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Time for cathedral building: reimagining school ministry

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Abstract

Expanding on models for school chaplaincy and drawing on the work of Fowler, Parks, Pohlman, Erikson, Williams, and Pannikar this article argues for a new and reimagined approach, shifting from a seminary model of spiritual formation to a cathedral model of spiritual exploration. Grounded in an incarnational theology and an understanding of the spiritual dissonance of youth within a pluralistic culture, the chaplain cultivates Pannikar's christic vision within the school context. In this way, the chaplain leverages opportunities for engagement in persona Christi as missionary, witness, accompanying presence, and guide in the quest of adolescent spiritual exploration and meaning-making.

Keywords

cathedral model, faith development, Raimundo Pannikar, religious education, school chaplaincy

In *School Chaplaincy: An Introduction*, David Pohlman identifies several models for school chaplaincy and the work of the chaplain—pastoral care, peer support, educational, liturgical, and community development.[1] These are helpful categories through which to understand school ministry. Yet, our understanding of this unique context might be enhanced through considering a more holistic approach more suited to the particularity of the experience.

Medieval cathedrals functioned as hubs of community, the central point around which activity revolved and through which community shaped and expressed its multi-faceted life. The role of these cathedrals, together with their evolving presence into the twenty-first century, serve as a helpful model within which to reimagine the work of school chaplaincy. The context and ministry of the school chaplain aligns with the characteristics of cathedral building, allowing for a creative and inclusive approach celebrating the vibrant nature of community, remaining open to the multiple ways that the Spirit mani-

[1] David Pohlman, *School Chaplaincy: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 23.

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fests itself, and nurturing not only an approach to spiritual formation, but also encouraging spiritual exploration at the heart of adolescent faith development.

The mission field of school chaplaincy

Within a post-Christian era, the chaplain functions in a unique role, representing the Church and Christ within a non-church and often lightly Christian context. The diversity of this community requires a missional stance witnessing in an often foreign land. Often, chaplains find themselves embracing a theology that sets themselves over and against the culture while prophetically encouraging the school community to engage with, be shaped by, and ultimately be transformed through, the invitation to the gospel. "'Embedded' in the school community, they embody the core values of Christian faith and ministry, values that may at times be in tension with the institution."[2] This tension creates opportunity for authentic engagement with differing perspectives. This is an approach we have seen before.

Paul's itinerant ministry within a syncretistic world is certainly a poignant example of the ways the Christian gospel engaged with, and transformed, culture far from the gates of the Temple. A much older model is found in the peculiar biblical story of Eldad and Medad (Num.11:26-30, *NRSV*), who, though they missed the opportunity to gather at the tent of meeting to receive the Spirit, began prophesying in the camp. Moses quickly recognizes that the Spirit is not contained in any one location: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (Num. 11:29). Eldad and Medad are forerunners of the school chaplain, practicing their ministry in the camp and outside the tent of meeting, just as the chaplain stands in a peculiar space, not quite the same as a parochial context, somewhere in the "hinterland between sacred and secular, between the world of the Church and the world of contemporary, secular culture inhabited by pupils and staff alike."[3]

The chaplain attends to God's presence "on the move," throughout the world's religiously diverse campground and not only in the fixed structures of Christian worship. This recalls the origin of chaplain in the fourth century CE, evolving from *cappelanus*, the person who accompanied the sacred relic of Martin of Tours' cape as it made its way throughout the countryside, setting up moveable chapels to house the relic. The chaplain—caretaker of the sacred—was witness to its presence and power wherever it showed up. The current exercise of school chaplaincy signals a return to these origins of the chaplain in the camp and on the move, as missionary and witness to the Spirit's unveiling.

This ongoing divine disclosure suggests the critical interpretive role of chaplaincy in religiously diverse contexts. As Rowan Williams states, "the unknowability and indefinability of the divine nevertheless provides a potential lens through which we can dare to explore our differing perspectives on truth."[4] The school chaplain becomes a guide in this spiritual exploration, modeling active engagement with diverse perspectives:

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[2] John Caperon, *A Vital Ministry: Chaplaincy in Schools in the Post-Christian Era* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 59.

