

The Role of Chaplains in Indian Christian Colleges

by Maher Spurgeon

Introduction

A Chaplain is commonly defined as a clergyman attached to a private institution, chapel or regiment. In India Chaplains are commonly assigned to educational institutions, as well as to hospitals and the military.

In the early history of the Church of England in India, Chaplains were ship's chaplains. The Church of England in India began as a spiritual support for Englishmen doing business in India. The East India Company received its Charter from Queen Elizabeth I on December 31, 1600, and the Commission for the seven voyages states:

“For that religious government doth best bind men to perform their duties, it is principally to be cared for that prayers be said every morning and evening in every ship, and the whole company called thereunto with diligent eyes, that none be wanting; so that all may jointly with reverence and humanity pray unto Almighty God to bless and preserve them from all dangers in this long and tedious voyage.” Such a principle required the employment of chaplains, and the first chaplains were essentially ship's chaplains, engaged for the entire voyage, which normally lasted about three years, including periods ashore at Surat and Bantam. (M.E.Gibbs: 1972, p3)

Consequently Rev. Edward Terry, Rev. Patrick Copeland, Rev William Isaacson, Rev. I. Thomson and Rev R. Wynchester came to India as Ship Chaplains and Chaplains in defense forces. Even though early Chaplains were appointed in ships and defense forces, undoubtedly the Chaplains did a better job in the field of education. In 1715 a Charity school was founded in Madras along the same lines as those which were being established in contemporary England. In that school thirty impoverished children were given nutrition and education. Stevenson, who was the Chaplain at that time, was very active in this matter.

Several attempts had been made by the Christian missionaries in the beginning of the 19th Century to provide education for Indians, partly in their native dialects and partly in English. Chaplains played a major role in founding educational institutions in India. In 1835, two school Chaplains, Rev. George James Laurie and Rev. Matthew Bowie, founded a school called St. Andrew's School in Madras. Later this school became Madras Christian College.

Christian Colleges in India

There are many Christian colleges in India. They have contributed a lot to the building of the nation, to the socio economic development, to the development and growth of the Indian church, and on ecumenism in India. The contribution of Christian educational mission has been substantial on the building of the nation, on the development and the growth of the Indian church and on ecumenism in India. Chaplains in the Christian colleges play a major role in carrying out the mission of higher education in India. Before dealing with the role of chaplains in Indian Christian colleges we need to look into the context and at the situations in which Christian colleges in India exist and carry out their mission.

Situation and Context

Christian colleges have a vision of strengthening four different dimensions of Education. They are:

1. Learning to know: Higher Education Institutions are expected to provide facilities and opportunities for the students to learn and to improve their knowledge. Imparting sound learning is one of the objectives of Higher Education. Desire needs to be created in the young minds to learn.
2. Learning to do: Colleges and Universities need to provide skill based training in order that the students may be able to apply their knowledge in the life situations.
3. Learning to live together: Campuses should provide healthy atmosphere for the students to grow in love, unity and brotherhood in order that they may learn to accept each other, accommodate each other and live together when they go out of the campus.
4. Learning to be: Building of character is another important objective of Christian Higher Education. The young people need to be facilitated to make decisions so that when they go out of the campus they may impact the society.

With this vision, handed down to the colleges from the founding fathers, Christian colleges face the situations and concerns described in the paragraphs ahead.

Pluralistic Society

Indian Society is a pluralistic society where many religions exist together. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and tribal religions are important religions in India. These religions converge on certain basic elements of faith and practice, but every one of them is nonetheless a social and spiritual entity in itself and retains its peculiar features that cannot be accommodated into other faiths. India has many cultures, languages, traditions and religions, and has the distinction of being a kind of laboratory where experiments in pluralism have taken place for centuries. Modern Indian society provides the spectacular sight of various religious communities living side by side. According to 1991 Census, the breakdown of the various religious Communities is as follows (Malayala Monorama Year Book: 2000, P. 361)

Religion	Population in Percentage
Hindus	82.4 %
Muslims	11.7 %
Christians	2.3 %
Sikhs	2.0 %
Buddhists	0.8 %
Jains	0.4 %
Others	0.4 %

Students come from these different religious backgrounds to Christian colleges for their higher education. Inculcating Christian values in the young minds and introducing Christian values to those who come from other faiths in this pluralistic context is a great responsibility of the Chaplains in colleges.

