



Faith Focus - Today's college chaplain: 'I'm a big brother figure'

Students seek support from captains over stress rater than faith guidance, Peter McGuire writes in The Irish Times.

Scott Evans doesn't look like a typical chaplain: there's the hipster beard, the casual clothes and his very relaxed manner, for a start.

The 33-year-old [Church of Ireland](#) UCD chaplain is a regular at [Electric Picnic](#), where his

Paradoxology tent has five prayer installations but also offers free tea, coffee and biscuits in exchange for a promise to do a good deed for someone else at the festival.

His podcast, *The Graveyard Shift*, looks at life and faith in [Ireland](#) today and has topped the iTunes podcast charts.

Evans spent a large part of his childhood in [Bangladesh](#) – a majority Muslim country with a history of secularism – after his father moved there to work in development.

He arrived in UCD in the midst of a controversy with almost €2 million in public funds being spent annually to employ chaplains in colleges and universities – despite only a handful of students showing up to weekly Masses.

In a world where most students are either barely or not at all religious, why on Earth would any student want to talk to him or his colleagues, two full-time Catholic priests and a part-time Methodist? Why not just go to a counsellor?

He's about to answer when his phone rings.

It's his fiancée, and she's having a fantasy football league crisis. Evans talks her through some options and then returns to me.

“Fair question. I’m really more of a big brother figure that people can unload on. Counsellors play a crucial role in taking people on a therapeutic journey over a series of sessions.

“For some people, that’s not what they need; sometimes they just need to vent or talk to someone outside their family or social circle. And, while there is always an urgent clinic for people who need help immediately, there can be a long waiting list to see the counsellor.”

Students come to Evans and his colleagues about financial worries, exam stress and relationship problems.

Sometimes they just call in to shoot the breeze or check in with him. Occasionally they chat about their faith, or lack thereof.

Students have called in because they have a crisis pregnancy, or because they are either struggling with their sexuality or experiencing problems from other people.

Non-judgemental role

“My role is completely non-judgemental. It is not my job to direct someone’s journey,” he says.

“My job is to create space for them to be able to step back, examine their journey and help them understand themselves.

“For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, my role is also to love them and create space for them. I was on a panel for the ‘[Gay in Galway](#)’ Pride event years ago, along with various LGBT representatives. I didn’t speak. I just listened and, at the end, said I was sorry for how we had failed to love them and failed to listen.”

Perhaps the biggest issue facing the students he ministers to, however, is grief.

“I see students whose parents have passed away, and that is really hard. They sometimes think their friends are sick of listening to them, but they can come to myself, or my colleagues, and talk about their memories and how they feel lost.”

At this point, he gets visibly emotional and takes a moment to compose himself.

He’s brimming with ideas and enthusiasm. There’s a short film in the works, where students will tell their story in three lines, as well as an exhibition of smiling people which only shows their eyes.

Whatever about his contribution, the wider question of whether students or taxpayers should fund chaplains is controversial. Evans's salary, however, is paid by the church.

“I was supposed to study marketing,” Evans says. “The night before I was supposed to accept my place in DIT, I was praying for guidance. Was this the right call for me?”

“I'd been involved in youth ministry in my local church in [Greystones](#), Co [Wicklow](#). I loved it and I knew I wanted to be involved with ministry. So I found a leaflet for Bible college and decided to go for it. We studied pastoral care, leadership, the New and Old Testaments and what faith looks like in Ireland today.”

As we walk through campus, students greet Evans warmly. Are they religious, like him? What denomination are they?

Belief systems

“I generally don't know,” he says. “I don't usually know whether or not a student has faith, because if they don't bring it up, I don't either.”

“I don't want to get into someone's belief system and try to merge it with my own.”

And how does he get on with students?

“Oi, Chris”, yells Evans at a passing student.

“What do you want, priest?” the student shouts back.

They appear to antagonise each other. Then, Evans laughs and beckons Chris over. Smiling, they give each other a quick but warm manhug.

Chris immediately – and forcefully – makes it clear to me that he is a nihilist, and not religious.

But, over the past year, he is one of the many students that this unlikely chaplain has built a solid relationship with.

“He’s great on Biblical analysis, sure,” says Chris. “But I know that if there is someone in need, I can send them to Scott and he will help them with whatever they need. He’s like a religiously funded but non-religious counsellor.

“I was sick and he convinced me to go to the hospital; he even brought me there. There’s never any preaching. He’s good in a crisis and I am always telling people to go to see him. Even though I’m a nihilist.”

One of the most rewarding parts of Evans's work has been the interfaith dialogues and finding common cause with others.

“That’s a big part of my job as chaplain: encouraging the dialogue that benefits us a society.

“I don’t think it benefits us to say that there should be no talk of religion anywhere but at the same time, everyone has to be invited into the conversation and faith should never be used as a weapon.”

Do we really need college chaplains?

Just a handful of students turn up to weekly Masses held by college chaplains in a number of third-level colleges.

Religious organisations have defended the work of chaplains and say Mass attendance is not a fair measure of their contribution. Instead, they say the spiritual support and pastoral care they provide to students is a much better reflection on what they do.

Groups such as Atheist Ireland, however, say there should be little place for State or student-funded chaplaincy services.

Their concerns prompted a report by the [Higher Education Authority](#) last year which found that the €2 million spent on chaplaincy services was funded mainly through a combination of State grants and student contributions.

Chaplains' salaries ranging from about €35,000 (St Patrick's College in Drumcondra) to €66,000 per year (University of Limerick).

Dublin Institute of Technology was found to have spent the most (€245,720 in total) on chaplaincy services annually

The report recommended that all colleges must ensure these appointments are in line with public sector rules within 12 months.

Lay people will be also entitled to apply for State-funded chaplaincy posts in third-level colleges under changes aimed at ensuring they meet public sector recruitment rules.

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