[3] Caperon, *A Vital Ministry*, 59.

[4] Rowan Williams, "All Faiths and None: Theological Issues in Multi-Faith Chaplaincy," in *A Christian Theology of Chaplaincy*, ed. John Caperon, Andrew Todd and James Walters (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), 63.

> The "availability to all faiths and none" approach to chaplaincy effectively requires openness to the idea that "truth" is not the exclusive property of one faith, or of one tradition within one faith: it is the job of chaplaincy and of chaplains to encourage a more nuanced understanding of what truth is, how and where and to whom it is revealed. . .there is an urgent need for Christian chaplains to model what might be termed "generous orthodoxy" in this respect. This is certainly not to be understood as downplaying the distinctive truth claims of the Christian faith within the multi-faith context. Still less is it a call for religious relativism, but rather for a Christianity confident enough in its own perception of revealed truth not to fear *engagement* with those whose perceptions differ.[5]

Informed by the current theological insights of Christian tradition, chaplains affirm the spiritual journeys of both Christians and students of different faiths. Indeed, the Trinitarian heart of Christian theology, and the importance of Spirit-focused pneumatology in this approach, open avenues to engagement.

In his essay, "Trinity and Pluralism," Rowan Williams presents the *trinitarian pluralism* advocated by Raimundo Panikkar which does not deny the particularity of various religious traditions.[6] Instead, Panikkar uses the model of the Trinity to demonstrate the unity in diversity of human spirituality. He urges us to think of the multiplicity of religious faiths and their common connection *through the Spirit.* For Panikkar, reality mirrors the divine life of the Trinity: a unity in diversity of three-in-one. Panikkar asserts that seeing reality within a Trinitarian framework develops *Christianness*: the basis for Christian engagement with other religions. Thus, he says that the ability to possess the "christic vision" is rooted in one's capacity to perceive the world as intricately connected with trinitarian life. Panikkar emphasizes the *Spirit*, which is always present throughout the world, and the *Logos* who entered the particularity of our time and space. This important relationship between Spirit and *Logos* reveals the mystery of the Godhead and binds the disparate threads of religious faiths together. According to this understanding:

> the Christian does not ask how he or she knows that the Christian religion is exclusively or universally true; he or she simply works on the basis of the christic vision for the human good, engaging with adherents of other traditions.[7]

Likewise, the school chaplain is called to engage the life of the community, seeing its potential through the incarnational lens of "christic vision," while acknowledging the power and presence of the Spirit's unveiling. The academic context of the school is a dynamic sphere through which *Logos*, Spirit, and Truth are revealed in discourse, tensions, and dissonance. In the meeting space of the camp, the chaplain stands in the place of dynamic tension as sacramental presence, counter-cultural witness, prophetic missionary, and spiritual guide: *in persona Christi* within a culture that does not necessarily hold that perspective, and yet is united around a "shared interest in how faith speaks to the human condition and the quest for personhood."[8] The spiritual questions of meaning

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[5] Williams, "All Faiths and None," 65–66.

[6] Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavid D'Costa (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 3–15.

[7] Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism", 6.

[8] Williams, "All Faiths and None," 67.

and purpose take on special significance within the context of adolescence when the formation of identity creates the backdrop for more intense spiritual exploration.

Navigating through spiritual dissonance

Psychologist Erik Erikson, argued that we should understand human growth as an "epigenetic process" of development—the view that "anything that grows has a ground plan, and out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole.."[9] Erikson applies this understanding to the formation of personality. *Identity vs. Identity Confusion*, occurring during adolescence, is the defining stage of epigenisis. The adolescent identifies the strengths and weaknesses of personality, and, through a dialectical process, develops a commitment to values which will become her own. As we consider the role of school chaplains in this dialectic, we must consider the unique developmental context of the students with whom they constantly interact.

