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Margaret Naughton

‘Standing in  
a Transitional  
Space’:  
Healthcare  
Chaplaincy in an  
Evolving World

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# ‘Standing in a Transitional Space’: Healthcare Chaplaincy in an Evolving World

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Margaret Naughton

The healing ministry has always been an integral part of the Christian message. Throughout the gospels, we read of the many signs and miracles that Jesus performed during his ministry on earth, many of which focused on healing and well-being. After all, he cured the blind, healed the lepers and raised the dead. He reached out with compassion and empathy to those who suffered in mind, body and spirit and in so doing, offered them an experience of God the Father. Such powerful outreach. Journeying with people at their lowest and most painful times, Christ reached out with authentic and genuine care for those who suffer and struggle. A powerful recollection and demonstration of the wonder and mystery of God. A wonderful and encouraging reminder that while we may sometimes struggle to understand the mystery of God, that belief in this same God can offer something to latch onto at our lowest and most painful times.

COVID-19

Suffering is a reality. It is part of the human condition. It is something which we will all have to face at some point in our lives. While the way we suffer will be different for all of us and the type of suffering we might endure will also be unique to us and to our experience, suffering is suffering. It is challenging to suffer whether in mind, body or spirit. Indeed, suffering is one of life’s greatest mysteries. It is enigmatic, mystifying, disempowering. It challenges who we are and what we believe in. The last two years have brought us into another place of mystery with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. While we are now at what we hope is an end point, this has come at the end of a long and challenging process for so many people. The world as we have known it, has been turned upside down with many of our certainties eroded

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away. We have found ourselves in a space of vulnerability, of pain, of suffering, of loss, of dismay and hopelessness over the last few years. Values, norms, mores have all been reviewed, rewritten, reflected upon. Unexpected changes and challenges for all of us as we found ourselves caught up in the midst of the pandemic, in the middle of what at times appeared like a never-ending journey into the unknown.

I believe that when we find ourselves navigating through a period like the pandemic, we are challenged in so many ways – personally, professionally and socially. These key moments in our lives bring us into a very different zone. They bring us into a place of self-reflection and possibly self-growth. They can push us to really dig deep within ourselves and tap into who we are and what it is that defines our lives. A key part of our lives at pivotal moments is meaning-making. In a sense, what I mean here is that we engage in that process of digging deep. In times of crisis, we can find ourselves grappling with deeply challenging, existential questions around the meaning and value of our lives. It is now that we find the courage to journey inward and look at the crevices of our own being in order to try to make sense of who we are and what it is that gives my life meaning and purpose. We can find ourselves standing back, seeking to understand the ‘why’ of our situation, the ‘why’ of our lives, the ‘why’ of the mystery. This is not an easy process. Indeed, it can be an extremely painful one as it can throw up issues, questions and concerns that may have long been buried internally, known to no one but ourselves. I believe that these last few years have brought us into an epoch of meaning-making, perhaps even meaning-seeking, in order to understand the ‘why’ not only of our own life but that of those around us. The hard questions have been asked by so many of us, demanding us to dig deep within to try to make sense of such an evolving context. We have found ourselves engaged in a process of self-reflection, self-examination and indeed self-growth. We have sought anew answers to some of the challenging questions of the theological canon around suffering and meaning. We have engaged once more with questions around the meaning of our lives. We have sought to understand the ‘why’ of the pain of others. We have asked aloud once more where is God when we suffer? We have asked once more, why does a compassionate, benevolent God allow good people to suffer grievously? Why not stop the pandemic in its pathway and end the suffering of a pained world?

### HEALTHCARE CHAPLAINS

Working as a healthcare chaplain, I am one of many who support others to dig deep, to tap into their own resources to try to find

meaning in their lives, especially during times of deep crisis and loss. I have witnessed this process of painful searching to find meaning. I have seen the pain that people can have when they suffer, when they struggle, when they simply cannot find the answers to the questions that deeply trouble them. I support an authentic self-reflection facilitating a conversation with self and with faith offering in the process a safe and non-judgemental space to do so. I enter into their world, walking a step or two on the journey with the seeking person while allowing them the opportunity to piece together their questioning, their seeking, their need to know more, to understand more deeply, to reflect more congruently. Chaplains are above all, *listeners* to stories and they seek to help others to stitch together the deep tapestry of their lives so that they can locate for themselves the gold of their own meaning-making process. And we all have a story to tell, a story that can be full of colour and majesty, pain and darkness. Our story is what makes us uniquely us. It is what gives us a place in the world, even when that world becomes uncomfortable and somewhat painful. Chaplains, with the value they place on narrative, hear and see the person in front of them, that *Imago Dei* seeking the ‘why’ of their life. They listen, they see, they engage and they support those who wish to share their story and who wish to thread it together in order to make sense of who they are and what they believe in.

