

# MOULDED FOR MINISTRY

Exploring the Strengths and Needs of Catholic Prison Chaplaincy  
in England and Wales

## A REPORT

WITH INSIGHT FROM OVER  
SEVENTY CATHOLIC PRISON  
CHAPLAINS

CAMINO  
HOUSE

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & BACKGROUND

This project began in 2017 in preparation for the annual conference of Catholic Prison Chaplains, at the instigation of Mgr Roger Reader, Catholic Bishops' Prisons Adviser from 2013-2017. Fr Paul Douthwaite succeeded Mgr Reader and has guided the completion of this report.

Design and facilitation of the process with prison chaplains, and the collation of this report, was undertaken by Danny Curtin ([www.dannycurtin.co.uk](http://www.dannycurtin.co.uk)). Danny Curtin is a partner in Camino House, a collective partnership between charity leaders specialising in faith and not-for-profit sectors ([www.caminohouse.com](http://www.caminohouse.com)).

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Recommended reading alongside this report:

- *The Right Road* (CBCEW, 2016)
- *Belief and Belonging* (Lemos and Crane, 2016)
- *The Role and Contribution of a Multi-Faith Prison Chaplaincy to the Contemporary Prison Service* (CCCS, 2011)

# FOREWORD

Fr Paul Douthwaite

*Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, National Chaplain for Prisons*

In whatever walk of life we are called to, appropriate preparation and attaining the relevant skills are necessary if a person is to be effective. Jesus equipped his first disciples and, following his example, the Church has been fastidious over the last two millennia in preparing their successors for ministry.

In its dialogue with all involved in criminal justice, the Catholic Bishops' Conference has been dynamic in promoting the work of reform as a collective responsibility. In their document, *The Right Road* (2016), Catholic Prison Chaplaincy was identified as a central element in this reform.

In furthering the commitment of the Bishops to providing chaplains for prison ministry, this audit was commissioned to identify the most appropriate elements of formation necessary for effective ministry within the prison context. I am confident that this report will be the basis on which an appropriate course of formation can be developed, not only for prison chaplains but also for chaplains who are to engage in other areas of specialised ministry.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON METHODOLOGY:

- We began by facilitating a half-day session at the annual prison chaplains' conference, attended by over 70 chaplains. This workshop was designed to invite participants to reflect on:
  - the nature and function of chaplaincy
  - what they bring to their ministry (experience, strengths and skills)
  - what is worth celebrating
  - what training needs exist
- Reflection and analysis was then carried out on the qualitative data gathered from the conference
- Further focused interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, and conclusions were drawn up
- The findings and recommendations were then collated into this report.

# INTRODUCTION

The role of the chaplain, in any context, is to embody the visible and tangible presence of a faith community, bringing compassion and pastoral care to those they minister to. In a prison, although a chaplain will also minister to staff and families, the heart of his or her ministry is the spiritual care for prisoners. In over one hundred and twenty prisons, over two hundred Roman Catholic priests, deacons and lay chaplains bring an attentiveness to the needs of over 15,000 Roman Catholic prisoners. Their role within a prison is likely not to be fulfilled by anyone else.

“When two people come together, a chaplain and a prisoner, and there is that deep sharing of what is hurting the most – self-disclosure from the prisoner and loving attention of the chaplain – that facilitates healing. God is in the moment – in that intimacy that we are allowing to happen.” Lay Chaplain

Over the last two years two documents have been published which affirm the importance of Prison Chaplaincy. *The Right Road* (CBCEW, 2016) reaffirms the commitment bishops of England and Wales: “We are ready to work alongside and support you in transforming prisons from places of despair to places of redemption”. The research report *Belief and Belonging* (Lumos and Crane, 2016), highlights the unique nature of Catholic chaplaincy:

“Catholic chaplains are overwhelmingly trusted as people who can support Catholic prisoners’ attitudes to, and experience of, religious belief and practice. They are also widely seen as independent support mechanisms who are connected to the prison regime but are not seen by prisoners as a part of the punitive ‘system’... Formal and informal encounters with the Catholic chaplaincy creates a valued space and set of encounters distinct from the specifics of a prisoner’s offence, sentence plan or participation in specific mandatory interventions, and separate also from the day-to-day prison regime, authorities and hierarchies.”

