University Chaplaincy for Today's Students: What Does It Mean?

Ecumenical chaplaincies at universities do more than build community while nurturing spirituality and ethical values. Wherever a university has such a spiritual and religious resource, Carleton University chaplain Tom Sherwood argues, it is better able to maintain its own best tradition and integrity.

Academic Matters, December 2007
Reprinted with permission of author

When community and university leaders were establishing the Ecumenical Chaplaincy at Carleton University in the early 1960s, they could not have foreseen the society we have today; but they did anticipate the value of spiritual care and religious advisory services. People don't hang up their spirituality on some post at the entrance of the campus when they come to study or work at a university or college. If they are religious or spiritual, that dimension of their worldview continues to be a part of who they are. It may not be obvious or externalized in the performance of their academic roles, but it is certainly part of their essential human identity in terms of relationships, emotions, hopes, and values.

They may not be religious in the ways that their parents and grandparents were. Perhaps that has always been the case, but the religiosity cleavage between people born after 1975 and previous generations is a wide gulf. Sitting with students in my Chaplaincy Centre at Carleton, I have heard people say, "Our family only had one rule when I was growing up: you had to brush your teeth before going to bed." When I ask a crowded lecture hall of students if any of them have never attended a formal religious ritual of any kind, several hands go up. Each week at least one person says to me, "I'm not religious, but I am spiritual." It is usually a student, sometimes a member of faculty, or staff. They usually mean that they connect with some sense of the sacred, some concept of timeless and eternal values and existence, but in very personal, individual and eclectic ways. Some people coming into my office for counselling or other conversation declare clearly at the outset that they are atheists or agnostics or, at least, doubters.

It may simply be that I am available. I keep open office hours in a "storefront" location at the centre of the academic precinct, between the bank and the bookstore, and there are thousands of classroom seats within two minutes of my office. Thousands of students go by each day between classes. Perhaps they choose to confide in me because I am not a doctor or psychiatrist or psychologist. They may know—or hope—that I don't use a medical model in my response to their concern. They may know that I'm a religious professional, grounded in my own faith tradition, trained to deal with spiritual issues, experienced in helping people call on their own religious traditions and spiritual resources. They may have heard me give a guest lecture in one of their courses and decided to trust me. One of their friends may have told them that I am trustworthy. They may simply be curious.

The sign beside my open door says "Ecumenical Chaplain." Sometimes students stop to ask me what "chaplain" means. Sometimes they ask me about "ecumenical"—firstly how to pronounce it, then, "What does it mean?" I've learned that there are two problems with this two-word job title coined in 1965: the two words. The terms are certainly not fashionable today, but the ideas behind them are. The students have come to translate "ecumenical" as

"global" or "without borders"—like "Doctors without Borders" or "Engineers without Borders." They deeply appreciate an inclusive religious attitude—especially in contrast to the histories of religious intolerance that they may be aware of in Canada and other countries.

"Chaplain" is normally defined as a religious professional in a specialized, institutional setting, such as a hospital or children's hospital, a school, mental health centre, a hospice, the military, a political institution, or a corporate setting. The word "chaplain" comes from western European Christian culture: a priest serving a private chapel. That isn't what it means anymore: I have no chapel at Carleton University; Zak Kaye is the Jewish chaplain at the University of Toronto; and Abdul Hai Patel the Muslim chaplain there.

What does "chaplain" really mean in practice? I have permission to tell a story about a successful young professional, living and working in Ottawa. A few years ago, he was a graduate student at Carleton, and he was in crisis. He knew me a little from the Pause Table—the outreach program of free home baking and snacks that we do during December and April exams. Like a lot of students, though, he didn't come to the chaplaincy or to the chaplain until he was in trouble. And he was in trouble. As a result of a bad decision, his status as a graduate student and his professional future were at risk. The story has a good ending. He got through his crisis, completed his program, and got on with his life. But when he first presented himself to me, he was definitely a student at risk and not just with respect to his academic status. (University chaplains are regularly doing subtle, unspoken but systematic suicide risk assessment as they sit with depressed, anxious or agitated students. The suicide rate is one of the "dirty secrets" of post-secondary education.) In the middle of this student's crisis, there was a moment I will never forget. At the end of one of our consultations, he got up to leave my office, turned around, came back, and shook my hand. "Thank you Tom," he said. "You're the only one I can talk to about this… other than God."

As I religious professional, I'm probably supposed to say, "Talking to God is good. Listening too." We call it prayer. But we know, because our children and grandchildren tell us so, that sometimes we need someone with skin on.