Chaplaincy is a ministry of presence, of compassionate journeying and of authentic listening. It provides an opportunity to speak of pain, of suffering, of mystery. It is about offering a sacred space in which the ‘why’ of life can be explored, evaluated, deconstructed, reconstructed, celebrated and shared. I sense that chaplaincy offers something that can be missing from society, a *space* that becomes uniquely ours, to hold, to share, to evaluate, to determine its direction. In a pastoral encounter, it is the person not the chaplain who determines the trajectory of the conversation. They lead the dance. They take the first step, the last step and the many steps in between. They go only where they are able to go while ably supported in a compassionate and tangible way by a caring pastoral practitioner. Chaplains have enjoyed an increased profile during the Covid-19 pandemic. They have, in many respects, come to symbolise presence, rootedness, calm in the midst of a storm. They have come to demonstrate something by way of certainty in the midst of an uncertain world. They have shown strength and courage in the face of ongoing change and challenge. Certainly, they have been shaken by the pandemic just like everyone else but simultaneously, they have demonstrated great personal courage in continuing their ministry among the sick. They have undertaken a process of self-discovery and self-growth too as many of them

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stretched themselves beyond the norm, trying now modes of ministry, new and innovative ways of reaching out from behind their mask. I believe they have found renewed sense of purpose and vocation during time of deep questioning and challenge.

## NEW CHALLENGES

After all, a key strength of the chaplain, is the person. They share their smile, their gaze, their gift of bodily presence. However, their key strength has been challenged in many respects. After all, the *mask* has been a prohibitor of the smile. PPE has eroded the sense of ‘person’ that one immediately connects or indeed not, when a chaplain enters the space of the other. Therefore, chaplains were challenged to engage in new and more innovative ways as a result of the pandemic. They were charged with learning to minister from behind the mask, beyond the tools of safety which have very much become the norm. They were asked to navigate new waters, to find a way to offer compassionate care to those who wanted to know the person behind the mask before opening their heart and soul to them. Chaplains also learned how to utilise technology in order to continue their ministry when visitation simply was not possible anymore due to personal safety issues. A time of great change and challenge for a ministry of hope and healing. In many ways, chaplains have themselves been asked to reflect on both the ‘*why*’ and the ‘*how*’ of their ministry in the last eighteen months or so.

Reflecting on the courage shown by chaplains during a time of great change, I do so by also giving some consideration around an especially pertinent question - what is their place within the transitional space, in that world where science, medicine, spirituality and culture meet and often collide? For chaplains, it can be challenging to find a space within a world of clinical decision-making, in a space that is inhabited by so many other disciplines. In a world where healing, curing and recovery are of paramount importance, how or indeed do chaplains find a way of navigating through and within such a context? In many ways, this brings us from the macro to the micro in terms of how chaplains can support their own on-going journey of self-exploration so that they can continue to provide pastoral ministry within a changing context and culture.

The medical, scientific and clinical environment is a very specific one. It is one concerned with care that is driven by results and by a quest to get people healed and home. It can be a rushed environment, a place of different language, different culture, different ways of engagement with those who use its services. Culturally of course, there are issues that also impact upon the

chaplains’ placement within the healthcare context. After all, hospitals and healthcare facilities are a microcosm of society and all the external challenges, stressors and changes that occur socially and culturally impact upon the role of the chaplain. As society ebbs and flows, negotiating the various quagmires and enigmas of a changing world and demographic, so too does the contemporary chaplain find themselves doing likewise. Changing church practices, lower mass attendance numbers, legislative and societal changes all bring different issues to the bedside, to the ear of the chaplain. Chaplains are tasked with trying to navigate a number of systems, languages and realities which all add to the complexity of their work, to the challenge it is to stay grounded and rooted each and every day.

Therefore, *how* do they stay grounded within such a context? How can they remain rooted within a world that is at its best challenging and changing all the time? I believe they do so because of their personal courage and conviction that what they bring to the bedside is *worth* bringing. They trust that what they do has something of value to offer to those who struggle with the ‘why’ questions, with the mystery and with the pastoral and personal reality of suffering. After all, they come to offer compassionate care at a time of deep pain and loss. They stay grounded even in the midst of personal and professional challenge because they come as people of faith, supported and scaffolded by an awareness that they are *not* alone. They are encased by their faith, by the God they believe walks with them each day as they continue their ministry. They are solid enough to stay the course because their faith is intrinsic to them and to their understanding of ministry. Endorsed by their faith community, they have significant formation in theology and reflective practice thereby empowering them to stand firm in that crossroads where so many different disciplines collide and engage. They are also consummate professionals who, like their multidisciplinary colleagues, are committed to the care of those they meet each and every day. They can stay the course because they wish to continue to minister to those who are *imago Dei*, the ‘living human documents’ to borrow from Anton Boisen.

Chaplaincy is a *sacred* ministry with deep scriptural and Christian origins. It is one that continues to be exercised by people who are grounded in faith and surrounded by faith, endorsed and connected with a church who considers care of the sick one of its key priorities. Chaplains, the listeners of stories, offer a sacred and real space for those who have challenging questions to ask. Supported by the courage and conviction of their faith, they continue to minister even when the sands shift beneath their feet.