Whereas *The Right Road* demonstrates commitment of the Catholic Bishops to Prison Chaplaincy and *Belief and Belonging* explores the value of chaplaincy from the prisoners’ perspective, this report explores chaplaincy from the perspective of the chaplain. We designed a simple process to hear the insights of Catholic chaplains with two main aims in mind:

## **Identifying and celebrating the value of chaplaincy:**

Chaplains undoubtedly consider that their work has value, with a distinct place within the prison system. We wanted to examine this value from a Catholic perspective, and indeed offer it as something to be celebrated. Research commissioned by the National Offender Management Service highlights the need to celebrate Chaplaincy in the prison service:

“We recommend that both locally and nationally opportunities are found to celebrate the contribution of chaplaincy to establishments and wider aims within the Ministry of Justice.” *The Role and Contribution of a Multi-Faith Prison Chaplaincy to the Contemporary Prison Service* (CCCS, 2011.)

## **Identifying opportunities to strengthen and support:**

There is a need to equip people offering themselves as chaplains. The majority of full time chaplains are deacons, religious sisters and brothers and lay people. In most cases the prison is served by either one or a network of priests who regularly visit to offer the sacraments. Training and support is necessary to ensure that chaplains are equipped for their role. In addition, with the increasing number of lay chaplains, training can help provide opportunities for development and career progression. Hence part of this work is looking forward to what makes this role more professional and attractive for lay people, those from Religious Life and ordained chaplains.

# FROM THE CHAPLAINS' VIEWPOINT

HOPEFUL AND UNIQUE

## HOPEFUL & OPTIMISTIC

Catholic chaplains have an optimistic view of the prisoners they serve. They see beyond the crime of the prisoner and identify that many are victims of previous 'abuse' and being 'let down', and they are now 'scared', 'disempowered', 'lost' and often suffering from 'poor self-esteem'. The chaplains see beyond the 'broken' lives of prisoners, viewing them as people – 'brothers', 'sisters', 'parents', 'children' who:

- face challenges in education, addiction, mental health
- can be compassionate, hopeful and creative
- are full of potential, who are valued and who are ready to change.

It is significant that, despite the challenges of prison life, the chaplains rarely displayed a negative view about the prison population. Only 5.7% of responses included mention that prisoners can sometimes be manipulative, violent or aggressive.

## A UNIQUE ROLE

Whilst also referring to their statutory duties, chaplains describe the heart of their role as including:

- listening, nurturing, encouraging
- offering pastoral assistance, providing bereavement support
- leading prayer and worship, nurturing faith, administering the sacraments

*"For some men, they have never had in their entire lives someone who is prepared to sit and spend time and explore things with them. If you have never had it, always led a rough life, been discounted, parents not interested, teachers not interested, and you end up in a life of crime, you end up in that cycle. For someone to listen, to be interested, to ask about life, leads on to much bigger things. It gives them some hope, because up until that point in time they may have thought that no one cares, but here someone is engaging, is genuinely interested in what they have to say and wants to try and help them in some way. It generates hope for the future. Here is someone who cares." Deacon Chaplain*

**"I JUST FEEL THAT I AM WHERE GOD WANTS ME TO BE AT THIS MOMENT. THERE IS NOTHING I'D RATHER BE DOING. TO WALK WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE HURTING, WHO ARE STRUGGLING, TO ENCOURAGE THEM IN THEIR FAITH – I AM SO PRIVILEGED. AMAZING THINGS CAN HAPPEN IN PRISON."**

LAY CHAPLAIN

As a significant side note, some felt that they were not appreciated or understood internally within the prison. This meant that some other aspects of chaplains' duties, particularly the administration tasks, were prioritised by 'the system' over the 'real work'.

*"We need people to support us outside and inside. It would be nice if the prison could support us a bit more. We get side-lined quite a lot."*

Lay Chaplain

*"Prison management needs to assess whether it is in fact a false economy to remove admin support from chaplaincy departments – ending up with chaplains working as highly paid admin assistants, rather than doing their actual job."*

Priest Chaplain

# EXPERIENCE & STRENGTHS

## WHAT CHAPLAINS BRING

DURING THE PROCESS, CHAPLAINS WERE INVITED TO REFLECT UPON THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE AND THE STRENGTHS THEY BRING TO CHAPLAINCY. THEY OFFERED A MIXED RESPONSE.