A chaplain is someone with skin on, the human embodiment of caring concern and unconditional acceptance present to a person who feels uncared for and unworthy in a place where performance is evaluated and "conditional acceptance" is a familiar term.

What do university chaplains do? The "Four P's" of campus ministry are pastoral, prophetic, priestly and pedagogical. These categories refer respectively to counselling, support and advisory services; peace, justice and environment programming, and ethical reflection; weddings, funerals and worship services; and educational programs. No chaplain does all those things well or tries to. Some chaplaincy teams are successful at such balance and variety, but individuals tend to focus.

At Carleton, I budget about 60 per cent of my personal time for pastoral activity, and coordinate a pastoral team which provides another 2.5 "person years" of counselling and open office hours. The pastoral support is very important. However I also plan and lead programs that speak a prophetic word of justice and ethics to the campus community. As the one full-time chaplain, I coordinate and facilitate clergy colleagues in other religions and various Christian denominations as they lead worship services on campus. Normally, I do not lead worship unless there is a need to conduct a memorial service on campus. I officiate at only

two or three weddings per year, because I try to connect the couples with local congregations of their own tradition. Some university chaplains have chapels and regular chapel services to conduct. They may also have 20 or 30 weddings a year.

I also teach. In addition to the small-group chaplaincy programs in which I mentor and encourage spiritual growth, I teach religion courses in anthropology, sociology and religious studies as a contract instructor, and give guest lectures in a number of courses. I enjoy this activity in itself, but it also increases my effectiveness as chaplain.

Who comes to the chaplaincy? Many kinds of people: Muslim and Jewish students who ask questions about Christianity or are simply looking for referral into their own local faith communities; students researching assignments in any of the disciplines in the arts and social sciences, sometimes in architecture, design, journalism or business ethics; students looking for
faith-based clubs or clubs related to peace, justice and environment issues; people concerned about racism, sexism, and homophobia; people looking for on-campus spirituality; people looking for support in the context of crisis; people hoping to be talked out of their suicidal feelings; Christians critical of the church; Christians asking, "Where's a good church?"

Do gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people come to the chaplaincy? Yes. And I am a familiar face in the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer Centre at Carleton. For some time, we have been doing a program together called "Que(e)rying Religion." At Carleton, we bring in a religious leader from the community for conversation with students about issues of religion, faith and sexuality.

Do Aboriginal students come to the chaplaincy? Yes. The Aboriginal Lounge is just a few steps away from my office. I am a welcome guest there, and a number of Aboriginal students trust me and seek me out despite the history of the mission church and residential schools. They know I am associated with the 1986 United Church Native Apology and subsequent Healing Fund. Some native students will never trust me and will never come to the Chaplaincy; and I can respect and understand that.

But the chaplaincy is not for all the students, faculty, and staff. It does not seek or expect to be. Certainly, we could not staff it to provide spiritual counsel for 22,000 students. Chaplaincies at Canadian universities and colleges today are an item on a menu of student services. Not everyone needs or will use the Writing Tutorial Service, but the university must provide one. Not everyone will use the swimming pool or fitness centre, but our concept of university includes such facilities. Not everyone will use the religious and spiritual advisory services, but increasingly students expect them to be there.

This has come as a surprise to some university and college administrators. Several of the modern, post-war universities in Canada established themselves intentionally independent of organized religion. But the increasingly international and multi-faith make-up of the high-school-age population has put pressure on that strategy. Christians from other cultures may be more aggressive than Canadian-born Christians in asking for opportunity to practise their religion on campus. Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, Aboriginals and others may feel they need certain accommodations that the founders did not anticipate.

Increasingly, university administrators, thinking in terms of fiscal concerns, recruitment and retention, realize that an effective multi-faith chaplaincy serves the university's mission statement.

One of the modern dynamics that traditional chaplaincies and older universities have had to adapt to is the increasingly multi-faith diversity of the campus population. Some universities, like the University of Victoria, provide for this with a large team of chaplains representing the different faiths. The university also has an Interfaith Chapel, a free-standing building used by adherents of more than a dozen world religions and the regular venue for diverse religious and spirituality programs. York University has a Multifaith Centre, centrally located near the main library. The University of Toronto opened a new Multi-faith Centre in October 2006. Other universities are adapting space or considering the possibility of new space dedicated for use by religious and faith-based groups.

