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Principles of Good Practice for School Ministry in Episcopal Schools

National Association of Episcopal Schools

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Preface

The ministry of a school chaplain, in Episcopal schools, is both a time-honored one, as well as one that currently exists amidst a great deal of change. Given the increasingly fluid and complex religious landscape of our culture, chaplains now minister in a school community that is increasingly diverse: in most schools a variety of religions are represented as well as an increasing number of students, parents, and faculty who come to the school with no experience with any religious tradition. As the role of the school head changes—with increased pressure on the advancement and marketing fronts—the nature of the chaplain-head relationship is changing. As a result of denominational preferences and religious affiliations becoming more interchangeable, the relationship of the school chaplain to the Episcopal tradition of the school can seem increasingly complex.

Amidst these changes, an effective school chaplain can make an extraordinary difference in life of an Episcopal school. As pastor, priest, prophet, and teacher, the chaplain can serve as a binding, spiritual force, standing at the crossroads of faith and reason, individual and community, tradition and change.

Schools continue to seek in their chaplains a rootedness in faith. That faith is crucial for the important role of spiritual leadership that chaplains provide. The need for chaplains who feel called by God to carry out a ministry in this unique context, and who live exemplary lives supported by prayer and service, has never been greater.

We offer these principles of good practice to highlight the potential for school chaplaincy—based on our experience of seeing good chaplains at work—as well as to serve as a resource for a school in these and a variety of other contexts:

- As a tool for evaluation of the position of chaplain
- As a vehicle through which schools can review their Episcopal identities
- As an aid in formulating a position description for a chaplain as well as in the search for a new chaplain

Because new chaplains come to our schools with a wide variety of previous experience, or lack of experience, the principles set forth here serve as goals for the chaplain's long-term role and place in a school. In some cases they should serve as standards to work toward, as opposed to being immediately in place.

While the roles of chaplains can differ greatly within our wide membership, Episcopal school chaplains are individuals set apart for a unique and grace-filled ministry. An Episcopal school should exercise great care in the search for persons who will fulfill this high calling, have an appreciation for the intricacies of this type of ministry, review regularly the many dimensions of this important and complex position, and be attentive to the care for and well-being of those who choose to minister in and help build up the common life of a school community.

Role of the Chaplain in the School

Given the variety of duties a chaplain may have—preaching, teaching, counseling, coaching, administrating, and involvement in service learning, to name but a few—it is easy for the role to seem fragmented or diffuse. Added to these internal school demands, chaplains—particularly those who are ordained—also have responsibilities toward their bishops, dioceses, and other clergy, and in some cases the rector at parish based schools. At its best, this seeming diffusion of responsibilities places the chaplain in a prime position to be flexible and maneuverable within the various parts of the school and beyond. This means that attention needs to be paid to where the chaplain falls within the leadership structure of the school, the potential conflicts to be found in the position description, the spoken and unspoken expectations of the person undertaking this role, and the assumed sources of the chaplain's authority.

- **It should be clearly articulated where the chaplain falls within the structure of the institution, including the leadership structure of the school, and attention should be paid to providing the chaplain a clear, written position description (i.e., one that takes the various roles into consideration), so as to provide the chaplain with the fullest picture of what is expected of him or her.**

Differences in Context of School Ministry

The contexts for school ministry are widely and structurally different. Some school chaplains find themselves working between parish and school, serving both institutions and holding significant responsibilities in each place. Other chaplains work full-time in day schools or boarding schools, where responsibilities, as well as the rhythm of school life, can vary greatly. While some chaplains minister in schools with a very traditional liturgical life, others operate within a more progressive, interfaith context.

All chaplains find themselves not only working within the confines of the school, but also representing the school while ministering to alumni/ae, parents, and the greater community. Pastoral issues of sickness and death can emerge suddenly, hardly corresponding to the tightly knit schedule of a school day.

- **School chaplains need to be able to embrace the culture of their particular schools, including the regular schedule and routine commitments that school life requires. They should know what the school expects in terms of leading chapel and school worship. Given their responsibilities in pastoral emergencies within and beyond the confines of the school community, heads of schools and chaplains should have an agreement on procedures and practices—particularly what the school chaplain does—when such pastoral emergencies arise.**

Relationship of the Chaplain to a Pluralistic Community

The chaplain plays a crucial role in helping the school maintain a healthy balance between being faithful to its Episcopal identity and being a welcoming and diverse community. A chaplain is among those key people in a school who can articulate and symbolically represent what it means to be an Episcopal school, which by its very nature welcomes and advocates on behalf of those of differing religious traditions, or, as is increasingly the case, those who come from no religious tradition at all. The chaplain encourages all members of the school community to understand and appreciate their respective religious roots, while having a particular responsibility to help maintain and enhance the relationship of the school to its Episcopal tradition. As the principal resource to the head of school in helping to articulate the Episcopal identity of the institution, as well as helping to advise the admissions office, faculty, and staff on issues of Episcopal identity, the chaplain's role is a highly visible one, crucial to the school being able to talk about itself and promote its mission to the wider community.

