for the university, to visit her. As I drove back to Glasgow, I reflected deeply on the fact that, on that single visit to her at home with her sister, I had learned more of significance about her than on all the occasions I had met with her in a room at the university. It was

a turning point, and I realised that I needed to be an initiative taker in pastoral care. The other area of conflict was my functioning as a member of the team of student counsellors. The difficulties for all of us in the team were not at any stage of a personal kind, but arose from the understanding we all had that secular counselling and Christian pastoral care were two very distinct approaches to helping students make sense of their experiences. When, by happy mutual agreement, I ceased to be a member of the team, we worked much more collaboratively. Yet this was another signal to me that I was unable to be the minister that I was and wanted to be while operating under some of the incomprehensible constraints placed on me by the university.

Most significant of all was the understanding that D.Min. study gave me that deliberate, sustained and collaborative reflection on ministerial practice was absolutely vital if I were to go on finding ways of exercising a ministry at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But of even greater personal significance is the fact that I discovered that such reflective practices were, for me, energising. Back now in a parish setting, I find my work is much less habitual and much more considered. Difficult visits, contentious meetings or strained relationships with colleagues, parishioners, or members of the congregation seem not only to be fewer, but are less confidence sapping. The D.Min. has given me a way of recalling, considering and learning from all such encounters. And because such encounters hold fewer terrors, it is somehow easier to hold them up for shared reflection with colleagues, not least with the students whom I have supervised. Perhaps most significantly of all, however, D.Min. study has helped me hugely to rediscover a theological focus in my examination of these encounters, which I have used alongside my erstwhile preferred behavioural, sociological or psychodynamic lenses. Nothing is any longer routine, for every ministerial experience yields insights to inform the next.

[1] Of my initial starting salary of £16000, the Polytechnic paid £10000, the Church of Scotland £3000, the Roman Catholic Church £2000, and the Scottish Episcopal Church £1000.

[2] It seems better not to attribute this to the individual responsible.

[3] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976, 23

[4] C K Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament,* Exeter:The Paternoster Press, 1985, 35