There were many who had worked in previous 'professional' roles prior to becoming prison chaplains. The highest ranking of these roles were:

- Teaching
- Health and Social Care
- Priest/Deacon/Religious
- Therapist/Counsellor/Mental Health worker
- Other chaplaincy (hospital/military/youth)
- Religious Life (Sister/Nun)
- Support worker

"The fact that we have done something else before is of note. [Prison chaplaincy] seems to be something that people fall into at a later point in their life. I know a Catholic chaplain who was a prison officer, one who was in industry with his own business, and a head teacher. Teaching is common. We've all done something else, before becoming what we are. That's very useful - I would have struggled doing what I do now, if I hadn't done what I had done."  
Deacon Chaplain

However, when asked about their previous 'professional experience', out of 156 individual comments less than two-thirds were true descriptions of their previous careers or qualifications. The other comments identified 'life experience', which the chaplains saw as being relevant to their profession - e.g. 'spouse', 'hope', 'being loving', 'having suffered in some way'. In itself, this might be an indicator of how chaplains value what they bring to their work, placing a value on what is harder to quantify and attest to in qualifications and CVs.

This was also the case when it came to talking about inner strengths. When asked to describe their strengths, chaplains centred on faith and 'soft' skills. The most common ideas expressed when they described their 'strengths' were:

- Being faithful
- Having empathy
- Being good at listening
- Being loving
- Being caring and compassionate

The full list of responses, grouped into themes, are shown here:

Theme	Strength	Mentions	
Faith	Faithful	15	
	Firm Gospel values	6	
	Missionary	1	
Pastoral	Prayer	3	
	Empathy	10	
	Listening	10	
	Being loving	8	
	Compassionate	7	
	Caring	5	
	Walking alongside	2	
Self	Sense of humour	7	
	Steadfast/Tenacious	6	
	Self-confident	4	
	Realistic	1	
	Calm	5	
	Enthusiastic	4	
	Conscientious	3	
	Good ideas	2	
	Inclusion	Welcoming	3
		Open	3
Non-judgemental		2	
Trust		3	
Availability		1	
Vulnerable		1	
Having boundaries		2	
Role		Leader	3
		Team player	2
		Multi-tasking	3
	Orderly	1	
Other	Being family people	4	
	Life experience	2	
	Sense of justice	2	

Although there were many commonalities (none of the following are necessarily exclusive), chaplains identified a distinction of emphasis in what lay people, those in religious life, deacons and priests bring to chaplaincy:

- Lay – Life experience, parenting skills and ability to empathise with family situations.
- Deacon - Brings a distinction in Liturgy and bridging Church and family life.
- Religious Life - Not as restrained in time as others. Support in their role from their own religious community.
- Priests – Celebration of the Sacraments, working well with other chaplains.

# SKILLS TO EXCEL IN CHAPLAINCY

The value of chaplaincy, including Catholic chaplaincy, in making a difference to the lives of prisoners is well documented:

“A diverse cross-section of the prison population of various faiths, and indeed of no faith, values the presence and contribution of prison chaplaincy to the modern English and Welsh penal system.

The role of the prison chaplain is not confined to the provision of religious services; extending to a central role in the provision of support services for prisoners, and in some cases staff, especially for those in crisis.”

The Role and Contribution of a Multi-Faith Prison Chaplaincy to the Contemporary Prison Service (CCCS, 2011)

“A large majority [of prisoners - 86 per cent] felt that the chaplains helped them to learn more or to practise their faith. The most commonly expressed form of this assistance was through talking about and teaching matters of faith and belief... Prisoners also reported that chaplains played an important role in pastoral support. Prisoners valued chaplains being available to talk things through or just listen as well as practical and personal support from chaplains. Help with maintaining contact with families was also mentioned by prisoners as a valued pastoral support. Practical and emotional support in times of family bereavement was also valued.”