In her book, *The Critical Years*, Sharon Parks addresses faith development in young adulthood. Parks grounds her discussion in Erikson's claims that the achievement of a "self-aware self" marks the beginning of adulthood and that the virtue of fidelity most notably corresponds with this newly defined self.[10] In his writings, Erikson stressed that during the stage of identity crisis the adolescent is in search of a model of faith, understood as trust. In Erikson's words, a youth "looks most fervently for men and ideas to have *faith* in."[11] In an earlier essay, he defines this faith as "fidelity: the virtue and quality of adolescent ego strength . . . supported by the search for something and somebody to be true to."[12] From this premise, Parks suggests that the threshold of young adulthood is marked by self-aware responsibility for shaping one's own definition of fidelity: "a consequence of this awareness is the recognition that one must take responsibility for the faith one lives by."[13] With the emergence of this new self-awareness, one begins to take responsibility for one's "own knowing, becoming, and moral action—even at the level of ultimate meaning-making."[14] Against this backdrop of increased responsibility, Parks identifies a common characteristic of young adults. Citing the work of Kenneth Keniston, she recognizes the dynamic of "*pervasive ambivalence* toward both self and society."[15] During this period of identity and faith development, the young adult is often located between exploration of the unknown and tentativeness to explore. In this time of spiritual exploration, the individual is probing, searching, and defining, making meaning in and through, over and against, the community of the school, often entering

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[9] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 92.

[10] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 93.

[11] Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 128.

[12] Erik H. Erikson, "Youth: Fidelity and Diversity," in *Youth: Change and Challenge*, ed. Erik H. Erikson, (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 2–3.

[13] Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 77.

[14] Parks, *The Critical Years*, 77.

[15] Kenneth Keniston, *Youth and Dissent: The Rise of a New Opposition* (New York: Harper Brace & Jovanovich, 1972), 8.

a time of spiritual dissonance—a liminal moment of moving to another level of spiritual development or falling into a place of moratorium.

James Fowler, in *Stages of Faith*, offers a six-stage model, culminating in universalizing faith. Fowler pulls together the theories of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, combining them with theologies of Tillich and Niebuhr, to demonstrate the correlation between psychological development and the process of meaning-making. As we hold psychological theories together with theological reflections on faith development, a pattern of necessary spiritual dissonance emerges and through which an individual advances through a dialectical process of faith development. Tillich, suggests the power of this dissonance in his definition of religion: "Being religious means passionately asking the questions of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive the answers, even when the answers hurt."[16] The discomfort, the dissonance, the "hurt" of meaning making marks the opportunity for spiritual growth.

This existentialist emphasis is seen again in Tillich's *Theology of Education*, where he raised the question of how the Church School might more authentically live its mission:

> the problem of the Church School is more than the problem of the Church School. It is the problem of the relationship of Christianity and culture generally and Christianity and education especially. The problem is infinite and must be solved in every generation again. Within this frame, the Church School is like a small laboratory in which the large questions of Church and world can be studied and brought to a preliminary solution which could become an inestimable contribution to the solution of the larger problem.[17]

Similarly, educational philosopher Nel Noddings' approach focuses on similar "large questions," resonates with Tillich's emphasis, and underscores the developmental stage of adolescence where "most students, whatever their religious or nonreligious background, ask such questions as the process of maturing."[18] Avoiding the universality of these questions, "is to compartmentalize not only the curriculum but also the life of the mind and the life of the human spirit."[19] This in turn, may lead to an impoverishment of schools and children, where meaning-making is cut off from the questions that have long nurtured its growth.[20]

School chaplains must take account of their peculiar context, along with the spiritual dissonance of adolescent faith, to support a model of chaplaincy which helps students raise questions of meaning and purpose as they navigate their way through uncharted territory. Chaplaincy programs should provide a constructive context for this spiritual exploration.

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[16] Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.

[17] Paul Tillich, "Theology of Education," an address given at St. Paul's School (Concord, NH), 1956.

[18] James Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 225.

[19] Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 226.

[20] Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 226.

Seminary or cathedral?

Despite the best of intentions, the majority of chaplaincy programs often resemble programs of spiritual formation not unlike the training found in most seminaries. This is not surprising, as Episcopal Schools were founded with the targeted mission of inculcating the values, traditions, and beliefs of the Church into the next generation. Similarly, those who took on roles as chaplains in these schools did so often fresh from seminary and with the intention of creating a program of spiritual formation closely aligned with their own seminary education. While this gravitational pull toward spiritual formation may have been an effective model in the schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the evolving diversity and religious landscape of Episcopal Schools in particular, and the secularization of society in the post-Christian era in general, call for a different model which is grounded in tradition, open to the manifestation and dynamic life of the Spirit in a heterogenous multi-faith community, and engages the spiritual exploration of adolescence in the twenty-first century. In considering this model, we should move from seminary to cathedral.

