

Chaplaincy at Treloar's, a very special school.

I was born a teacher; it was the only career I ever considered. The subject was always Religion as I was fascinated by the accounts of how mankind meets with God and even in moments of doubt at university my studies helped keep my faith alive. There was, however, always an inner voice that challenged me and about ten years ago I began exploring a priestly vocation. As I embarked on my curacy I stopped formal teaching, believing that God was calling me to work in rural parishes serving Him and His people as a parish priest. I really enjoyed this time and I learnt many new skills especially in realizing the importance of working as church within the wider community. However, eighteen months into my curacy I was asked to consider the position of chaplain at Treloar School and College and, as I tentatively looked around this very specialised school for children and young people with severe physical and mental handicaps, my heart sang and I knew that God was calling me to this place and work.

Treloar's is a specialised school and college accommodating approximately 170 students from nursery age to 25 year old adults. Our students have multiple disabilities many of which are severe and complex. About 1 in 5 have life limiting conditions. Many of them require one-on-one, 24hr care, some are two-to-one. Almost all of our students use wheelchairs but many spend time in walking or standing frames or cycling on specially made cycles. About 50% are vocal whilst the others communicate with a variety of communication aids including Makaton sign language, communication books, eye gazing at a computer screen or Perspex board or operating a voice activator using a head or foot switch or maybe just being able to indicate a yes or no with a subtle movement. Communication as maybe you can sense, is the most challenging part of my job!

Treloar's, like any good school and college, encourages each child, each student to achieve their full potential, whatever that might be. Working with parents and local authorities and employing a whole regime of different therapies (physio, speech and communication, occupational, plus all the educational side of things as well) each child is surrounded by their personal multi-disciplinary team both supporting and encouraging. Sometimes expectations need to be pushed and sometimes expectations need to be managed.

What about my role? What does a priest and a chapel add to this community? What can I possibly offer? There has been an Anglican chaplain at Treloar's for many years. The role has changed from a full time residential post to mine today which covers just two days a week with a brief is to provide spiritual and pastoral support for the students, their families and the 600 staff - quite a sizeable parish! I care for people irrespective of their faith position and have found my background in world religions and years of teaching RS to sceptical teenagers invaluable.

We are lucky enough to have our own, small, consecrated chapel and again this is open to people of all faith and none. The chapel is decorated by beautiful stained glass windows, designed by a former student and reflecting this multi-faith provision and also remembering the tragic loss of our past haemophiliac students. It's a good space which all students pass on their way to the swimming pool. It is a place for prayer both in groups and alone, small services, meetings and some lessons. Over time I've come to see that the presence of a chaplain and a chapel as that which invites reflection, allows for pauses and the asking of difficult questions, encourages a search for meaning and provides a sanctuary from the busy-ness of life.

Beyond the usual round of assemblies, input into class activities, prayer meetings, some lessons and services, I would describe my ministry as that of a ministry of presence and happenings. As a former teacher I have always been used to having my day controlled by a timetable but now much of my work involves BEING. Being in and around College and School, being known, being available, keeping spiritual antennae working and trying to discern when to speak and when to keep silent. It's this that often leads to

conversations. Can I talk to you about Or will you talk to.... Those conversations can be really hard for example, from students things like 'Why has God made me disabled?' or 'Why has my boyfriend died?' or from staff, 'How do we explain to X that his Mum or grandma has died when he will have very little comprehension of what that means?' But don't, for one moment, think it is all glum. Treloar's is full of laughter. It is a positive place which in the midst of great challenges there is an effervescence of joy and achievement and a can do attitude. The things that you treasure are, comments such as, 'I never thought that I would see my child take part in a nativity play.' Or, 'my son was naughty today.' Or the literal understanding and accompanying enthusiasm of a group of students responding to a Bible story and then praying. And times when students realise that they can, can climb a climbing wall, can go sailing, can choose which breakfast cereal they want, can make their own food or can have a conversation or can say yes or no.

I see Treloar's as somewhere where you can sense the out-breaking of the Kingdom of God. The needs of our students are always held paramount (as attested in a recent OFSTED report in which our residential provision was assessed as excellent overall). The staff uphold justice, equality and dignity of the individual whilst encouraging and rejoicing in all sorts of achievements. I find it both humbling and joyous. Please pray for our students, their families and the amazing staff that keep the place going.