Brock University is an interesting example. Like Carleton, it was established to be secular, and a later generation of leaders had to devise a way to provide spiritual care. The chaplains are paid by off-campus religious organizations, but the university welcomes and appreciates them, offering practical accommodation and support. But what about space? My fellow ecumenical chaplain, George Addison writes:

> We are still working on making the Rita Welch Centre more welcoming to diverse faiths…. We have argued that the university should not merely tolerate different faiths on campus, but should accommodate in a generous and inclusive way by providing space on campus for religious life. Faith after all, cannot be confined purely to the private sphere, but is part of the landscape of the university. Further, the best way to deal with differences and possible conflict among people of faith is to recognize diversity and provide space and program dollars to promote inter-religious understanding and dialogue.

Many other Canadian universities are also considering how to provide space for spirituality at this time.

If space is difficult though, multi-faith programming is not. Sometimes it is essential that an event include the participation of several faith groups, sometimes it is simply desirable and possible. I arrange or participate in several multi-faith panels each year, addressing such issues as racism, gender roles, ethical issues, and public policy issues. These events enrich the intellectual and spiritual life of the campus community.

Multi-faith ritual is more difficult, but it can be done; and it may be even more important. For example, after 9/11, many campus communities were able to convene pastoral care services and prayer events on a multi-faith basis. The same needs arose after the tsunamis of December 2004, the shooting at Dawson College in September 2006, and again at Virginia Tech in April 2007.

Healing ritual needs to be multi-faith and perhaps invented. When the students asked me to convene a commemoration of the victims of 9/11 on the first anniversary, we developed a multi-faith prayer service in which nine world religions were accorded about five minutes each. I booked the event into a lounge at the top of the only high-rise building on campus. The religious groups used their time in different ways, but generally they read from scripture or

recited from sacred tradition, and prayed. If the language was Hebrew or Arabic or Sanskrit or Cree, the speaker would explain in English or translate. Students told me afterward that they had expected to feel like spectators during most of the ceremony. Some of them were surprised to realize how touched they were and how much their own spirituality was expressed during the leadership of some of the other religious groups. Some of the students most touched by the ritual and most appreciative identified themselves as being "not religious."

After the speakers had taken their turns, I invited the 100 or so students to join in a circle, holding hands to symbolize our hope for the oneness of humanity and to remind us that people who are holding hands cannot throw things at each other. Then, silently we walked down the 44 flights of stairs, remembering the victims of the two New York towers, remembering, too, that some of the victims had been rescue workers on their way up.

University students feel fragile under the stress of economic, academic, and time pressure. They feel especially vulnerable at the beginning of a new year and during exams. The fact that 9/11 occurred during the first week of classes increased the trauma for the students I dealt with. Some were just learning their new roommate's name, just meeting their professors and class-mates for the first time. They had left a familiar support system and not yet established the new one. Similarly, the exam-time context magnified the wave of fear and anxiety that rippled through Canadian campuses last April when 32 people were killed at Virginia Tech.

The first few years after high school are a critical period of risk and decision-making for young adults in Canadian society. They choose their careers, their lifestyles, their life partners, perhaps, and their styles of citizenship in society. It is a time of vocational discernment in the broadest sense, not only in terms of jobs and careers. It is a time of identity discernment.

At Carleton, and elsewhere, I'm sure, students use the chaplaincy as a safe place to do that discernment in conversation with others as they reflect on the curriculum, get to know themselves better, develop their own ethical identities, and discuss public issues. They may become educators, civil servants, scientists, entrepreneurs, doctors, social workers, politicians, managers, architects, engineers, or anything. But for the large population of students who participate in the chaplaincy programs, hang out in the Chaplaincy Centre and engage myself and my associates in conversation, their vocational decisions are based in part on religious values or a spiritual identity.

For most of its centuries-old history, the university has been a place of community, spirituality and values. Contemporary conditions in Canadian society can make this difficult if not impossible. There isn't enough space at most universities and colleges for adequate common rooms; the students commute to class and rush away to their part-time jobs; traditional religious institutions struggle in post-modern culture; materialism, pragmatism and harsh economic realities erode ethical thinking. At Carleton, the ecumenical chaplaincy functions to build community, nurture and express spirituality, and articulate ethical values. Wherever a university has such a spiritual and religious resource, it is better able to maintain its own best tradition and integrity.

Tom Sherwood *is an ordained United Church minister with a PhD in sociology. He has been Ecumenical Chaplain at Carleton University in Ottawa, since 1999.*