

So, You're Thinking About Becoming a School Chaplain?

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Introduction

The usual pathway to becoming a school chaplain, is via a chaplaincy placement organisation. There are a number of placement groups around the country. Each State tends to have one major provider, in that they provide Chaplains to the majority of schools that choose to have a Chaplain. These include: Scripture Union in Queensland with over 700 schools; ACCESS Ministries in Victoria with over 300; Schools Ministry Group, in South Australia, with over 300 etc.

The main provider in your State is often the best group to seek to become a school chaplain through. There are a lot of good reasons for that but one of the main practical reasons is simply that they will have more opportunities for employment. If you link in with a smaller group that has 20 schools, job opportunities will be few and far between. Of course, you can become known to, and accredited with, more than one such group. That widens your options even more.

There are numerous providers, big and small. They are not all the same, and they don't all have the same standards, expectations, employee benefits, and vision for chaplaincy. But there are some similarities and some common ground.

What needs to happen for you to become a chaplain.

When I get a phone call or an email from someone asking about "How do I become a school chaplain?" the conversation will inevitably cover the following.

The kind of Christian you see yourself as: Your vision and gifting; your reason for wanting to work in a school setting.

This is really very important. Are you someone who sees chaplaincy as a "clever way to get into a state school, to spread the gospel message"? Or do you see chaplaincy as a way "to serve and care for others whoever they are and whatever they believe"?

If you think chaplaincy is a secret undercover work, and you are craftily outsmarting "the world" and secretly pushing an evangelistic or proselytising agenda, then you are in the wrong business. For a number of reasons. (1) Chaplains in state schools are guests in those schools.

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It is not your church. It is not your home. It is a State school that requires us to follow the rules set. (2) You sign a code of conduct that says you will NOT do those kind of things. It is ethically abhorrent that someone might think they can sign something and then not keep their word. ("Thou shall not bear false witness" – remember.) To have such an immature and dishonest attitude is morally distorted and wrong: you are not mature enough to do the role if you come in with that mental framework.

School Chaplaincy is not a place for evangelism. It is a religious based profession and ministry, but it is not about converting people. It is about service. You need to be a Christian who is keen to serve. You need to be someone who sees the parable of the sheep and the goats as a significant teaching of Christ. Someone who believes that demonstrating love in action – in acts of service that care for others – is the best thing a Christian can do. This is really very critical to get. Service or love in action, is an end in itself. It does not have to lead to anything else. As Christians who believe that "God is love," we can rest well in the fact that if you do acts of love for others, then that glorifies God.

Of course there will be times when you talk to children, parents and teachers, about faith issues. If they raise such questions with you. If it is appropriate and is not forced onto anyone who does not want to talk about such things. According to the census data that gets collected every 5 years, over 60% of Australians say they are Christian, and about 8% say they adhere to other faiths. People will be open to talk about faith in their own time and in their own way, without anyone forcing such conversations to take place. Especially in times of grief and loss, stress and trauma. But school chaplains must not "manipulate" conversations (especially with children, but also with everyone they interact with) to bring them around to talking about faith and religion. It is not the core business of the school chaplain. It is a secondary thing that may happen in appropriate contexts, but it is not the key reason you become a chaplain. You become a chaplain to serve the school community.

Your educational background

Assuming you survive the first point above, I would then be asking you about your educational qualifications. The minimum standard the Government asks for is a Certificate IV in a relevant area such as Youth Work or Social Work or Pastoral Care. The Certificate IV has to have two core units of work in it (one is an introduction to mental health issues, and the second is on "client referral") – but that is enough. And some chaplaincy placement organisations are happy to work with that minimum standard.

Others want more. Some of the larger school chaplaincy placement groups want chaplains to have at least a Bachelors Degree or higher in a relevant field of study. Those relevant fields are: Education, Counselling, Psychology, Social Work, Pastoral Care, or Ministry/Theology. The two minimum Certificate IV subjects must be done as well, unless they are covered already

in the Bachelors work. Most of the Bachelors in the areas just listed have something very similar to those two key subjects.

The organisations that require the higher standards for their chaplains, want them to be just as professionally qualified as the teachers they will be mixing with daily. Good intentions without skills and training are not enough. That is why some groups insist that their Chaplains have a Bachelors or higher: to be competent, trained, skilled up, and professional (as well as good intentioned!).

