

# **‘Growing a Multifaith Chaplaincy in Edinburgh’**

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**Abstract:** *The following article describes the documentary film workshop, ‘All We’ve Got’, which a multifaith delegation of students and staff from the University of Edinburgh’s Chaplaincy presented at the TCMA Conference in Melbourne on December 2, 2009. It also addresses the background, foundation, and key developments that contributed to the growth of this multifaith chaplaincy, the creation of a documentary film, and the feasibility of a delegation travelling to Melbourne to tell their collective story at TCMA and at the Parliament of the World’s Religions. It ends by sharing insights learned and identifying challenges that remain.*

## **Introduction**

This article started out as a simple description of the presentation our University of Edinburgh Multifaith Chaplaincy delegation made at the TCMA Conference in Melbourne on December 2, 2009. However, the process of writing about that presentation, while knowing that the readers primarily would be higher education chaplains, prompted me to include some of the background that made our presence and our presentation in Melbourne possible. Though I have tried to be objective in my telling, this is a story written from my own perspective – as one who moved to Edinburgh in 2001 to earn a Ph.D., yet became an intimate part of Chaplaincy development when I started co-facilitating retreats in 2003 and working for Chaplaincy in 2004.

I write as the current Associate Chaplain at the University of Edinburgh; as one who was raised a Vatican II Catholic - with half my family being Protestant - in the heart of the United States; as a shamanic practitioner who began walking a shamanic path twenty-five years ago, in great part due to the mystical dimension in Catholicism; as a minister ordained fifteen years ago in the International Assembly of Spiritual Healers and Earth Stewards; and as one committed to healing and growing the common, yet diverse, world soul we all share on this planet. My Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in 2005 was in Religious Studies/Divinity, and my research focus was contemporary shamanic practice in Scotland. In 2008 that work was published by Continuum as *A New Paradigm of Spirituality and Religion*. These issues of spiritual and religious change and transformation are dear to my heart, and it seems important for the reader to know this reflexive piece and the lenses I use as I share our collective story. Furthermore, the experiences that led to the film workshop I am about to describe ended up creating a collective, reflexive, and auto-ethnographic voice that those who created it recognize. Other writers might remember and emphasize different threads, but what follows is a story woven from the threads I find significant.

### **Invitation from TCMA**

When Patricia Blundell invited students and staff members from the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy's Parliament of the World's Religions delegation to present our documentary film workshop at the TCMA Conference in Melbourne, we were delighted. Patricia knew that many of our seven-member delegation had planned to arrive in Melbourne several days before the Parliament began, and that meant most of us would be able to accept her invitation. We all looked forward to meeting others involved in chaplaincy, exploring together issues related to multifaith, and receiving

feedback about our documentary film workshop, which we would be presenting at the Parliament on December 4.

Our workshop focused on the documentary film *All We've Got*, which we, along with many other students, staff, and chaplains from a variety of religious and belief backgrounds at the University of Edinburgh, had created under the generous guidance of Amy Hardie, Head of Research for the Scottish Documentary Institute at the Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), and with the fine editing of Patricia Delso Lucas, also from ECA. The film had begun as a story about life in a multifaith chaplaincy, but over time had evolved into a story about what really matters when dealing with difference in faith, belief and values. Because of that development, a workshop seemed to be the appropriate context and framework for reflecting on the issues and concerns raised in the film.

The six members of our seven-person multifaith delegation attending TCMA were Nurul Jihadah Hussain, Tamara Knowles, Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan (Vijay Ramnarace), Rev. Di Williams, David Wilson, and myself, MaryCatherine Burgess. After TCMA ended, Jw Hoi (Axxu), the former President of our student Buddhist Society and a recent University of Edinburgh graduate, flew from Malaysia to join us for a week of Parliament events. The eighth member of our planning team, Episcopal Honorary Chaplain Rev. Frances Burberry, remained in Edinburgh helping with responsibilities that allowed the rest of us to travel to Melbourne. Our delegates came from Buddhist, Christian (conservative, progressive, and Spiritualist perspectives), Hindu, Muslim, and Shamanic traditions, and among us were four students and three staff. This diversity reflected a natural gathering of interested people who already had

been working together in a multifaith environment. It was not an artificial attempt to appear different from what we were.

