Chaplaincy and Discipleship

0 Introduction
This paper is a set of reflections about the role of chaplains. It arose from the thought that Carlisle Diocese has a vision for itself of Growing Disciples, but it is not so clear how chaplaincy relates to this vision. It is written, therefore, for clergy and chaplains in Carlisle Diocese - but of course others are welcome to “eavesdrop”. It is not a connected chain of argument, and its conclusions are that chaplaincy is indeed about Growing Disciples, and that the rest of the Church needs to support chaplains and to listen to them, for it has much to learn from them and their work on the edge of Church.

Not all chaplains are Christian, of course, but this paper deals specifically with Christian chaplaincy. Chaplains needn’t be ordained: the Hospice Chaplain in Carlisle is, at the time of writing (Nov 2011), a lay person, and the recent School Chaplain at Trinity School was also lay.

There are many different sorts of Chaplains: school chaplains, hospital chaplains, industrial chaplains, urban or rural chaplains, retail chaplains, prison chaplains ….

Chaplains work in other people’s institutions. Some chaplains are paid by those institutions and not the Church, some by the Church - but whichever is the case, the chaplain needs to live within the rules of their institution, and this generally means that proselytising is not appropriate. (This would on the one hand be particularly true for Hospital Chaplains, and on the other hand not true for Prison and Forces Chaplains, part of whose role is to look after congregations and run churches.) How then do chaplains link to the Diocesan Vision and Strategy of Growing Disciples?

Chaplains would want to assert that chaplaincy may not be about overtly making converts, but it is nevertheless distinctively Christian ministry.

1 Issues
Chaplaincy, because it is on the edge of all institutions, is particularly vulnerable when economic pressures increase: Church, School, and NHS, are equally likely to see it as a possible area for making financial savings (eg Chaplain to Trinity School, Chaplain to Workington, etc etc). This is particularly so because many institutions under financial pressure are moving increasingly to looking for measurable outcomes, and may assume that Chaplaincy is inherently not about that sort of thing. It is somewhat ironic that the Church, which surely has as part of its cultural DNA that not everything worthwhile can be measured, sometimes takes the same line, wanting to know, more sharply from chaplains than from parochial clergy, what outcomes they deliver. Chaplains are therefore under pressure from both sides to demonstrate their value and effectiveness. However, see below (paragraph 6) for examples where chaplaincy has been valued by the Fire Service and Pirellis.

Another distinctive problem for Chaplaincy on the edge of both Church and other institutions is that of management: neither the Church nor other institutions are comfortable with managing beyond their own boundaries. (This would be less true for example in prisons where systems are more structured.) Changes to expectations of chaplains and to the institutions they work in may necessitate more thinking in this area. (With huge structural changes proposed to the NHS, would it be good to do more centralisation of the management of hospital chaplains with a Chaplain General of the NHS?)
Within the Church generally, it should be admitted that we have not been good at recognising and valuing vocation if it takes a person beyond the boundaries of the Church. “Why won’t N (who is a teacher, or doing work with young people on the streets) work with our Sunday School or Youth Club?” can be seen as implying that N’s work as a teacher is not proper Christian work. However, although ministry is not about doing things in Church, it is not necessarily equivalent to doing worthwhile things beyond the Church. What things to tackle will require discernment from Chaplains.

2 Chaplains and the Diocese
Both those who are chaplains and those who are not need to see chaplains as operating within the Diocesan Vision and Strategy - for several reasons. First, at least some chaplains already report feeling “divorced” from mainstream ministry and they feel this separation is harmful to them. Second, chaplains are a tremendous resource for the Diocese and we therefore need to set up structures which enhance a sense of incorporation. Third, chaplains are people whose vocation to be priests or lay ministers the Church has recognised - so that they and we need them to fulfil that vocation by growing disciples.