Belief and Belonging, (Lemos and Crane, 2016)

That prisoners value the religious and pastoral work of chaplains is unsurprising. This appreciation of chaplaincy is complemented by our exploration of chaplains own understanding of what they bring to their ministry. Chaplains identified the skills they felt supported their role. Their top mentioned responses in relation to ‘skills’ were: **Listening, Prisoner Interaction and 1:1 work, Prayer, Administering Sacraments, Knowledge and love of God, Liturgy/Mass, Bereavement counselling**

## ‘Soft skills’

The focus from the chaplains on what can sometimes be described as ‘soft skills’ reflects their understanding of the role:

“We have a unique role. You can talk to people in a gentle way and try and make them have different views – to change their ways of thinking. You’re not going to tell them they are wrong or right. You are going to try and alter their way of life by being gentle. All they are told in here is ‘oh you are not good enough’. But they can be told by us that they are important in their own unique way. Even though they have done wrong they can go out and start a new life.” Lay Chaplain

Listening is the most mentioned skill necessary for chaplains.

“There is an art to listening. There are good listeners and bad listeners. People

may be impatient, looking at their watch and needing to go to the next thing. But the prisoner may be about to divulge their biggest secret. That might be a focus – it’s not easy to listen well. It’s absolutely critical in terms of what chaplains do. For some it may come easy, it may be natural. Others may need help, guidance to hone the skill.” Deacon Chaplain

## Pastoral Focus

A focus on pastoral skills amongst chaplains’ responses also echoes their experience of dealing with vulnerable people:

“When we are interacting and connecting with prisoners – we are with people, often very damaged, who have lots of trust issues. They may have been abused in the past and been in care. They are to be handled very delicately. To be able to connect with them we have to be approachable, warm, non-confrontational.

The essence of what we do is to build relationships with people. To enable this to happen it helps to be warm, kind, considerate, and a good listener. Often they have not had the opportunity to share their story with someone.” Lay Chaplain

So at the core of what is needed for chaplaincy are these softer pastoral skills:

“Chaplains need to have a compassion for those they are looking after, as well as a realistic view of the complex needs and the ability to analyse them.” Priest

“Mostly [prisoners] see us as people that can be trusted, that they can open up to. We need to provide a safe environment for them to be able to share what’s hurting most. It has to be genuine - people pick up when you are not being authentic. In a sense, you can’t teach this to someone.” Lay Chaplain

Others also highlighted the need for more tangible, quantifiable knowledge and skills, including a grounding in knowledge of the Catholic Faith.

“They need some sort of basic faith qualification - as far as the Church is concerned this is the CCRS [Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies], which I think is perfectly adequate.” Lay Chaplain

“I want to have candidates [for vacancies] with a confidence in theology with a pastoral or theological background” Mgr Roger Reader, Catholic Bishops’ Prisons Adviser 2013-2017

# TRAINING AREAS

## SUPPORTING CHAPLAINS

CHAPLAINS WERE INVITED TO REFLECT UPON THEIR CURRENT SKILL LEVELS COMPARED TO THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SKILLS NEEDED TO FULFIL THEIR ROLE. THE PROCESS HIGHLIGHTED AREAS FOR TRAINING

Chaplains illustrated that there is a mix of skills and experience required for working within prison ministry. It is evident that pastoral 'soft' skills are valued highly. Some of these skills might be passively acquired but many can also be actively taught and trained for (e.g. Liturgy and listening skills).

Some chaplains identify general areas where they are low in confidence, but where they would make a high impact:

- Time management
- Budgeting
- IT
- Using systems
- Record keeping/Admin
- Leadership skills
- Management skills

Some chaplains indicated that training would be appreciated in:

- Bereavement counselling
- Advocacy
- Mental Health knowledge
- Public speaking
- Dealing with conflict (including with colleagues)
- One-to-one work

In addition there are some pastoral skills and specialised areas where some chaplains lack a deeper confidence – all areas which can be supported through training:

- Knowledge of scripture and theology
- Spiritual Discernment

Some things can be done collaboratively – and are already on offer. For example, when reflecting on what would be useful for a person new to the role to be equipped with, one chaplain said:

*“It would be helpful if people had counselling experience before becoming a chaplain, but it's not essential. You can learn it as you go along. There is the 'Pastoral Care and Counselling Skills' from Chaplaincy HQ. Even if you don't come with that qualification you can do it. It's well worth it.” Lay Chaplain*

Undoubtedly other training needs could be developed collaboratively with other faith chaplaincies and with Chaplaincy HQ. However, the distinctive nature of some aspects of Catholic prison chaplaincy suggest opportunities for training before in a Catholic setting could be beneficial. Specific training areas might include:

- Forming others in faith – scripture and theology
- Working one-to-one and in groups in a Catholic context
- Finding sources of support in your ministry
- Being a Catholic chaplain alongside others – avoiding and managing conflict
- Catholic tools for spiritual discernment and pastoral practice

These areas could be effectively integrated into a training course prior to people starting their role in prison. It is also likely that these training needs are shared with other Catholic chaplaincy settings e.g. hospital, the military, and schools. A combined Catholic chaplaincy course could be developed to prepare people for working as a Catholic chaplain in various contexts. Specific, shorter courses, might be provided as on-going training opportunities.

*“The more training you can do the better”  
Lay Chaplain*

# KEY MESSAGES

## IN SUMMARY

- Chaplains remain positive about their role in often very challenging situations. They know that their work makes a difference.
- Many chaplains bring a wealth of life experience, skills and knowledge to their role. Lay people, ordained chaplains, those in Religious Life bring different experiences and strengths to their ministry.
- Possessing pastoral skills – e.g. 'listening', 'compassion', 'attentiveness' – are essential to a chaplain feeling confident in fulfilling their role.
- 'Harder' professional skills support the chaplain.
- Chaplains seek more support from within and outside the prison system.

## RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

### FOR CHAPLAINS

- Some Chaplains have shared that they have a high confidence in their skills where others feel they lack expertise. How can you develop means to share your areas of strength to support others?
- As well as pastoral skills, the role of the chaplain is supported by specific skills, such as administration and management. How can you identify training needs in these areas and seek out opportunities for support?

### FOR PRISON GOVERNORS AND LEADERS IN PRISON

- Chaplains have indicated that their pastoral work does not always feel appreciated and that they can be 'side-lined' in the system. What opportunities can you create to counteract this?
- Which 'hard' professional skills (e.g. management skills) should chaplains value and how do we achieve this?

### FOR BISHOPS AND LEADERS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

- How can you show prison chaplains that their pastoral work is appreciated?
- How can you share the story amongst Catholic people that prison chaplaincy is a rich and diverse workforce providing a positive, rewarding ministry?

### FOR TRAINING PROVIDERS

- Training needs are likely to be shared across Catholic chaplaincy settings e.g. hospital, military, school chaplains. A combined Catholic chaplaincy course could be developed to meet the needs of those working as (or preparing to work as) a Catholic chaplain.
- As some chaplains report high confidence in areas where others lack skills, consider developing opportunities for training through group sharing and reflective practice.

Whilst this report has focussed mainly on chaplains' skills and training instead of their spirituality and motivations, it is significant to note the response of 70+ chaplains to their final question:

**“What does a Catholic prison chaplain need on day one in the role?”**

Almost all the responses fitted into the following four themed groups:

**Christ being at the centre / Being “Christlike”**

**Seeing Christ / ‘the holy’ in others**

**Conveying faith/Catholic Faith**

**Being open to God/Jesus**

It would appear therefore that the advice from Catholic prison chaplains across England and Wales would be to recruit and form chaplains with Christ at the centre of their lives – open to seeing God in others.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

**"ONCE THEY LEARN TO OPEN UP AND TO SHARE WHAT HURTS THE MOST AND TO KNOW THAT THAT IS OK – AND THAT THEY ARE STILL LOVED AND STILL A PERSON OF DIGNITY AFTER WHAT THEY HAVE DONE – I WOULD THEN TRY AND ENCOURAGE THEM TO DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, LIKE THEY ARE DEVELOPING WITH ME. 'JUST HAVE A CONVERSATION - JUST BE YOURSELF'. BEING YOURSELF. THE PERSON THAT IS BEING THEMSELVES WITH ME, CAN BE THEMSELVES WITH GOD AS WELL."**

**LAY CHAPLAIN**