### **The Film Workshop Format**

We began the workshop presentation by introducing ourselves and individually explaining why we had wanted to attend the Parliament and why we had chosen a film workshop as the format for our story. We also reflected upon how our individual thoughts and feelings about the project had evolved throughout the previous year of working on and implementing this vision. Each delegate described his or her understanding of why it seemed significant that our context was Scotland in the United Kingdom, the City of Edinburgh, the University of Edinburgh, and a multifaith chaplaincy that had been called forth and was being supported by University leadership in this layered and culturally rich environment. Delegates explained how the documentary film grew organically from something rather descriptive of activities shared by people from diverse perspectives into a more reflexive, auto-ethnographic account of personal and collective stories about relationships and communities of trust and friendship.

After setting this context, we showed the film *All We've Got* and followed it with a moment of personal reflection; time for small group discussion about reactions, ideas, and relevance to participants' own circumstances; and a large group exploration of questions, comments, and insights from TCMA participants. Delegates closed with reflections on points of difficulty, hope, and significant learning that they had experienced during the process of weaving their stories together through the medium of film. They then joined TCMA participants in informal conversation at the conference's closing lunch.

Presenting the film workshop at TCMA was great preparation for our subsequent presentation at the Parliament. The Australian chaplains had given all of us a sense that we were appreciated and valued. In a written e-mail reflection on his experience in Melbourne, Vijay described feeling as if the TCMA chaplains had ‘applauded and complimented our seemingly insignificant effort in the Edinburgh Chaplaincy.’ For him, that sense of ‘harmonious support from all manners of people’ is what ‘really motivates’ (Ramnarace, 2010). With that encouragement, we headed into the Parliament with confidence and excitement.

### **Foundations of a Multifaith Chaplaincy**

As with many higher education chaplaincies throughout the world, the University of Edinburgh’s Chaplaincy has worked hard to create a presence and a place for students and staff of all faiths and none to find support and encouragement in their religious, spiritual, and belief paths. Old records recently destroyed showed that in the 1990s Edinburgh chaplains built on Christian ecumenical foundations as they began reaching out more intentionally to those of other faith traditions – especially to Jewish and Muslim colleagues. When Di Williams was hired as Chaplain to the University in 2000, University leadership supported her vision of developing a chaplaincy for all faiths and none. They also allowed Chaplaincy to retain a large centre with an auditorium; a small chapel; a room that became our multifaith resource centre (library); staff offices – along with a meeting area; and several other rooms that now are used for group meetings, individual contemplation, and by honorary chaplains who occasionally meet privately with students. This Chaplaincy Centre is separate from some smaller multifaith/common spaces Chaplaincy manages in other parts of the campus.

One way the Chaplaincy mission has been fulfilled is by continued hosting and encouragement of an expanding variety of student religious and belief societies, who meet regularly in the Chaplaincy Centre and in other Chaplaincy spaces. Another way has been continued facilitation of the honorary chaplains' team as they have developed a more multifaith dimension and perspective. These chaplains reflect a variety of traditions. The Christian faiths represented have included Anglican, Methodist, Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Free Church of Scotland, Orthodox Christian, and at various times Baptist and United Reform. However, chaplains from Judaism and Islam have also been members of the team. Extending out from this group has been a circle of 'belief contacts' from Buddhist, Quaker, Hindu, and Humanist traditions – with all becoming increasingly involved in Chaplaincy provision. An additional effort to fulfil the Chaplaincy mission has been collaboration with other University personnel in providing Muslim prayer rooms on campus and in refurbishing many Chaplaincy spaces, in order to make each environment more welcoming. Most recently Chaplaincy has been actively supporting the University's Vet School in their creation of a beautiful Reflection Garden for students, staff, and clients who deal daily with sick and dying animals.