3 Life at the margin
As well as working on the margins of the Church, some chaplains have themselves come from those margins: many (anecdotally, disproportionately many) chaplains are women, for example, and many have taken less traditional routes to ordination (eg divorce, disability etc). They have had to work out what discipleship means in contexts similar to those in which they work - contexts where church is probably out of its depth. (It could be argued that many clergy operate within the safety of Church contexts; conversely that it is chaplains who take something of Church to the margins.)

In biology, it is the edge which is the most exciting and vital place - where change happens and life begins. Organisms and institutions need to have something of the experience of the edge, or they will become static and die. Chaplaincy, being on the edge, offers this experience to the Church. Chaplaincy, as it were then, creates the conditions which allow and enable growth.

Of course these comments about the chaplains being on the margins of the church (and sometimes also of the institutions in which they work) are true when our perspective is from the Church or institution. On the other hand, from the point of view of the community served, chaplaincy is absolutely at the centre!

4 Chaplaincy partners
Chaplains work in partnership with others. Hospital and Hospice Chaplains, in particular, have worked hard and successfully at building up teams of lay people from local churches to support the work of chaplaincy. This provides important opportunities for the volunteers to grow in their own discipleship, growth which can feed back into their parochial situations, if only the local churches will allow it.

We might even wish to regard non-Christians as partners in chaplaincy. Ken Wright, as chaplain to Workington, saw the local policeman (who popped in to shops and listened to employees who were
facing redundancy when there were possible job vacancies), and above all the hairdressers (the only physical and personal contacts for many old ladies from week to week - listening to their fears and concerns), as the real pastors.

5 Pre-evangelism
Chaplaincy can be seen as pre-evangelism, the work which goes on before evangelism is even possible. A possible biblical reference might be the story of St Paul witnessing the death of St Stephen, which we might think of as working on and in him before his vision on the road to Damascus. What Stephen said, Acts tells us, enraged the Jewish leaders, but his courage and grace as he died may have had a different impact. What chaplains say is of course important, but who and how they are, and what they do, is a reaching out and sharing faith, a mark of discipleship.

Another way of putting this is to point out that discipleship is about following Jesus, and some people do this without naming Jesus. Chaplaincy is then about naming the unknown God.

6 Direct growth in discipleship
Chaplaincy can produce growth in discipleship more directly: although overt preaching would be completely inappropriate in many chaplaincy situations, being in the institution and wearing a dog collar is a very visible witness to the Church and its work, and indeed to God.

Chaplains are people who understand and work within institutions, without being completely part of them. They are sometimes the only people who are able to speak the truth because they stand apart from some aspects of the institution (hierarchy, promotion, discipline, etc). This truth telling and independence is also a witness to God, who both stands within and apart from human society. This is a significant prophetic role.

Chaplains, if not running churches, can be seen as not having the vested interests of a Vicar who has to make a church flourish, and is responsible for its growth and stability. This independence from the Church is also part of the witness of Chaplains.

Chaplains are sometimes in touch with people who formerly had faith but have fallen away. As chaplains work for and speak about wholeness after brokenness, they can offer a way back to faith for such people.

Chaplains are able to connect people of faith with each other at work. Some chaplains find the reducing of the ‘loneliness’ of being a Christian in the workplace, and the drawing out of Christian fellowship within the working environment, to be one of the most satisfying aspects of chaplaincy.

In ministry there is a lot of unfinished business (cf Wesley Carr: Brief Encounters). Chaplains in particular may have the briefest of encounters, with little sense of what happens next. (Though ongoing, long term relationships are sometimes possible: for example Hospital Chaplains with some staff - and even with some long term patients.) Therefore there is need for our churches to be open to follow-up, to be able to tend and harvest seeds which others have sown. Not only do chaplains do some of the sowing, they may be the best people to tell and show the church how to be open and ready to do the tending and harvesting.
Another aspect of these brief encounters is that chaplains are perhaps more experienced than parochial clergy at making the best and most fruitful use of the few minutes which may be available to them. If a personal anecdote may be forgiven, when listening to a very fine hospital chaplain talking about how he talked to patients, I felt my own practice in pastoral visiting was more like dancing around on the edge of the pool, barely daring to get in the shallow end, when he purposefully said hello and then moved sensitively but very quickly to the important things which needed to be asked and said.

