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Why non-faith schools are appointing chaplains

Increasing numbers of secular schools are adding chaplains to their ranks to provide pupils with pastoral support amid a mental health epidemic



A gardening club is one activity run by Dr Joshua Hunt, full-time lay chaplain at Felixstowe School

“Bringing boys to religion,” opined an article in the Church Times in 1944 about public school chaplains, “depends very largely on the personal relationship between the boys and the man authorised to teach them Christianity, and on the Christian influence that he can bring to bear on them.”

Gone are so many of these assumptions: the necessity of religion, that religion being Christian and the male, didactic chaplain ministering, in general, to the sons of the privileged.

In today’s secular, multi-faith landscape, chaplains are increasingly cropping up in secular state schools. Male or female, ordained or lay, mostly Christian, they are likely to offer forms of pastoral support rather than anything evangelistic. And they are in demand.



Chess club at
Felixstowe School

Odd perhaps, given that the number of children in church on Sundays is low. (In April, the Church of England reported that children's Sunday attendance had halved since 2003, from 154,000 to 70,000 in 2022, though figures published in May for children's weekly attendance showed a [modest bounceback](#) post-Covid.) Yet it is less odd, say those involved in supporting young people, when you consider the waves of cuts made to state-funded youth clubs and youth mental health provision, the long-term effects of the pandemic and pressures linked to social media.

"There is a growth in chaplaincy, and that's across all schools: Anglican, Catholic, and community [non-faith] schools and colleges," says the Rev Mike Haslam, chair of trustees for the Centre for Chaplaincy in Education and chaplaincy development adviser for the diocese of Bath and Wells. "In the Somerset council area ... we've had [chaplains] in each of the five CofE schools for decades but in the last seven years we've created chaplaincies in eight community secondary schools and I'm working with another two to create chaplaincies."

The Rev Charlie Kerr, chaplaincy adviser to the diocese of Oxford, who has helped to create eight community secondary school chaplaincies there since 2020, adds: "If there were funding for chaplains, I could easily find a dozen or so community secondaries that would take them."

What lies behind the growth? "We have told the story," says Haslam, "of the impact that chaplaincies can make within a school community. We've, in a sense, demystified it and 'de-religioned' it," particularly the perception that a chaplain will "bash everyone over the head with a Bible". He adds that, following the example of Jesus: "We come in to meet people where they are, rather than expecting them to come to us."

Demand is rising at a time when chaplains are becoming more familiar sights in places such as nightclubs, law courts, golf clubs and professional football clubs, as well as shopping centres, town centres and even the Hinckley Point nuclear power station. The number of chaplains in community schools has accelerated in the last seven years or so, says the Rev Garry Neave, the CofE's recently retired policy adviser for higher and further education. He compares [2014 research](#) for the CofE's Mission and Public Affairs Council, which recorded about 200 chaplains in church schools, with 2022 data collected by Birmingham Newman University, which counted more than 900 school chaplains. According to this data, in state secondaries and FE colleges that mentioned on their website that they had a chaplain, about 80 per cent of chaplains were in institutions that did not mention any religious affiliation.

Asked why young people would be open to chaplaincy, Neave lists stress factors such as the impact on households of the cost of living crisis, the isolation and anxiety of the Covid years and social media platforms offering a choice between “bullying and shaming that you can’t get away from” or “missing out on what your friends are doing”.

Neave notes that the CofE is reaching out to “children who aren’t in its own schools” as part of an ambitious and wide-ranging vision for a “mixed-ecology Church” pioneered by the Archbishop of York, the Most Rev Stephen Cottrell.



Neil Wylie is unordained chaplain at Nailsea Community Secondary School

Dr Joshua Hunt, the full-time lay chaplain at [Felixstowe School](#), a community academy, runs a theology club where he debates with agnostics and atheists, a gardening club (offering students “outdoor learning, growing their own fruit and veg”) and a chess club. He offers mentoring and bereavement support, as well as pastoral help to staff, and helps with assemblies. He has developed a reflection room (a prayer room for all faiths and none) and forged partnerships with local churches so staff and pupils can hold services at Christmas and Easter.

He also steps in at times of sudden need. “At our local mental health services, the waiting list can be four or five months or even longer,” he says, whereas he can speak to a pupil who has been bereaved “the next morning”. Last summer a couple of Year 11 pupils told him at their graduation, “I wouldn’t have been able to get this far if I hadn’t had your support”, and he thought: “I just sat with you once a fortnight and listened.”

The school's head, Emma Wilson-Downes, says Hunt, whose role was created in 2014, has given pupils "the idea of connectedness, of having something that is bigger than just you ... Lots of children don't have that. And the world can be a lonely place if you're a teenager". Has she had any complaints from parents about the school having a chaplain? "Nope." His role is structured around three themes: awe and wonder, justice and activism, and wholeness and inclusion. "There's something in that for every child," she adds.

The diocese of Leicester has just funded a pilot year for a part-time chaplain for Send (special educational needs and disabilities) units in the Learn Academies Trust of 19 primary schools in Leicestershire. The process of accessing help from the stretched Send system, which supports more than one in six pupils in England, is "heart-breaking for families", says the chaplain Nadine Weedall, a senior member of a local New Frontiers church.



The Felixstowe School gardening club gives pupils "outdoor learning"

Haslam admits that funding for chaplaincies is a "continuing challenge". A local charity, church or diocese may cover costs, at least initially. Jen Jacklin, head teacher of King Arthur's School in Somerset, says her school would not be able to employ their part-time chaplain, Wendy Hester, whose role was created in 2019, were it not funded by the diocese of Bath and Wells and the charity Links.

Jacklin attributes the rise in demand for youth mental health services to society becoming more open and teaching young people a "dialogue around wellbeing, mental health, identity", at the same time as "a denigration in public services to support people". Regarding chaplaincy, she would advise other community school heads: "Don't rule out something that could be really powerful. We all are really struggling with early help services."

So, despite low church attendance among young people, some non-faith schools are finding that having a chaplain is a sensitive way to reduce the gaps once filled by youth workers and help young people navigate the questions and choices facing them.

Chaplaincies in non-faith schools

In the **diocese of Oxford**, which covers Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, eight new community secondary school chaplaincies have been created since 2020 and another two are being created this year.

Five new chaplaincies have been created in FE community colleges since 2022 and two more are being created this year.

In **Somerset**, comprising the local authorities of Somerset, North Somerset and Bath and NE Somerset, eight chaplaincies have been created in community secondary schools since 2017 and two more are being created this year.

In **northeast Essex**, comprising Essex county council, Thurrock and Southend, eight community secondary schools and one community primary school have begun receiving chaplaincy provision from the organisation Christian Youth Outreach Colchester since 2011.

The **diocese of Durham** has national church funding from 2024 to employ chaplains in three community FE colleges.