Your life and work experiences

You do not have to have been a chaplain in a hospital or prison or football club first, to be a school chaplain. People come to school chaplaincy with a wide range of work backgrounds that offer value and skills and experiences that overlap and inform their work as chaplains. Your life experiences and your work experiences will be assessed and evaluated: how do they help prepare you for chaplaincy?

There are school chaplains in their early 20's. More are in their 30's or 40's and there are those in their 50's and 60's as well. The best fit for any school is hard to predict. The school leadership team will know what they are looking for. Sometimes it might be a "grandparent" figure for children to confide in and talk to. Other times it might be a young person who can get out on the playground and play footy with the kids. Depending on what the school wants and needs, a person who is 24 or 44 or 64 years old could be chosen from those interviewed.

Other things that have to fall into place

A current Police Check, and a current "Working With Children (Employer) Check" (WWCC)

Chaplains must have a current police check. It cannot be embedded in your VIT if you are a teacher. It has to be a document that you own personally, from the Police, that says you have passed the police check. The chaplaincy placement agency needs to know that you have a current police check and it has to be renewed every 2 years.

All workers need to have a current WWCC (Employer one) as well. It costs originally to get the card, but it does not cost to update it with new employers. The WWCC lasts 5 years before it has to be renewed.

Why both the police check and the WWCC? Because they cover different things. If you only had the police check, your placement agency would only hear about it if you were ever convicted of an offense, the next time you renewed your police check. But if you also have the WWCC, then the employers nominated also hear about it if you are ever charged with an offence. That is actually more important. They want to know if a charge is laid against one of their workers, so that they can stand them down until the charge is dealt with. If they only rely

on the police check, and they only find out when a renewal occurs, that a conviction has occurred, that could leave a perpetrator in a school for months or longer. Better to err on the side of “maximum care for the child” and stand someone down on leave without pay, until a charge is finalised – better that, than to leave someone working with children when they might be found to be someone who harms children.

School chaplains are a diverse lot.

There are not just Christian chaplains. There are some schools that find a Jewish chaplain or a Muslim chaplain for the predominant group in their school. But most Australian state school chaplains are Christian chaplains. And they come from all the different Christian traditions. There are Catholic and Apostolic, Baptist and Anglican, Uniting and Pentecostal, and everything in-between. To work with such a range of fellow workers generally means that chaplains are tolerant and gracious. If they are not so, they have “slipped through the net” and they are in the wrong profession.

Some chaplains will be theological liberals, and others will be theological conservatives. Some will support gay marriage and others won't. Some will vote Liberal, others Labor, others Green and others Family First. But they should be professionals who keep their personal views to themselves. They should always treat all people with equality, dignity, and respect. They must be inclusive, non-judgmental and tolerant. No matter what the student (or parent or teachers') world view, and no matter what their lifestyle choices are.

But should Chaplains even be in state schools? What about the separation of church and state?

There has been and will continue to be discussion and debate about the place of chaplains in schools. There are bigger philosophical and theological issues that could be explored in detail. There are important questions that are being asked. Are Christians meant to rely on government support for sustaining their work? Are Christians even meant to collaborate with “the state”? Didn't Satan offer Jesus the kingdoms of the world if he would only worship him? Are we aligning ourselves with Satan's kingdom to work with governments, accept government money, and comply with government codes of conduct? Or perhaps we should stay out of state schools and anything to do with government funding, because by aligning with the powers that be, we are actually siding with oppressors and with those who keep the poor, poor and downtrodden? Then again, maybe the secularists are right and we should keep religion completely out of secular education? (But what about multiculturalism? How does that fit?)

Even if we could answer those and all the other big ticket questions in the background, perhaps it is appropriate to at least say the following. At the end of the day, “the proof is in the pudding”. School chaplaincy has been extraordinarily successful. Over 95% of the Principals across

Australia who have chaplains are very happy with their work and their contribution to school life.

When you think about it, chaplains are appreciated and accepted in many other institutions of the community: the army, the police force, football clubs, hospitals, prisons, and more. We accept that the chaplain offers a service that complements and works to reinforce the great work of other caring industries in the community (counsellors, psychologists, welfare workers, mental health workers etc.). We know that people find comfort and strength with the support of chaplains: chaplains provide a part of the whole story, towards holistic wellbeing for people who want their help.