### **Staff Development**

From a staffing perspective, in 2003 Chaplaincy personnel expanded from a full-time chaplain working with a part-time administrator to a team that also included a full-time receptionist and a part-time chaplain. That is when the administrator began working closer to full-time. In 2007 the part-time chaplain role ended, and a full-time Associate Chaplain post was created not only to offer traditional pastoral support, but also to focus attention on and service to spirituality and multifaith development within

an increasingly diverse and international student and staff population. Concurrently, the full-time Chaplaincy administrator's role converted to a job shared by two people.

### **Programme Development**

Since 2003, the receptionist has booked Chaplaincy Centre rooms for groups wanting to use the space. Also, each person in that role has served as the 'front face of Chaplaincy' - further developing the auditorium into a highly successful Drop-In space where students and staff can enjoy a cup of tea or coffee, meet with friends and colleagues, read the newspaper, or meet other people in a welcoming and relaxed environment. Each semester for the last several years, students from the Fair Trade Café have used our kitchen to prepare and sell soup and bread once a week to growing numbers of people in the auditorium. The Chaplaincy Drop-In space has come to be known as a welcoming place for those of all faiths and none. An average of 2500 people a week use the entire Chaplaincy Centre during semester times.

Another programme that seemed to encourage a broader sense of spirituality and of multifaith was the on-going feminist spirituality retreats, which began in 2003 and were based on Joan Chittister's book *Heart of Flesh*. Di and I co-facilitated those retreats in one form or another over the following six years. These gatherings attracted students, staff, and larger community members from diverse religious and spiritual perspectives, and they helped build a sense of community. Another programme that attracted interest, participation, and a sense of community was the *Beyond Theology* DVD series that Chaplaincy offered, and I facilitated in 2009. That programme invited focused discussions about the relationship between religion and spirituality and about traditional and contemporary perceptions and experiences of 'God' across a variety of faith traditions. It also presented some of the evolving ideas

that a number of international religious and spiritual leaders are actively exploring related to the roles of spirituality and religion in the contemporary world.

For two years starting in 2006, Chaplaincy offered a monthly series entitled 'Exploring Spiritual Practice'. In each of those 75-minute sessions, selected individuals – often students from the student religious societies or one of the honorary chaplains – discussed and shared experientially some of the spiritual practices they most treasured from their own faith traditions. Those in attendance often gave very positive feedback about what they learned and how they had grown in their own understanding and respect for different spiritual practices.

As a way of re-framing and consolidating on-going and relatively brief reflective spiritual practices still offered at the Chaplaincy Centre around midday during each semester, in 2008 we coined the term 'Spa for the Soul'. Under that heading has come Taize chanting on many Mondays; mindfulness meditation on most Tuesdays; indoor labyrinth once a month on a Tuesday; Christian Holy Communion on Wednesdays; and shamanic journeying on various Fridays. 'Spa for the Soul' has become another way of providing regular 'time to be' through a diversity of spiritual practices.

In 2008 we inaugurated an annual Multifaith Public Conversation, which was designed initially to be a multifaith parallel to the University's annual Opening Service at Greyfriars Kirk (Church of Scotland). The first Multifaith Public Conversation involved a panel of speakers from the three Abrahamic religions. They reflected on multifaith issues and challenges individually, in dialogue with each other,

and in conversation with audience members who attended. After that successful event, the following year brought another successful presentation and workshop by Dr. Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and speaker/workshop leader in his own right. The Multifaith Public Conversation for this academic year will be held in March of 2011, and the multifaith student group has taken responsibility for organising it.

Of all the projects and programmes Chaplaincy has offered, Di seemed most devoted to working with University officials to secure funding and construction of a Chartres-style labyrinth on campus. Once it was built, she worked tirelessly to develop labyrinth workshops that enabled her to share information about labyrinths and their uses. She also wrote a book entitled *Labyrinth – Landscape of the Soul*, which was published in 2009. Officially dedicated in 2005, The Edinburgh Labyrinth has provided for the University and the larger community an ancient and beautiful way of reaching across religious, spiritual, and cultural differences by offering a simple path of reflection.