Inter-Denominational Context

College communities are interdenominational. Students and staff come from different denominations in most of the Christian colleges in India.

Emergence of Extremist Groups

In the recent years many extremist religious groups have come into existence. They inculcate their ideas and dogmatic opinion in the minds of the young people. These result in religious conflicts and communal disharmony in the society. Christian colleges have a great responsibility to promote peace and religious harmony in the society.

Emergence of Professional Colleges

In the early days Christian colleges were the pioneering institutions in higher education. Therefore the best students would attend Christian colleges for higher studies. But now, due to the growth of several engineering and professional colleges, the quality of students coming to Christian colleges has declined. We get average and below average students. This is a great challenge and provides plenty of opportunities for Chaplains for their ministries.

Role of the Chaplains

A Chaplain's main responsibilities are to provide spiritual, religious, ethical, and pastoral support to students and staff. In general most of the Christian colleges and universities expect the following from the Chaplains;

1. To provide a focus for the Community's faith life
2. To provide opportunities for prayer and worship
3. To provide possibilities to celebrate milestones in life.
4. To provide individual spiritual guidance and direction
5. To provide a listening ear, especially during times of crisis
6. To provide study groups and Bible study.
7. To administer the Sacraments.

Colleges are communities like any other human community. Each college community responds to human needs in the personal, intellectual, social and spiritual dimensions of life. Chaplains, by including spiritual guidance in their work, make it possible for a college to attend to another vital area of human need in the help it offers to students and staff.

Most of the colleges in India recognize the diversity of faiths within the college community. The chaplaincy facilities are available for use by the members of all faiths in the college community.

In general the chaplaincy service aims to

- a) Assist students and staff in their personal growth and ability to cope effectively with their problems.
- b) Strengthen the sense of community within the institution, and
- c) Enrich the quality of life within the institution.

This will mean that the Chaplains are given with the following roles and responsibilities in the educational institutions.

1. To be pastors to members of the college community using all the resources available and especially the spiritual resources of the faith community, to attend to their needs and to assist in their personal development.
2. To encourage the development of a holistic approach to faith within the college context, in particular intellectual inquiry and debate.
3. To proclaim and teach the Gospel, and when appropriate, to interpret it for intellectual consideration.
4. To organize worship and to administer the various rites and sacraments for the benefit of the Christian community in the college campus.
5. To care for those who come with problems and needs.
6. To nurture the college community by promoting its spiritual growth, unity and out-reach; to encourage and organize Bible study, prayer and other small group activities.
7. To act as a catalyst by promoting all that contributes to the welfare of the college, and seeking by a timely word, encouragement, and inspiration to activate the latent resources of the college for the common good.
8. To act as agents of reconciliation, helping to promote understanding between groups which are antipathetic to each other.
9. To speak out regarding matters of injustice and work with those who seek to bring about change for the common good.

One of the important roles of Chaplains is to enhance the Christian presence on the campus. Enhancing Christian presence in the pluralistic context is a challenging task. Here I would like to quote Lindbeck:

...it can be argued in a variety of ways that Christian Churches are called upon to imitate their Lord by selfless service to neighbors quite apart from the question of whether this promotes Conversions. They also have scriptural authorization in such passages as Amos 9:7-8 for holding that nations other than Israel, and by extension, religions other than the biblical ones, are also peoples elected to carry out their own distinctive task within God's world. If so, not everything that pertains to the coming of the kingdom has been entrusted to that people of explicit witness which knows what and where Jerusalem is and marches (as believers hope) toward it, if only in fits and starts. It follows from these considerations that Christians may have a responsibility to help other movements and other religions make their own particular contributions, which may be quite distinct from the Christian one, to the preparation for the Consummation. The missionary task of Christians may be at times to encourage Marxists to become better Marxists, Jews and Muslims to become better Jews and Muslims... Obviously this cannot be done without the most intensive and arduous conversation and discussion” (Richard Wood: 2002, p. 2)

A Christian presence in Christian colleges in India also includes encouraging College communities to find ways to enter into inter-religious dialogue, to find effective ways to work with those of other faiths, and in working together, to raise the deeper questions of life in this world. Moreover, Indian society is a disadvantaged society. Colleges need to contribute to the socio-economic development of our people. In this context a Christian presence is one of Christian service.

In the speech delivered at the ACUCA Chaplains seminar in Thailand, Rev. Dr. Anri Morimoto spoke of the “3 P's of Chaplaincy,” describing the roles of the Chaplain as pastor, program Director, and professor in an age of specialization. (Anri Morimoto: 2004, pp101-112). Considering India's contexts and situations, where we come across religious and communal conflicts, an increasing number of broken families and the scourge of poverty, I would like to discuss the 3 “S”s of Chaplaincy.

SHEPHERD

The chaplain's role is the role of a shepherd. Whenever we think of the Biblical image of Shepherd, our minds naturally turn to Psalm 23. It begins with the reassuring words, “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want”

A nervous school child, with stage fright when reciting this psalm, blurted out, “The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I want.” Although perhaps it was an error, it provides spiritual

insight, and gives us a picture of intimacy, caring and security. The shepherd is the one who meets every situation with courage, who cares for the sheep and provides Guidance. Jesus Himself has elaborated the qualities of a good shepherd. From this perspective the Chaplains have the following roles and responsibilities.

The Shepherd knows his sheep.

The Shepherd knows each sheep personally (John 10:3, 14, 27). Chaplains should know staff and students in the college community, should understand their fears and frustrations, and be aware of their strengths and weakness. The Chaplain's personality and character should set a good example within the community

The Shepherd's presence and availability

The shepherd stays with his sheep and is there when they need him. The Chaplains should be available and approachable. They need to instill confidence in the staff and students of their college community. People and families who are having problems should feel free to come and share them with the Chaplain.

The Shepherd Guides and Directs

The staff or crook is the ever-present symbol of the shepherd's authority. Its primary purpose is to supervise, guide and direct the sheep. The Chaplains are also expected to guide and direct the people. They need to help the students to make good decisions in their lives. In the Old Testament, God is illustrated as a Shepherd:

- Gathering his flock in his arms (Isaiah 40:11)
- Bandaging those that are hurt (Ezekiel 34:16)
- Leading them to a place of refreshment (Psalm 23)

Those images convey tenderness, nurture and devotion, all qualities essential to the chaplain tending, as a good shepherd, to his college community.

Concern for Straying or Lost Sheep

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus spoke of the shepherd who left his ninety-nine sheep safe in the fold to go in search of the one that had strayed away (Luke 15:4-6; Matt 18:12-14). Chaplains should have concern for those who have gone astray. The problems among the students are increasing day by day. Many students even become addicted to certain destructive habits and pastimes. Chaplains play a major role in the rehabilitation of these.

STEWARD

Chaplains are stewards. That means they are trustworthy, responsible and accountable. Christ explained the qualities of a steward through Parables.

A Steward is a Man with Trust

In New Testament times, wealthy householders employed stewards to supervise their staff and to be in charge of household affairs. Since the steward had earned the respect and trust of his overlord, his position was one of great privilege.

Stewardship implies trust and those “who have been given trust must prove faithful”

(I Cor: 4:2). Chaplains need to be trustworthy people. Chaplaincy is a great privilege given with great trust.

