Abstract

In Queensland alone there are over 400 chaplains in more than 600 state schools, and in the other states and territories of Australia, as well as New Zealand, there are several hundred more. In Australasia, there exist examples of state school chaplaincy that are different to those in government-funded schools found elsewhere in the world. Because of the strong church-state divide in Australia and New Zealand, these chaplaincy services do not exhibit the strong links between government-funded schools and particular denominations evident in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Instead, Australasian chaplaincy services are commonly auspiced by interdenominational bodies that oversee training, funding and employment issues and that provide chaplaincy programs for state schools that desire them. These chaplaincy services are resourced through a variety of church and community funding sources, and more recently in Australia through the federal Government’s National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP).

The purpose of this study was to articulate the nature and effectiveness of chaplaincy services in Queensland state schools. It sought to ascertain in which areas state school chaplaincy services were performing well, as well as how and where they could be improved, and it sought to identify those features of chaplaincy that underpinned its effectiveness.

The focus of the study was on the Queensland state school chaplaincy program auspiced by SU (Scripture Union) Queensland, as one of the most wide-spread programs within Australasia. The Queensland program employed chaplains in almost 70 percent of all state schools and was regarded as a worthy model for further investigation.

The research approach taken was to use state school chaplaincy in Queensland as a case study. The case study consisted of three research phases—firstly a broad data collection phase, secondly a survey phase and finally a focus
group phase. In the first research phase, data were gathered from state school chaplaincy documents, archival records, an internal SU Queensland survey and interviews from a variety of chaplaincy stakeholders. From this data gathering process, 187 topics emerged and these topics were subsequently distilled into 30 chaplaincy issues. In the second phase of the research, school-based and non-school-based stakeholders were surveyed to develop an understanding of the importance of each of the 30 chaplaincy issues and how these issues were being performed within chaplaincy services in state schools. In the final research phase the results of the surveys were analysed and the most problematic chaplaincy issues were further explored in six focus groups—four consisting of school-based Local Chaplaincy Committees (LCCs) and two further groups: one government-based and the other SU Qld-based.

The nine key findings of the study were that: (1) state school chaplaincy can be highly effective; (2) state school chaplaincy is highly contested in nature; (3) state school chaplaincy is therefore also multi-faceted and demanding in nature; (4) a strong LCC is crucial for chaplaincy effectiveness; (5) strong initial and continuing education is important for state school chaplains to undertake their multi-faceted roles; (6) state school chaplains need considerable support in their demanding work; (7) full-time chaplaincy is superior to part-time chaplaincy; (8) state school chaplaincy needs a strong funding stream; and (9) state school chaplaincy services are particularly challenging in practice.

The study also found that state school chaplaincy services were broadly regarded by school-based respondents as effective and worthwhile additions to the life of Queensland state schools. This support for chaplaincy was not without caveats and problematic areas that emerged included: (1) setting goals for chaplaincy services and achieving them; (2) having enough resources for the chaplaincy services to operate; (3) the initial training and continuing
professional development for chaplains; and (4) the effect of finance and employment issues on chaplaincy services.

The study also found that chaplaincy services were effective additions to state school communities. Even so there were some major issues needing improvement which emerged from the study and these fell into two areas—issues which related either to the expectations of, or responses to, chaplaincy services by schools, and issues that were more in the province of chaplaincy management by LCCs. Findings from the study suggested that local chaplaincy committees, as the common form of chaplaincy management, are key to the effectiveness of chaplaincy services and addressing the problematic issues listed above. The Seven Cs model of State school chaplaincy as Incarnational Ministry which emerged from the study proposes that a well trained and an able Chaplain, who employs both Community engagement and Church connection, may be facilitated by the Catalyst of an effective LCC to provide Christian spiritual support and Care and assistance for members of his or her school community. Together these factors provide the character of an effective chaplaincy service—inCarnational ministry.

There are three key recommendations for chaplaincy practice that arise from the findings of this study. Firstly the study suggests that there is a need for strong supportive systems around chaplaincy services. At a state-level, a chaplaincy forum is recommended, to clarify and moderate the myriad expectations of chaplains in schools. It is also recommended that there be effective training for LCCs and with some means of ensuring that LCCs operate according to state policy and remain broadly representative groups. Secondly, there is utility in having processes for qualifying chaplains. It is recommended that a process of registration for chaplains, that involves the benchmarking of chaplaincy qualifications and the mandating of continuing education and professional supervision, be established. Thirdly, it appears important that
chaplaincy committees work together effectively. It is recommended that LCCs prioritize a strategic planning process, incorporating an ongoing program of chaplaincy service evaluation, in order to deal with problematic issues as they arise. In this process, they should find solutions to the ongoing issue of chaplaincy funding, in order to deal more proactively with managing the ministry of chaplaincy. Finding a strong, consultative leader appears to be crucial to this process.

Three areas for future research are proposed. Firstly it is recommended that research be conducted to inform the training of LCCs—in handling financial issues, in dealing with issues of representation, and in the area of LCC leadership. Secondly, research is recommended into possible benchmarks for the initial and continuing education of chaplains, and the qualifications of chaplaincy supervisors. Finally, it is recommended that similar studies to this case-study be conducted in other jurisdictions.