### **Growth of a Multifaith Chaplaincy**

Growing out of all these programmes and out of general social trends toward diversity world-wide, during the second half of this decade there emerged with more clarity on the part of students in the religious and belief societies and from our growing multifaith team of honorary chaplains a desire to learn more deeply and personally about each other and about those traditions within which they found meaning, value, and purpose. Being together had helped these groups realise they did not have to relinquish their own religious or belief perspectives in order to learn about the traditions and values held by others who were becoming their friends. Sharing who

they were started to feel safer, and therefore, it became increasingly desirable to learn more extensively about the beliefs and practices of their colleagues and friends.

### **Student Multifaith Development**

For the students, that shift in perception began to show itself at a formal meeting of religious and belief society officers, who decided they wanted to move beyond just checking-in about themselves and the activities and issues of their societies. They were eager also to work together, and their first joint initiative was a Multifaith Meal for all religious and belief society members and for other interested students. At that first Multifaith Meal and at each annual meal since then, they have shared food from their respective traditions; learned in a light-hearted way some of the core elements of different beliefs; enjoyed each other's music; and generally had fun. Those experiences easily led to other events, such as special Hindu festivals like Diwali; charity fund-raising events for people in Gaza; an unconventional pub quiz (no alcohol, not in a pub – with questions related to different belief traditions); and a discussion series about issues of concern they had identified. Some of these students even planned and hosted a panel of speakers from different religious and belief perspectives, who were featured at a successful 'Re-imagining Economics' seminar in May of 2009.

### **Honorary Chaplains' Team Development**

On a parallel track, in 2007 Di and I, in collaboration with the multifaith team of honorary chaplains, spent one of our joint 'away days' exploring common and differing values. Emerging from that time together came a group decision to 'go deeper' with each other and start 'weighing-in' at meetings, rather than just 'checking-in'. That began to happen, and within several months, we all agreed to help host and co-facilitate the 2008 Scottish Higher Education Chaplains' Conference,

which was to be held at the Edinburgh University Chaplaincy. Our team used a World Café model to create key questions about issues central to addressing multifaith learning and inter-religious dialogue among higher education chaplains. At the actual conference, we then co-facilitated World Café sessions among participants - using the questions we had surfaced earlier to stimulate discussion. Since that time these chaplains have become closer friends and have taken steps to learn more about each other's beliefs and practices.

### **A Documentary Film for the Parliament of the World's Religions**

In the autumn of 2008, a number of people from the University and from the Edinburgh Interfaith Association began talking about the possibility of attending the next Parliament of the World's Religions, which was to be held in Melbourne, Australia, in December of 2009. To determine genuine interest in this suggestion among the University community, I arranged an October meeting, and eight people attended. Those present included students, staff, and an honorary chaplain. Each person wanted to participate in the Parliament and contribute something of value to it. Everyone realised that the only possible way to secure the necessary funds for this endeavour was to submit a proposal to present something at the Parliament, and that proposal had to be something the Parliament organisers would find valuable enough to accept. Their acceptance appeared to be an essential component in any funding applications we might pursue.

Axxu is the one who suggested that a documentary film based on a year in the life of a multifaith chaplaincy would be a great way to tell our own multifaith story and to assure that those who ultimately travelled to Melbourne would take with them – through the film – all those who had participated in creating it. This small group fully

supported Axxu's suggestion, though all of us wondered how we would ever accomplish our not-insignificant goal. Delight and some trepidation swept through us when Amy Hardie said she would teach us to use a DVD camcorder; guide us in capturing on film the many upcoming events that would embody our multifaith story; suggest a good film editor at the appropriate time; and provide her expertise in assuring we had the finished product we wanted. Once we knew we had Amy's support and guidance, we moved forward with our 'great work'. As Tamara wrote later in her written reflection on the film, 'We were involved in creating something larger than ourselves that needed to be completed and shared,' and regardless of whether we would be allowed to attend the Parliament, 'it was still worth doing, simply on its own merit' (Knowles, 2010).

