Ecumenical Chaplain’s Annual Report – McMaster University Ecumenical Chaplaincy /2020-21

This is report includes a year where the ministry of the ecumenical chaplaincy was on-line.

From our annual meeting in May 2020 until now (May 2021), like all else at McMaster, our programs and partnerships were engaged virtually; and while our pastoral care was largely on-line, it was not exclusively on-line (e.g. visits outside in-person, at distance, going for walks etc.)

I experienced this year of pandemic-pain as one where ministry in general and chaplaincy in particular were as meaningful and as important as ever.

Yes, attendance for some programs dropped; and programs which never existed before the pandemic began and thrived. And as far as counselling and mentoring were concerned, the numbers have never been higher compared to my previous 4 years of in-person presence.

As a colleague of mine at Northeastern University in Boston put it, “*Whatever way you measure the significance of ‘being present’ during a time of everything virtual, and regardless of how difficult or disheartening it was, because of disappointing numbers or overwhelming depression, we need to remind ourselves that ‘we did it’!”*

The remainder of this report is a snippet into what “we did” over the course of this past year, which, as always, when it comes to all things “spiritual”, is as much (if not more) about “who we are” and learning how to “be” as much as anything we “do”.

**Pastoral Care** – I don’t hesitate to remind us all that “care” is at the “core” of what our chaplaincy is about. Our ecumenicity is informed by empathy, and our empathy informs our ecumenicity. The empathic piece describes our non-judgemental and holistic approach. The ecumenical addresses the inclusive and social conscious nature of our presence.

As mentioned in my preamble, this area of pastoral care (particularly on the one-to-one) is the one area that we have seen significant increases. This mirrors the high percentage of mental/emotional isolation which the rest of the population are also feeling during Covid-19. What is positive about this fact is that the Chaplaincy is recognized as a “safe space”, and the more our University community knows of the Chaplaincy Centres’ existence (student, staff and faculty), the more it is utilized by those who seek what we aspire to offer. These needs often don’t include those asking to be involved with the chaplaincy programs e.g., becoming a part of MCMC, anymore than those who enter the Wellness Centre look to become counsellors or physicians. But they remind us of why we are here.

In April of 2020, the numbers seeking spiritual counsel were doubled on a weekly basis from anything known before March 2020 (4-6 in-person weekly prior to pandemic; 8-10 on-line weekly during the pandemic). As the Fall Term began, the number of 1st year students seeking this was high, with other seasoned students, staff, faculty reduced.

All demographics picked up again in December `20, dropped at the start of the new year, and then picked up again in March `21.

Our programs are necessary as ends in themselves, but our programs are also a ‘road map’ to finding what many are seeking (especially in desperate times) and that we all deserve – namely, a personal experience of compassion and care.

**Programs** – Becausewe knew in the Spring that the University would be on-line in the Fall/Winter, we began preparing ourselves for enabling on-line platforms. The pattern that emerged was 3-fold, inviting intentionality in meditation/prayer, reflection/visitation and deeper discussions.

We introduced, for the first time, an opportunity for “meditation”. This was experimented for 4 sessions in Fall, where we added 3 more to end the Term, and then picked up again in the new year with 9 sessions. These all took place on Mondays at noon, and between the introduction, meditation itself and follow up visiting, the time would end at 12:30 -12:45pm. The numbers ranged between 4 and 6.

Wednesdays during the week saw us honoring the time we have reserved for “Selah”, which other than the intentional 12:15 pm reflection that would take place by various members of our council or friends of the chaplaincy e.g. Rabbi Ben Shefter, or myself, it would be a time to “stop by and check in” as peoples schedules and needs permitted.

The numbers for the weekly Selah were often between 4-6, and as large as 9-10.

The 3rd piece in this trifecta of weekly platforms was the newly launched “Xianity @ the Margins” group, founded on the inspiration of 3rd year Arts and Science Student, Torrin Maag. Torrin has not only worked closely with me in shaping its “idea”, he has given of himself to this with real commitment and personal conviction.

There were 5 sessions in the Fall, with subjects such as “Challenging Normalcy” and ‘When the Church Does Bad Things” – and in the Winter Term with themes such as “New Beginnings” and “God is RED”, with 4 sessions in all. The Winter Term also saw Torrin introduce a “Queer Theology Series” which was a more concentrated C@M series addressing LGBTQ2+ issues in religious life. This alternated on the weeks that the “regular” C@M did not meet. There were 4 sessions included in this series alone, making the total overall count of C@M sessions this Term to be 8.