In institutions, staff who are suspicious of the Church are sometimes able to see the positive effects of the chaplains’ work and to re-think their opinions of Church.

Chaplains may feel undervalued, but they - like all clergy and Christians - may not always be aware of the effect they have on others: “you don’t realise what an inspiration you are.” The request from the Fire Service to have Chaplains because they had seen the effectiveness of the Police Chaplains is additional testimony to this from an institutional point of view. Another example would be an improvement in time lost for sickness which at least Pirellis believes has been reduced by half because of the work of the Urban Chaplain in Carlisle. A third example would be from the NHS, where although what Chaplains can do is limited, (and Chaplains themselves may be almost too conscious of their limitations), what they can do means a lot to people sometimes in a desperate state or in extreme situations. Further quantified examples from the NHS are detailed in another brief paper about the effectiveness of Hospital Chaplains prepared by Richard Pratt with help from and on behalf of the Hospital Chaplaincy Collaborative.

The Diocesan understanding of Discipleship as its vocation and work, and its thinking on five marks by which discipleship can be known (maturity of faith, prayer and worship, outreach, social engagement, quality of relationships) offer a number of ways in which Chaplains can see their work. For example, using the image of the hen and her eggs and then her chicks, growing in Discipleship is about coming out of your shell and helping others to come out of theirs. Chaplaincy is often about being alongside people who would probably not cross the Church threshold (metaphorical or literal) - especially at times of challenge and change. That being alongside is precisely what can enable the coming out of a shell.

7 Support from the church
The seeds planted by chaplains will often need to be harvested by parochial clergy. There is a danger, however, that the parochial clergy and their churches will tend to want to grow only people who fit in safely with existing congregations. This is a problem for prison chaplains, for example, who do look for churches to take on offenders who have served their sentence - but find many rejections (especially if the offence was a “difficult” one like child abuse or a sex offence).

Parishes need to work at other ways of supporting Chaplains: just keeping Chaplains in their prayers would be a good place to start! Chaplains and Parishes need to think about ways in which Chaplains can support parochial clergy and parishioners, too! The Diocese too needs to support and value Chaplaincy: the event hosted by the Bishop at which the initial version of this paper was presented was a first in 20 years, and very greatly appreciated. In fact quite a lot of our Chaplains report getting good support from individual colleagues, but less good support from Chapter/Synod which tends to be focussed on more churchy agendas. Not all Chaplains want invitations to tell Chapter about their ministry; this is not something a Chapter would ask of other, parochial, colleagues!
Putting the same thing more succinctly, Chaplaincy offers to many an opportunity to encounter Church in a context beyond Church - the effectiveness of the opportunity will be enhanced by support from the wider Church.

8 Bridge building
Bridge building, relationship building, is an essential precursor to effective ministry. We saw, during the floods and the shootings, how clergy and chaplains with established relationships came into their own. Chaplaincy is about building bridges; chaplains have one foot in the world and one in the church. Chaplains are therefore crucial links in an ongoing chain, an essential context for growing disciples.

In the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as always out and about, walking around, getting alongside people at work. Jesus entered the world of other people; St Paul too, with his tent-making, could inhabit a world beyond the religious. This is very much what chaplaincy does: workplace chaplaincy, obviously - but also school and hospital and prison chaplaincy too. The privilege chaplains have, of being in the world of others, is a parallel of the privilege parochial clergy have when they visit peoples' homes or are invited into their lives at the most emotional points - birth, death, marriage…..

One technique of chaplaincy, then, is to look for some extra points of contact - football, engineering, science. To set against this, some chaplains have said that, although the wearing of a dog-collar is necessary for honesty about who you are as a chaplain, in the first year it can be a barrier, but by the second year it is an asset.