We prepared and submitted a Parliament proposal that included our film workshop and several labyrinth events Di wanted to do with our help. We also submitted numerous applications for funding. Together we identified what was important to film and why; learned how to operate the camera; tried rather unsuccessfully to operate the sound; celebrated when we learned that our proposals had been accepted in some form by the Parliament; and encouraged each other when funding seemed minimal or nonexistent.

Many of us remember a meeting in April of 2009, when our funding prospects looked rather bleak. Instead of resorting to despair, something almost tangible occurred in the room, and we were filled with an unexplained sense of hope. David later remarked humorously that we had half a skill set and no money, yet we moved ahead

not knowing why, but filled with the inspiration to persevere. Not only that, but the idea for a 'Re-Imagining Economics' seminar was born at that very meeting.

This enthusiasm was enhanced in May, when the University Secretary provided some funding to support staff expenses to attend the Parliament. Around that time, five of our team members received financial support from the University's Small Projects Grant scheme for some of their travel. In June we discovered we had the necessary funds to send a delegation of eight, though ultimately, Frances decided to stay behind.

In August of 2009 Amy introduced us to Patricia, a filmmaker and our editor. Patricia brought a lovely spirit that tapped into underlying themes, story lines, and relationships. The editing process called for a deeper look at what our story really was, because at first our footage looked like a public relations film for Chaplaincy. We wanted more than that. Instead, we hoped to convey what many of us connected to Chaplaincy had been learning and experiencing in recent years about how to deal with 'questions that matter' and 'issues that concern', particularly when faced with personal and collective difference. As a result, we invited students, staff, and chaplains to engage in conversations about deeper issues and challenges of multifaith. With the permission of those who agreed to participate, Patricia filmed those conversations. Her wonderful editing skills and keen sense of story and artistry combined beautifully with Amy's gentle, yet masterful, guidance and our own deepening understanding of what we considered significant.

As the new footage blended with what we already had taken, together we watched our story emerge into a film we decided to call *All We've Got*. That title refers to a

comment in the film, in which Di Williams talks about how our relationships and sense of trust in each other is really ‘all we’ve got’. In other words, we don’t have all the answers, but we do have some trust in exploring challenging questions with others we care about and respect.

We think the film invites reflection and dialogue on several levels for different people. We hope it shows how a modern University Chaplaincy can provide a safe and supportive space in which people from diverse cultural, religious, and spiritual backgrounds can find hope in sharing their common ground and in appreciating their differences. Those involved in this film reflect both male and female, ages ranging from 20s to 80s, cultures from East and West, and people with religious and nonreligious perspectives. Not only have they explored and reflected on issues of religious, spiritual, and cultural diversity in their interactions at the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy, but they have portrayed their own thoughts and feelings regarding why this kind of dialogue and collaboration about difference is crucial in the world at this time in history. For that we are proud and pleased. If any readers want to view the film or learn more about our chaplaincy, please go to our web site, [www.ed.ac.uk/chaplaincy](http://www.ed.ac.uk/chaplaincy).

### **Insights and Challenges**

Before proceeding to challenges, it seems appropriate to include positive reflections taken from those written reflections most members of our delegation wrote and sent to me via e-mail shortly after our trip to Melbourne. David commented,

The feedback (from TCMA and Parliament participants) made it very clear that the resources available to students of Edinburgh through the Chaplaincy are very much more significant than those available at many other universities and that Edinburgh can very rightly be proud of what has been achieved in developing a spiritual resource centre. There was strong, clear feedback to the effect that what has been achieved at Edinburgh is extremely worthwhile and

meets a clear need that in many other institutions often goes under-resourced or unmet. (Wilson, 2009)

Tamara wrote,

As I look back at the process of creating and presenting the film, I realize it gifted us with unexpected benefits. As we progressed through the filming and presentation of the film, it continued to foster that same spirit of interconnectedness among the individuals and organizations we encountered. The same sense of welcoming discourse that moves through the film continues to carry forward in discussion today, and as that message of connection and humanitarianism was central to the film, so it proves central to our lives. (Knowles, 2010)

