

Good Morning everybody,

My name is Tony Nolan. I am the Chairperson of the School Chaplains Association, a position I am honoured to hold since our convention last October. I am in my sixth year as a Chaplain in Cashel Community School in Co. Tipperary and being a Limerick man I am preaching in a foreign land!!!! I am delighted to be joined by two colleagues from the School Chaplains Executive, namely, our Vice – Chairperson Elaine O’Sullivan and our PRO Frances Day and who is also Supporting Mentor for Kerry Chaplains.

We are delighted to speak and meet you at your convention. We are grateful to Mr. John Irwin and the ACCS Executive for offering us this opportunity.

As Chaplain For All, the Chaplain is responsible with you the Principals and Managers for the characteristic spirit of the school which in turn is reflective of the founding intention of the school.

As Chaplains and as people ultimately, **how we do anything is how we do everything**. We are *Chaplains For All*: students, staff, management, parents, BOM, the community in which the school serves.

As you are all acutely aware, in an ever-changing society, those we encounter are exposed to more pressures than ever before with all traditional beliefs and values being challenged. Today, though technologically connected, many are often disconnected from those around them and experiencing loneliness, an erosion of self-esteem and mental health difficulties. The Chaplain along with yourselves and all other stakeholders has a key role in maintaining environments which allow students to develop to their full potential and face difficulties with courage. Management and full-time teaching staff are often under time pressure and the Chaplain is in a unique position to be available to meet individual needs. The Chaplain collaborates with all members of the school community and in particular with those who hold designated pastoral responsibilities. The role is a privileged one, accompanying young people and staff on sometimes difficult paths, especially those who have been bereaved, empathising and intervening when students are experiencing difficulties. By being a witness to the Christian way of life the Chaplain organises

opportunities for worship throughout the liturgical year. The Chaplain also nurtures links with the local parishes and encourages members of the school community to show respect for all faith traditions and minority groups. The Chaplain is available to meet students to discuss problems they may be experiencing, providing a listening ear, recognising their distress and working out the issue together. When there is a crisis or distress in the community, the Chaplain is there to guide and support, referring to relevant outside agencies when necessary. Every aspect of the educational process can lead, ultimately, to the significant advancement of the individual from an intellectual, imaginative, creative, physical and spiritual point of view.

School Chaplaincies can sometimes feel like isolated places where the Chaplain and a few trusty colleagues work hard but may never have the time or opportunity to articulate comprehensively and clearly what this work is and who it benefits.

School chaplaincy is a dimension of personal / pastoral care that enables these seeds of growth be acknowledged and appreciated.

This Personal/Pastoral Care involves:

Welcoming and belonging (making pupils feel welcomed each day and that they belong to the community of the school)

b) Accompaniment (making sure pupils have someone to turn to, adults, older pupils or peers who will be there for them)

c) Opportunities to talk and share lives (noticing when things are not right)

d) Advice and counselling.

In response to a Political Question (in relation to Wellbeing in schools) Minister For Education & Skills Joe McHugh T.D. recently acknowledged in the Dáil:

Chaplains perform pastoral and counselling roles and play an important role in supporting student wellbeing. Wellbeing is at the top of the agenda in schools throughout the country. It encompasses so much... Not only student wellbeing but staff wellbeing as well!

Absence of wellbeing and the experience of somebody looking out for you can lead to vulnerability. Vulnerability in any walk of life is a huge challenge. We are all vulnerable at times in our respective roles. We strive to ensure that schools are safe spaces which offer a healing environment at times of vulnerability. As Chaplains it is incumbent upon us to ensure that everybody is aware of a safe space within our school. Evidence of this safe space should be present in our kindness, a smile, an openness, compassion and warmth. Indeed this is something you cannot train for or indeed put in a planning or policy document but is tremendously important. As St. Paul says 'clothe yourselves with compassion'. This is what informs our work. As Chaplains it is our maxim that 'People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.' That statement is the foundation stone of Chaplaincy upon which the cornerstone is faith formation.

The Chaplain is a witness to the Christian way of life and responds to the spiritual needs of young people. An open door may be the refuge, the warmth, the haven where true feelings and anxieties are revealed as they are listened to with sensitivity. It is a ministry of listening.

The Chaplain collaborates with all members of the school community and in particular those who hold designated pastoral responsibilities relating to students, staff, their families and members of the wider school community connected to the school. We need to work closely and well with you on a daily bases.

To quote Monahan & Renehan (*The Chaplain: A Faith Presence in the School Community*) *there is no blueprint on the who of Chaplaincy. Chaplains, their personalities and their natures are as varied as the personalities and natures of the people to whom they minister.* The role of the Chaplain is a very varied one and of course the Chaplain needs support too, but nevertheless the role is extremely rewarding and I thank God everyday for blessing me with this special role.

The SCA is a voluntary group which represents all those working in the field of school chaplaincy. It aims to provide mutual support and to promote the cause of Chaplaincy through dialogue with other bodies. It is a self-financing association that organises CPD opportunities for members. Many of you will be very familiar with the role having worked with a school chaplain for many years and for some this may be a new experience for you. The history of school chaplaincy is complex; however, as you will all be aware, down through the years the ACCS has been involved in producing a comprehensive document outlining the role and duties of the School Chaplain. Other Chaplaincy duties include visitation of homes, religious services, retreats and celebrations, as well as pastoral counselling. You will also be aware there are many aspects of Chaplaincy outside of this.

Last year members of our executive were involved in producing a handbook for school chaplains. Although the role is very much framed around the unique talents and strengths of the individual, this handbook includes resources and templates to assist the chaplain in their day to day work and also for planning and record-keeping. The handbook is available to all members of the association and has been well received as it was written in line with best practice, is user-friendly and appropriate to Irish schools. The individual plans created using the templates have also received positive feedback from WSE inspectors when they have met with Chaplains as part of student support teams during school visits. We will continue in our efforts to support and resource the chaplain in your schools and ensure that wellbeing and care of all continues in the best possible way.

The annual SCA two-day conference provides an opportunity for the updating of resources, sharing of knowledge and up-skilling and is supplemented by regional meetings for members throughout the year. I would ask you to encourage your chaplain to join the association and facilitate their attendance at the conference on October 16th & 17th next at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Limerick.

I came across this piece which for me captures much of what chaplaincy should mean:

A poem called **The Chaplains Room**: by William J. Crockett

A People Place

If this is not a place where tears are understood

Where do I go to cry?

If this is not a place where my spirits can take wing

Where do I go to fly?

If this is not a place where my questions can be asked

Where do I go to seek?

If this is not a place where feelings can be heard

Where do I go to speak?

If this is not a place where you'll accept me as I am

Where do I go to be?

If this is not a place where I can try to learn and grow

Where can I just be me?

On behalf of the Executive of the School Chaplains Association, I wish to thank you for listening and meeting with us today. I also wish to thank the ACCS secretariat for their ongoing support.

Finally it is our hope and prayer that your convention will be a huge success and help you recharge the batteries so that you return to your school with a renewed vibrancy and energy in your roles as leaders in education today.

If I may share with you a prayer often used in chaplaincy which could also be used in each of our respective roles:

As I live each day
May I do my part
To make one difference
To touch one heart
And through each day
May it be my goal to encourage one mind
and inspire one soul.

As key stakeholders in education and wellbeing, you play a precious part in that development.

God Bless You all and have a great convention.