A Steward is given Responsibility

The Steward is put in charge because his master has a responsibility to fulfill until the master returns. He accepts his responsibility not part-time or as a hobby, but as a fundamental duty. Stewardship implies giving clear instruction on what to do and what results are expected.

Steward – Chaplains must take the time to think of ways and means to develop and fully utilize the God-given potentialities of the people in order to foster growth towards his kingdom. Chaplains have a great responsibility in the promotion of religious harmony by organizing inter-religious dialogue.

A Steward is Accountable

Chaplains are given much in terms of power, influence and resources. Jesus’ use of the stewardship image clearly emphasizes that the more a person is given, the more is expected of him. . Chaplaincy is a gift from God for the service of his people and in the building of the mystical Body of Christ. It is important to understand that accountability gives us a sense of Self-worth, self-respect and also a sense of security. Chaplains are accountable to God for the privilege they have received from him and also accountable to their community. The qualities of a Steward also include honesty, integrity and transparency.

SERVANT

The Servant motif of having a Servant’s attitude and a Servant’s heart is given great prominence in the New Testament. When we talk of Chaplains as servants we speak of their roles of service, support and empowerment.

An important characteristic of Servant hood is setting an example. There is no doubt that the most efficient way of engendering desirable modes of behavior is by setting an example. When the Apostle Paul desired to help the Corinthians achieve a better way of life, he said to them, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (I Cor 11:1)

Chaplains need to strive to serve the genuine needs of the members of the Community and to inspire and encourage them to serve others. Dr. Jerry C. Wofford states as follows:

Servant leaders do not try to pull along reluctant followers. Instead, they stimulate with their enthusiasm, they provoke thought by sharing and by listening to others and they empower others with confidence in what God will do through them. They take responsibility for supporting others who are working with them and for helping to get the recoveries that others need for their work. They constantly bring vision of their organization before others to assure that everyone is on tack. In all of this, servant – leaders see their role as helping others to excel in fulfilling God's purpose in their lives and ministries. This is not a role of power but of empowerment. Servant leaders come finally celebrate with those they lead." (Jerry C Wofford: 1999, P. 181).

As Servants, Chaplains must listen to others, and empathize with others. They must be committed to service, committed to the growth of the people and to building the community.

Conclusion

We live in a world of crisis. Everywhere we look there are problems. Students and staff alike are pressed with countless problems and difficulties. Ours is not only a world of crisis, but also a world of change; from changes in technology to changes in values. In this age of science and technology human values, fear of God and religious tenets have been receded and ignored. Materialism has taken the place of spiritualism. Evils such as hatred, selfishness, lust, and love for riches have crept the minds of young people. In today's world many youth have lost faith in God and confidence in themselves. Eventually they might fall a prey to drugs, drinks, vulgarity and the like. These young people ought to be guided spiritually and facilitated to grow in faith and love. This provides great opportunities for the chaplains to work among these young people and facilitate them in their spiritual growth and equip them to serve the society and make an impact when they go out of the campus.

All Christian colleges have a vision of molding young minds, equipping them for future challenges and helping to enable them to live successfully in this World. Chaplains have a great responsibility and play a crucial role in carrying out this mission. It is the responsibility

of Chaplains to make those in their community aware of modern trends within the religious field; and to introduce the values of the Gospels into the minds of students. Chaplains need to facilitate the spiritual growth of the members of their college community and to prepare and equip them for the road ahead. Chaplains are usually at the forefront of building community in the campuses. Building community is not the responsibility only of the chaplains, but chaplains bring an important perspective to this task and can be instrumental in building bridges to create a greater sense of unity on college campuses.

By tending to the spiritual needs of individuals and to the campus as a whole, a chaplain can be essential to establishing harmony and tolerance within the college community. Students who have grown accustomed to this harmony within the college community will come to expect the same level of harmony and tolerance outside of school. As a result, effective chaplaincy can contribute to nation building, and to bringing religious harmony to our society.

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