On average, between all programs/events associated with C@M, the smallest gathering saw 5 of us, and the largest included as many as 14.

In all programs - with each one having a different orientation and purpose (practicing contemplation, pausing to connect, or delving deeper into important issues) – there was the commonality of the Ecumenical Chaplaincy being a safe/positive space to pray, think and be.

The annual Advent and Lenten observances took place this year, with nice responses and turn-outs occurring in both cases (Advent over 50, and Lent over 30); and we held our seasonal ‘Grief Observed’ Service (or ‘Blue Holiday’) in December; as well as our annual Spiritual Retreat, entitled “Meaningful Memory” with 10 of us in attendance.

The other real “high-light” for me as far as a program is concerned, was the Student Inter-faith/spiritual gathering entitled #SpringingTogether that took place on March 22nd. Again, our own Torrin Maag represented us, along with 8 other religious/spiritual student representatives, sharing their thoughts/experiences on the meaning of Spring through the lens of their tradition. 35 were in attendance.

**Partnerships** – *Chaplaincy Centre, Denominational, University*

*Chaplaincy Centre* – The other Chaplains (Fr Bradley Markus and Dr Michael Fallon), Catholic Campus Director (Paul O’hagan) and Administrative Assistant (Kristine Sabido) in our Chaplaincy Centre, have committed to meeting weekly, for edification, prayer, organization and community building. This has served to be most helpful and heartening.

*Denominational* – We continue to be supported through these lean, liminal days, by our partnerships in the local, regional and diocesan expressions of the Anglican, Presbyterian and United Churches of Canada. Our current operational means could not function without the financial conviction and shared vision of our denominational partners. Our/my gratitude is perpetual for their on-going support.

*University* – I continue to chair the Inter-faith Working Group of the Presidents Advisory Committee on

Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC); serve on the Priorities and Planning group of PACBIC where we completed the protocol for the Spiritual Care and Learning Centre: for Religious, Secular, Spiritual Communities at McMaster, and where I subsequently was invited into being its first Director.

I also serve/d on the December 6th committee that raises awareness of misogynistic violence; and I represent us collaboratively with partnerships in the Equity and Inclusion office, Student Services (Student Success Centre, Case Management Office), and the Wellness Centre (counselling).

**Summations and Projections**

As most of you know, I have discontinued in my capacity as Minister of Westdale United Church as of April 30th. 10 meaningful years. The significance of this for the Ecumenical Chaplaincy is that the partnership we shared these past 5 years, in my dual roles, is no more.

Thanks to the vigilant work of Todd Hoare as our Treasurer, he has garnered the services of the Anglican Diocese of Niagara (one of our Denominational partners) to be the conduit for the practical distribution of my salary. This already happens with Kristine Sabido as our Administrative Assistant.

My entering into the role of Director/Coordinator for the Spiritual Care and Learning Centre (I have officially begun this month) is not the equivalent to the shared capacity we knew with WUC. The work is more related and intersectional, but the relationship between the University and MCMC is not.

That said, my office for the SCLC will be on the 2nd floor of MUSC, right around the corner from the Chaplaincy Centre.

I will differentiate the work of my role as Ecumenical Chaplain from that of Director of the SCLC, as I did between the Chaplaincy and the Church. However, it is ALL the work of G\_D and the belief in the power of love, and I will approach both as such, lest I split myself in two 😊

I look forward to the challenges of this new dynamic, as well as the same with seeking to re-enter into a hybrid of in-person and on-line life, anticipated for the Fall.

I hope to build on our current Ecumenical programs (Meditation Mondays, Mid-week Selah’s and C@M opportunities, including the possibility of reintroducing Talk and Tea) with the hope of intentionally introducing opportunities for “community engagement” i.e. the chances to put ones values of faith and service in action in the McMaster/Hamilton community.

These are ideas which I share openly with you not as guarantees but as “wonderings” which I believe any soul-centred, ecumenically oriented and socially conscious ministry must always do.

After all, we can’t say “we did it” until we first learn to “dream it, and be it.”

*In light…*

Rev Andy Crowell/ Ecumenical Chaplain, McMaster Campus Ministries Council