Our Chaplains in Cumbria already have, for the most part, a foot in a couple of camps - because almost all of them are part-time as Chaplains and many have also a part-time parochial role. This comes at a price as parishes struggle with allowing their priest space to do chaplaincy, and clergy struggle with balancing the two roles. So, although this puts significant extra pressures on them, it does give them advantages as well.

In addition, in our small communities, chaplains will be able to see people in more than one context - at work and then shopping in the local supermarket. Again there is the possibility of building bridges.

9 Spirituality
Spirituality is a fashionable word in some areas of chaplaincy - for example the NHS, which recognises the value of chaplaincy as dealing with the whole person, because it understands a person as having not just physical but also mental, social and spiritual dimensions to being - these are what make us human! (In fact all health professionals, not just the chaplains, have a duty to offer spiritual care to all those in their care.) At the same time, understandably (and rightly) the NHS does not wish to pay to promote a specific denomination or even a specific faith, so its understanding of spirituality is generic. We must accept this thinking as the context within which our chaplains work, and indeed embrace it but also offer a critique of this secular thinking on spirituality from our own perspective of Christian discipleship.

First, it is immoral to take advantage of the situations of vulnerability in which chaplains have contact with people. Whilst it is true that we all need to see ourselves as vulnerable and in need of
God, Christian Discipleship aims at mature adulthood (measured by the stature of Jesus himself): surely we want people to come to faith rather more in joy than in desperation?

Second, our understanding of authentic spirituality is that it cannot be based on a pick and mix, rootless, DIY, approach. A word which needs to go alongside spirituality is discipline - related, of course, to discipleship. Some might express this by going as far as saying that they would, for example, honour a good and faithful Moslem much more than they would someone playing at Christianity. This would set a tone of respect for chaplains’ relationships with those of other faiths - but also a tone of challenge to those who wished to water all faiths down to a common denominator of doing unto others as you would be done by. Spirituality is not affirmation of whatever a person chooses to be or do. If chaplains are able to offer appropriate challenges to people, this will help them to grow to that mature adulthood, and that joy, which we believe God wants to see.

10 New ways of working
In order to survive and be sustainable Churches are, like Police Forces and others, considering new ways of working which include others beyond the traditional roles; eg PCSOs, Licensed Lay Ministers etc. Could chaplains consider mobilising Christians already at work within the workforce, and others, so that they too see themselves as chaplains, discipleship growers, and so on? If it is to be done, it is probably only chaplains who could do this – as noted above, many parochial clergy might struggle to relate to the world of work beyond Church. Some chaplaincy already includes elements like this: eg the volunteers in hospitals, managed by the hospital chaplains; there is a similar system in prisons. Industrial and urban chaplains, and school chaplains, do less of this.

There are issues, of course: those at work are paid to do a job for their employer, not to distract with, or to be distracted by, conversations about faith. This is already having an impact on our industrial chaplains, especially when there are hard-to-cross security barriers – as for example at Sellafield and BAe Systems. What used to be called “loitering with intent” is now not acceptable in some workplaces. So Chaplains are already having to think of new ways working.

11 Conclusion
The Church has tended to marginalise those who minister at the margins; in doing this we have missed insights and wasted opportunities. Carlisle Diocese has a policy that 80% of our expenditure will be on local ministry - ministry in the parishes. This is a good discipline, but those whose work is, we might say, in new sorts of parishes, and spending all their time making contact with those beyond the Church, need to be understood as just as central to our life. Chaplains have much to teach us and we need to learn much.

This short piece represents my thoughts, modified by discussion with (and subsequent comments from) the Chaplains who attended a meeting and supper party hosted by Bishop James on 10th June 2011: Alun Jones, Judy Evans, Clive Pattinson, Jayne Tyrer, Paula Pye, Wendy Sanders, Bob Spratt, Anne Roberts, Ken Wright, Mailly-Clare Danks-Flower, Sheila Hughes, Lyndsay Gray.

version 4 1 xi 2011
version 5 revised Spring 2014
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