Related to the Parliament experience, but of interest to TCMA, Di observed,

We were, in our diversity, a microcosm of the Parliament gathering. We felt that rather keenly. We all wanted to extend the experience we already shared in the University Chaplaincy by somehow deepening our appreciation of living and working together as a diverse community . . . Experiencing afresh what it means to develop deep relationships across diversity is one of the most significant experiences I have come away from the Parliament still cherishing . . . For our own University team it was the sense of flourishing trust, understanding, compassion and fun we discovered as we spent quality time together, leading workshops, making significant contacts, participating in sessions and ceremonies, sharing meals, and exploring the places we travelled through and stayed in, that proved the worth of this special journey. The reality of sharing simple human living, with its mix of ease and disease, sadness and joy, struggle and agreement, despair and hope, was authentically enriching. (Williams, 2010)

Both Vijay and Nurul's reflections also addressed the Parliament experience, but their thoughts complemented what they experienced at TCMA. Vijay reflected,

Being two of over 600 presentations and still attracting a sizeable audience revealed something that I found to be at the heart of the gathering – we all have some similar experiences in our own contexts, and sharing them leads to an understanding that breathes new life into our own faith. It is not that there will be new ideas and grand solutions to age-old problems, as common sense usually is the best magic for them . . . As Nurul Hussein, an exceptionally spirited member of our group, so aptly put it: “If we can't happily co-exist in our small way here, what right do we have to hope that it can happen on a global level?” This trip to Melbourne really did give us hope for now and for the future: as harmonious co-existence seemed to be happening at the smaller levels and at the global levels at the Parliament. The future really is bright! (Ramnarace, 2010)

Appropriately next – and taking us further into the realm of challenges, are Nurul’s reflections. She wrote,

I had been feeling a bit like I had been living in a Parliament “bubble”, where almost everyone I met was really nice, enthusiastic about interfaith, and keen to learn more about other religions, as well as discuss the various exciting things that they were doing. Quite frankly, as all of us who are involved in interfaith know well, there are too many people out there who do not appear to have any of the above qualities. This poses two challenges when working in interfaith. Firstly, we can be tempted into limiting ourselves to working just with those people who are already interested in interfaith, as it may be easier to do. Secondly, we forget that we should continually reach out – not only for interfaith, but also for ourselves, in order that we realise that we cannot be satisfied that we are doing something useful, unless in the doing of it, we have overcome some sort of worthy challenge or opposition. It is important that we keep things in context. Yes, I loved the Parliament and learnt a lot from it, but what now? What should I do about all that I have learnt? These are the questions that I have to ask myself. (Hussain, 2010)

Like other chaplaincies and those who work for a better world, we still face remaining challenges. Our student leaders like Axxu, Vijay, Nurul, and David, who have championed multifaith learning, end up graduating and moving on when they complete their degrees. Many students interested in multifaith have busy lives filled with their studies and the business of their own religious and belief societies. Sometimes they need to appropriately find a balance that may exclude multifaith endeavours. At other times, they may still be afraid of that diversity.

Similarly, chaplains who have learned to care about each other and share stories of faith and belief do periodically move on to new assignments elsewhere. In that process, some of our honorary chaplains’ gatherings suffer from less diversity than when the team has a full complement. Those students and chaplains who move on may carry a heart-warming ‘spirit of multifaith’ with them wherever they go, which is wonderful. However, issues of turnover, transition, and leadership development

remain. Furthermore, when diversity of faith, belief, and values is not regularly brought to attention, many students and staff members who had seemed interested in that often forget about it.

A final challenge is that the wonderful spaces we enjoy so much at the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy may be reduced, when in a few years, our current building is torn down as part of a city re-development project. We will need to ‘show cause’ for abundant space in any new building schemes, and there are no guarantees we will be granted anything like the space we currently have.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that good things have been occurring at the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy. At the same time, we also face many of the same challenges that our colleagues in higher education chaplaincies elsewhere in the world must address. If we can remember what we learned from our film and from our experiences together, we will continue to build relationships of trust and safety as we explore how to live and thrive in an environment of diversity in faith, belief, and values. We also will learn how to better deal with conflict and how to more fully transform our words and beliefs into loving and compassionate actions that make a positive difference to life on this planet.

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