Canterbury Cathedral was first established by Augustine after his arrival in England in 597 CE. For over 1400 years, it has served as a space of prayer, the center of the Anglican Communion, and a place of pilgrimage welcoming visitors from around the world. Similarly, the forty-one other cathedrals of England became places of refuge and sanctuary. Through times of joy and pain, cathedrals reflected the life of communities. This often resulted in a process of enculturation through which the cathedral took on the characteristics of the community, often reflected through the artistry and creativity of the people, while also serving as vital places set apart for worship, offering a small taste of heaven on earth when the challenges of life (disease, poverty, injustice) became unpalatable. Today, cathedrals offer a similar space, connecting people into the arc of history and tradition. Modern cathedrals (most notably St. John the Divine in New York City and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco) continue to reflect the dynamic life of a more global community, inviting spiritual explorers from different traditions to cross the threshold even as they are firmly grounded in the rituals of Christian worship. The ministry of modern cathedrals often reflects Panikkar's christic vision, widening boundaries as houses of prayer for all people, integrating the art, life, and social justice concerns of communities to declare God's presence in new and exciting ways.

Considering this model, the school chaplain has the opportunity to serve as cathedral builder within the school context, reimagining the opportunities for engagement as missionary, witness, accompanying presence, and guide in the quest of adolescent spiritual exploration and meaning-making. While the school may have a functioning chapel, simple or grand, the process of cathedral building in chaplaincy does not rely on physical space, but rather on mindset and perspective. The cathedral model thus becomes a metaphor for this dynamic ministry. The characteristics of this model include:

- ***Reflecting communal life.*** School communities are blessed with diversity of perspective and talents which can be engaged within sacred space, truly realizing *leiturgia* as an act of public worship arising from, speaking to, and reflecting the life of the divine in community. Student artists, athletes, dancers, actors,

musicians, and poets can bring their talents into the liturgical space so that the community might see themselves reflected in the ongoing unveiling of the Spirit in community. In the same way, the work of chaplaincy might inform an understanding of communal life outside the walls of the chapel where academic and athletic endeavors might be seen as an expression of devotion, integrating prayerful practice, mindfulness, and transcendence to something greater than the individual and often realized in the synergy of teamwork.

- ***Inspiring beauty.*** Just as student and adult artists within the school community might be involved within the life of the sacred space, so too can chaplaincies make use of artists and installations from outside the school. These are opportunities to speak to issues of social concern and social justice. Some programs might include art exhibitions of sections of the AIDS quilt, the Wounded Warrior Combat Paper project, or partnerships with the Episcopal Church and the Visual Arts (ECVA).
- ***Reimagining tradition.*** One colleague described the work of chaplaincy as developing the spiritual marinade in which students could soak up the tradition. The cultural context of twenty-first century schools is unique and complex, often requiring that the marinade adapt so that students can chew on faith in ways that might be more appetizing and satisfy their own hunger. Rather than imposing the *Book of Common Prayer* on a heterogenous community that might not be familiar with its language, chaplains can embrace creative liturgies which incorporate new elements of worship layered onto the backbone of traditional practice. Reimagining a traditional evensong and connecting with the theme of environmental justice and stewardship around the feast of Julian of Norwich, or creating an evensong connected with the spiritual themes of All Hallow's Eve and the confrontation of fear, are examples of reimagined liturgies. Creative liturgical services like these allow adolescents to encounter the divine in unexpected ways which invite deeper spiritual exploration, engaging the spiritual dissonance that leads to deeper questions of meaning and purpose and opens the way for ongoing faith development.
- ***Broadening perspective.*** Just as many cathedrals have embraced their position as "houses of prayer for all people," so too can school chaplaincy invite perspectives from across the religious landscape to engage in the deeper questions, offering many paths up the mountain and diverse perspectives on Truth. Seen from Panikkar's Trinitarian Pluralism and the emphasis on Christianness, this work is engaged from the christic vision of the chaplain grounded in an incarnational Christology and open to the unifying power of the Spirit that "blows where it wills" (John 3:8, *NRSV*). This view underscores a mandate for engagement with the world's wisdom traditions. Chaplaincy programs might include a vestry or chapel council composed of students and faculty from a broad diversity of faiths and perspectives, offering a genuine invitation to multifaith discourse.
- ***Seeing the "Other."*** Raising questions of shared spiritual exploration highlights the partnership and shared experience of humanity across religious traditions. Rowan Williams likens this to the perichoretic life of the Trinity:

> The best multi-faith chaplaincy teams mirror our common experience of the divine, in so far as the dialogue that takes place between team members mirrors the internal dynamism of the

Trinity—a dialogue that is active, not passive, relational, not defensive and is an ongoing conversation which has encounter with and intimate recognition of the Other at its heart.[21]

A similar understanding is reflected in the relational ontology revealed in the African Zulu word, *ubuntu*, translated as "I am because we are." This underscores our interconnectedness in the web of being and the dynamic interplay of human relationship woven against the backdrop of God's interplay with the world. From this perspective, the justice work of chaplaincy programs intentionally incorporates the institutional commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in the work of building up Dr. King's vision of *Beloved Community* and shared humanity.

- ***Lifting eyes upward.*** The architecture of cathedrals was often designed to draw the eyes upward to see the grandeur of God in the beauty of the world. Metaphorically, the chapel program should shift our gaze to contemplate higher things, deeper realities, new insights into the faith journey. The work of chaplaincy within the school sets the educational mission within a larger theological framework, encouraging the community to "so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal."[22] This journey out and up necessarily involves the deeply personal human journey down and in where we discover the foundation of the greatest cathedrals.

The most important cathedral

Incarnational theology brings with it a mandate for engagement and the responsibility to lean into the plurality of differences that comprise Church and world. Schools are places where this mandate is made real each day as chaplains nurture the spiritual life of religiously diverse communities. How can we creatively adapt traditional forms to meet the unique needs of the twenty-first century student: spiritually hungry, often deeply skeptical, "pervasively ambivalent," and continuously living in a world of shifting environmental, economic, and cultural ground? How do we maintain the integrity of tradition while also allowing for the creative generativity of the Spirit? How then shall we live into the plurality of difference in a way that helps us to serve what God is about in the world right now? How will we do this without potentially fragmenting our communities? How will we do this in ways that involve our communities in this process of spiritual exploration?

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks highlights the power of *eros* to initiate self-actualization in teacher and student in the very best ways which nurture and inspire the heart of education. Moving beyond the limited understanding of eros as referring only to the sexual, hooks emphasizes the characteristic of eros as "a moving force that propelled every life form from a state of mere potentiality to actuality."[23] In other words, eros is the

[21] Williams, "All Faiths and None," 74.

[22] Collect, Proper 12, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1978), 231.

[23] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 194.

power that helps us to become what we were meant to be. Thus, eros has a critical role in transformative pedagogy, "to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully."[24] Citing Thomas Merton, hooks writes,

> the original and authentic paradise idea, both in the monastery and in the university, implied not simply a celestial store of theoretical ideas . . . but the inner self of the student . . . the fruit of education . . . .was the activation of that utmost center.[25]

For hooks, the "inner self" of the student is "the ground of their being in relation to themselves, to higher powers, to community." This critical work requires *eros* manifest in the passion and presence of teachers who are themselves, self-actualized.

Beyond arches and stone, the flesh, blood, and spirit of the human person is the greatest cathedral: reflecting God's glory, the wonder of the Spirit, drawing eyes upward in praise and inward in contemplation, to consider the beauty of things known and unknown, hidden and revealed. For educators and chaplains, "activating that utmost center" is the most important work and enduring legacy. In a world emerging from pandemic and longing for elevation, inspiration, and transformation, it is time to build cathedrals again!

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[24] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 195.

[25] Merton, Thomas, quoted in hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 199.