- **Chaplains should be encouraged to be people who foster a sense of religious identity among all segments of the school, while being able to assist the school in its efforts to be comfortable with the language, symbolism, and practice of an Episcopal community.**

Relationship of the Head Chaplain to the Head of School

The relationship between the head of school and the head chaplain is vitally important to the identity of the school as an Episcopal school, as well as to other relationships within the school community. While the specific nature of the relationship varies with personality and chemistry, a positive and enduring chaplain-head relationship helps ensure open, safe, and appropriately confidential communication regarding the pastoral issues in the school community. It also serves to monitor the culture and tone of school life.

- **The central relationship flourishes best when the head chaplain reports directly to the head of school.**

Reporting Relationships

Given the variety of roles that the school chaplain plays, it is common for chaplains to find themselves reporting to more than one person—head chaplain, head of school, division heads, curriculum coordinator/dean of faculty, dean of students, rector of the parish, bishop of the diocese. A lot of people can be watching and evaluating the chaplain.

- **The reporting structure for a school chaplain should be as clear as possible, and the mode of evaluation should reflect that clarity. The school chaplain needs to be sensitive to the complexities of reporting to more than one person, while the school should strive to keep the reporting structure streamlined and direct.**

Prophetic Role of the Chaplain

Great chaplains serve as the “conscience” for an institution, calling it back to its basic mission while challenging and encouraging the community to become more of what it can be. At times a chaplain must play the role of truth-teller, doing this in love, support, and compassion for the school but nevertheless helping the school to grapple with how it goes about its daily life with integrity and compassion.

- **Chaplains should be encouraged to be among the key people in the school who bring the community back to its core values, who can sense the hurts and anxieties of the community**

and can call attention to them. They should be permitted at times to step beyond the prescribed roles in order to call the school to be its best as a community.

Chaplain as Teacher

Most school chaplains engage in some form of classroom teaching, and in many cases they take on this role without having had much specific training or experience at teaching. A key source of a chaplain's authority comes from his or her involvement with the academic life of the school, particularly given the opportunity teaching provides for a chaplain to get to know many students.

- **Attention needs to be paid to an incoming chaplain's readiness for teaching, and what needs to be done to help him or her best be prepared for the vocation of teaching in a school, be it classroom management, technology, etc.**
- **Because many chaplains enter the teaching aspect of their ministry without prior experience, and frequently as the sole member of a department, a school should make certain that a suitable teaching mentor—one who understands the complexity and demands of the position as well as the subject matter—is provided for a new chaplain.**

Relationship of the Chaplain to the Counseling Staff

In their role as pastoral counselors, the work of the chaplains can seem at times very similar to the work of school counselors. In a variety of situations, these roles overlap. At the same time, there are significant differences between the nature of pastoral care and other modes of counseling. Pastoral care is characterized by listening, encouraging, and paying attention to the spiritual dimensions of the conversation taking place. Pastors listen not only for the voice of the other, but also for the voice of God in every conversation. Furthermore, good pastors are trained to know the importance of referring clinical or chronic problems to those who can provide long-term or in-depth treatment, and are able to discern the difference between maintaining confidentiality and knowing when situations warrant mandated reporting. When school counselors and chaplains work together for the common good of students, faculty, and staff, it makes a significant difference in the quality of care and tone of school life. This spirit of collegiality occurs only when each respective approach to care for members of the school community is respected and understood among those involved.

- **A spirit of collegiality and mutual respect for the various approaches in counseling and care should be encouraged and expected, with the chaplain being an important part of that counseling team.**
- **A process of communication should be in place that enables the chaplain to be aware of pastoral situations—deaths in the community, those who are in hospital—where the unique pastoral role of a chaplain is of particular value.**
- **Whether lay or ordained, chaplains serving in Episcopal schools must be educated about and appropriately trained in methods of safeguarding all students against physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or misconduct. This includes those courses mandated for clergy in all dioceses of The Episcopal Church as well as the Safeguarding God's Children program, and familiarity with required compliance with local, state, or federal laws regarding mandated reporting.**

Self-Care of the Chaplain

As with any professional who gives a great deal of himself or herself in a helping and caring capacity, the chaplain needs to maintain a routine of self-care through opportunities for professional development, networking with other school chaplains, and an ongoing relationship with a spiritual director. So, too, a chaplain has a responsibility to cultivate his or her relationship to the diocese.