If chaplains are good for adults in hospitals and the police force and the army and the local sports clubs, then why would we say they are not helpful for children (with parent permission). We don't limit children from other health professionals, or welfare workers. We don't restrict kids from seeing specialists who can help them in other areas. Why would we say: "Oh, we know they are good for adults but not for kids"? Is our philosophy of the separation of church and state so entrenched that we can't see the actual value and positive outcomes from allowing children to see chaplains?

Perhaps we accept chaplains for adults, but think that school chaplains will manipulate and trick our children. This assumes that school chaplains are indeed manipulative and deceitful. It assumes that the screening processes and the ongoing reviews miss all that. It also strangely assumes that adults can't be manipulated or tricked by deceitful people, and we know that happens all the time.

If we love our kids, then we would want the best for them. If some parents really think chaplains are evil and bad and a shocking influence on their kids, and if that is coming out of their love and care for their children, then so be it. Their children should never see a chaplain. But those parents should not try to do the "fundamentalist" thing of "making everyone else be just like them". Those parents should offer the same freedom of choice to other parents and if those other parents want their kids to have access to chaplains, then so be it.

And chaplaincy in state schools in Australia is not compulsory. And for primary aged children, there has to be parent permission for a child to see one. It is entirely optional for a school to even have a chaplain. No one is making any school have them. And for schools that have them, no one is made to see a chaplain. It is optional from start to finish.

Despite the big philosophical questions that still abound, at least we can say that much! It is entirely voluntary. No one is ever compelled to see a school chaplain.

Final comments and questions that bring us back to the original question: so... you want to be a school chaplain hey?

Let me end this by listing a few questions for you to think about. How would you react in these situations?

- If a Muslim child came to your office and asked you to help them get a room for prayer at lunch time, during the month of Ramadan.
- If a child simply turned up and wanted to talk about how they hate the fact that they had 'such and such' a problem ... and if they made no mention at all of faith or religion (a very common scenario I would add) – would you be happy to work with that child and not mention faith or religion at all?
- If a teenager came to your office looking stressed, and confided in you that they are gay and they just told their best friend and he recoiled and mocked him.
- If a parent came to you demanding they be told all that their 14 year old daughter told you – would you be able to balance confidentiality with sensitivity and care for the parent? Or would you possibly say too much and risk losing the trust of the children as the word got out that you break their confidence?
- If you are told something that requires mandatory reporting? How would you navigate that and still keep the respect and trust of the child?
- If a child of their own accord, asked you: "Why do you believe in God and Jesus? My parents don't. I think there is no God and it is as silly as Santa to believe in him.'

I hope those questions are hard to answer. There are right responses and wrong responses but naturally the way they panned out would depend on lots of interacting factors that have not been listed. Essentially though, we would expect you to:

- Help the Muslim child, advocate for them in their request with no strings attached.
- Serve and care for any child at any time, in assisting in their immediate problems and issues, without feeling any obligation to talk about religion with them.
- Assist a gay student without passing judgment on them and without communicating your own moral position on the issue; negotiate if the student wants you to talk to their friend; help them to identify what they want and ways they can get there.
- Maintain confidentiality while calming the parent and listening to their concerns. Reassure them that you will work with the child to help them communicate better with their parents. Let them know that you can't tell them what has been said, but assure them that you don't tell anyone else either (unless it is a mandatory reporting requirement).
- Explain to the child that you are legally obligated to report this, but that you will also be there with them during the process, and you will help them to face what they need to face.

- Give your reasons for why you believe, but be clear that they are your personal views and other people won't all agree. Honour their parents and their right to their views, in your response.

If you wanted to “convert the Muslim” or “tell the gay child they are sinners who need to be healed” or “look for clever ways to bring conversations around to religion” or “blab everything a child has told you to any adult who asks”, or “figured you knew best and would not make the mandatory report because it might make one of the parents upset”, or “took the opportunity to preach at the child and tell them their parents were wrong” ... then you are not ready for chaplaincy.

You need to be a mature Christian who sees service and love in action as the key features of Christian living. That is what schools are looking for in their school chaplain.