

A Humanist Chaplain! A Contradiction in Terms?

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Summary

Eleanor Davidson believes she is the country's first humanist to become a recognised member of a hospital chaplaincy team - she certainly is a first for Leicestershire. In this interview, Eleanor, an accredited humanist celebrant, explains the need for such a service, how she came to be appointed, how she views the role, and what still remains to be done.

A Humanist Chaplain - An interview with the country's first Humanist/non-religious Pastoral Chaplaincy Visitor

INTERVIEWER: Traditionally chaplains have provided religious support for people in institutions like the army, prisons, universities and hospitals. In the Leicester hospitals a multitude of faiths are involved, reflecting the diversity of the community. Why the need for non-religious representation?

ELEANOR: Over the past 35 years rarely a month has passed when I have not either been hospitalised or spent time in outpatient waiting rooms - it often feels that life is something that happens in between hospital appointments. Trudging the corridors I pause to scour the gallery of photographs on the Chaplaincy Department noticeboards, and I reflect on the absence of someone a non-religious person would feel comfortable approaching for spiritual support. I always assumed I must be in a tiny minority, but a little research in the 2001 Census for Leicester and Leicestershire soon showed that 16% expressed 'no religion' - in fact outnumbering all the non Christian religions combined. Bear in mind also that when completing official forms many people name the religion of their upbringing, even if they no longer practise or have lost the faith.

INTERVIEWER: So there's a surprising proportion of non-religious people in the community. But surely chaplaincy is a religious function - a non-religious chaplain is a contradiction in terms.

ELEANOR: There is a lot of this sort of prejudice - when I joined the team, one member even asked me 'do you have any morals - seeing as you're an atheist?!' But let me quote from the mission statement of the Chaplaincy Department of University Hospitals Leicester (UHL):

The Chaplaincy Department reflects the diversity of Leicester's communities and has representatives of the world faiths with sizeable communities in Leicester. ...

We provide religious, spiritual and pastoral care to patients, visitors and staff of all faiths or no faith. ...

So you see the need is acknowledged. But it has traditionally been assumed that it is acceptable for only the religious to offer support and comfort to all, including people 'of no faith'.

INTERVIEWER: ... and recognising a potential need, you decided to do something about it.

ELEANOR: That's right. Over the past few years I have become increasingly concerned at the neglect of those outside the religions. I felt that the time had come to do my bit about it, and with some trepidation I sought out Mark Burleigh, Head of UHL Chaplaincy, to talk over the need for a non-religious Chaplaincy Visitor.

INTERVIEWER: How were you received?

ELEANOR: Mark was very welcoming, but remember this was new ground for him too, and I wasn't ready to make things easy - I needed to make clear that the role should be seen as a right, having parity of status with the existing members of the team, and not as a favour established on an informal basis. The annual training day for hospital volunteers was fast approaching, and to his credit, Mark was very quick to invite me to participate. After several months of terrier-like activity from me, coupled with Mark's progressive spirit and commendable courage in the face of occasionally strongly worded opposition from some of his colleagues, it was accepted that I should join the chaplaincy team as a volunteer humanist visitor for those patients, visitors and staff of no religion.

INTERVIEWER: So now you have established the role, you must be overwhelmed with demands if the need is really as strong as you say - 16% is just about 1 in 6 people!

ELEANOR: There is still much to be done. For example, at the moment there is little awareness of my role, although my name is beginning to appear in some of the chaplaincy leaflets and publicity. However, more than this is needed because the non-religious have grown not to expect anything specific of the chaplaincy, and, unlike other members of the chaplaincy team, I am not permitted to approach patients uninvited (a piece of discrimination that still needs resolving). However, my patient visits have been mutually very positive experiences, which give me a lot of encouragement.

Selected patients are being asked by Chaplaincy to complete a survey into their religious status. This survey could be interpreted as a way of delaying or casting

doubt on the need for non-religious team members, but I accept that the status quo will not change overnight and I think the intentions are positive. We secularists will need to win over the existing order by understanding their anxieties, and with our competence and compassion we'll overcome their prejudices.

Clearly, the Census should make such a survey unnecessary, but if we must have one it should perhaps not ask how people classify themselves, but should be about what they want from a service they pay for - whether they use it or not. And this raises another concern: some members of the team are paid out of hospital funds; shouldn't we have a paid post for a non-religious member?

INTERVIEWER: Ah - so when it comes down to it, this is all about money.

ELEANOR: No more than for existing paid Pastoral Visitors. I need to make a living like anyone else, so the time I can devote to this work as a volunteer is limited. As awareness increases, I have no doubt that the demand will soon come to exceed one person's capacity, paid or not, and I hope that other qualified secularists will come forward as volunteers. When (because it has to happen sooner rather than later) a paid post becomes available, I may decide to be considered as a candidate, but for me the important thing is the establishment of the principle.

INTERVIEWER: I've been meaning to ask you - you use a number of terms like 'non-religious', 'atheist', 'humanist', 'secular'. Which of these are you?

ELEANOR: You could mention some more - agnostic, rationalist, freethinker, even 'bright'. I am most of these - and much more. We are all part of the greater human family. I don't believe in - and certainly don't worship - a supernatural being. For me what matters is the good of humanity and human compassion. Our moral guide should be in making the best analysis we can, individually and collectively, of the consequences of our actions. Of course what we read can help inform these decisions, but can also mislead us if we try to apply ancient principles out of context. As the chaplaincy mission statement makes clear, all team members are here for all staff, patients and visitors. To my mind the fine distinctions of classification are counter-productive - they are at the same time divisive and a denial of individuality.

INTERVIEWER: You have been working as a volunteer Pastoral Visitor for several months now. How have you found the experience?

ELEANOR: Obviously my conversations with individual patients and staff are confidential, so I can't go into details. As I would have expected, I have had a mixed reaction from staff, some of whom entered a caring profession from a sense of religious vocation. Others welcomed a breath of fresh air and have undertaken to ensure that the patients in their care are aware of this new addition to the service.

INTERVIEWER: That seems to be a good point to end our interview with Leicester Hospitals' Humanist Pastoral Visitor. Thank you very much, Eleanor. Do you have any closing words for our readers?

ELEANOR: Thank you. Yes, I'd like to thank the individuals who have been with me in this achievement for equality and diversity in Leicester, and hope that our example will soon be taken up elsewhere - in other towns and cities across the country, and also in other institutions - the schools, universities, prisons and armed forces. Remember, whether you're religious or not, chaplaincy services are there for you so do ask for a pastoral visit. And remember when completing those forms and surveys - their results are used to apportion resources to which you as a tax payer have contributed.

INTERVIEWER: And I think you had a specific request ...

ELEANOR: Oh, yes.

The Chaplaincy Department have various religious texts available from which people might seek comfort, guidance, inspiration. A non-religious alternative is very much needed. As we know, there is a wealth of non-religious literature. What I'd like your readers to do is to send me their suggestions for items for inclusion in an anthology of such works - poetry, songs, prose, pictures, cartoons, suitable for a hospital bedside book. And please do tell me about any other secular chaplaincy service you know about - I'd love to compare notes!

INTERVIEWER: Eleanor Davidson, thank you.

Eleanor S Davidson is a member of the British Humanist Association, National Secular Society and Leicester Secular Society. Eleanor is an accredited humanist celebrant for non-religious funerals, weddings/affirmations, namings, and is the Humanist/non-religious Pastoral Visitor in the UHL Chaplaincy Team..