- **Provision should be made, both in the chaplain's job description and regular schedule, for opportunities for professional and spiritual development, rest and renewal, networking, and maintaining a positive relationship to the diocese.**

Search Process

A number of questions present themselves to schools when faced with the prospect of searching for a new chaplain. Should this person (whether a matter of preference or of by-laws) be an Episcopal priest? Should this person be ordained? What type of experience is needed for this position, as well as what are the qualities most desired in the successful candidate (i.e., love of young people, a commitment to the unique nature of school life, the ability to express his/her faith in a way that affirms the school's identity of what it means to be an Episcopal school)? Should this person have experience in the world of education, have a certain level of ministerial experience, or embody a certain charisma?

Searches for chaplaincy positions in parish day schools pose additional challenges: what will be the expected allotment of time for the chaplain to give to the school, as well as to the parish? What will be the reporting scheme of the person who serves both the school and the parish? What distinguishes ministry in a parish from that in a school?

A search process also presents a school and, in some cases, a parish with a unique opportunity for understanding the position of the chaplaincy within the life of the particular ministerial context, including the fundamental tensions and opportunities that make this position both challenging as well as deeply satisfying.

- **In undertaking a search for a new chaplain, a school should be aware of**
 - **how it sees this chaplain in relation to the Episcopal identity of the school,**
 - **the complexity and centrality of the position, and**
 - **how it seeks that person to enter into the life of the school.**
- **Prior to conducting a search for a new chaplain, the school should know the bishop's expectations of the new chaplain within the diocese (i.e., attending diocesan convention, clergy conferences, diocesan commissions), and be prepared to foster and encourage that relationship between chaplain and diocese. Any ordained person in the Episcopal Church cannot accept a new position without the approval of the bishop, and that person will need to be licensed by the diocesan bishop. This means that an awareness of the degree to which the bishop or diocesan staff wishes to be involved in the process is vitally important. This is particularly crucial as any search moves toward interviewing finalists, as it is required that the bishop be involved in this final step in the interview process.**
- **Within the context of a parish day school, both parish and school should enter into a search process with a clear understanding of what both institutions need and require of the person for which they are searching.**
- **Attention must be paid to the ways a chaplain will touch and even potentially transform the culture of the school, and the ways the institution will support the chaplain in this challenging work.**

- **In the case of the position of head chaplain, NAES recommends that the person be ordained in The Episcopal Church.**

Compensation

NAES is frequently asked about standards for compensation for school chaplains. Our data indicate a wide variety in levels of compensation, depending on the experience of an incoming school chaplain, the cost of living in that particular region of the country, and the standards for compensation within a given diocese.

The most recent data gathered indicate that the closest corresponding standard is the diocesan equivalent level of compensation for a rector of a parish with at least five years of experience in that position. Similarly, roughly 60% of our school chaplains nationwide (including those in parish day school contexts) participate in the Church Pension Fund's defined benefit retirement program for clergy.

- **Schools should be prepared to answer candidates' potential questions regarding compensation, housing, and pension. Familiarity with the local diocesan standards for compensation is a valuable asset in beginning these discussions.**
- **If a chaplain or head chaplain is expected to be a part of the core administrative team of the school, the level of compensation should reflect that expectation.**
- **In the interests of attracting the best and widest variety of candidates for the position of chaplain, as well as for the long-term strength of the chaplaincy program in a given school, NAES recommends that ordained Episcopal clergy who serve as chaplains participate in the Church Pension Fund program. NAES, as well as representatives of the Church Pension Fund, are happy to discuss or provide resources for considering the various options for pension benefits and opportunities.**

Conclusion

An effective chaplain serves as a significant bridge-builder in a school community. He or she helps to bring together church and school, tradition and current realities, and attention to individual pastoral needs with an appreciation for the needs of the community as a whole. He or she also serves as a vital anchor for the school, reminding it of its traditions and rootedness in Episcopal identity and its need to be true to its responsibilities as a moral community. By embodying so much of the mission of the school, the chaplain serves as an ongoing model for the community to strive to be its better self.

It is in the interest of an institution to seek out and cultivate chaplains for a long-term ministry in the school, thereby giving the chaplain the best opportunity to build trust and respect among the various members of the community. To do that, schools must be attentive to the fact that the fruits of such a ministry are not quickly discernible to a new chaplain. For many it will take a number of years before the impact of their work is evident to them. Fortunately, when that impact begins to be evident, the joys and satisfactions multiply with each passing school year.

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National Association of Episcopal Schools

For payments/remittances: P.O. Box 21090

New York, NY 10087-1090

For all other correspondence: 815 Second Avenue, Third Floor

New York, NY 10017

phone: [800.334.7626](tel:800.334.7626) | [212.716.6134](tel:212.716.6134)

fax: 212.286.9366

info@episcopalschools.org

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