Celebration of Chaplaincy Sermon

22 May 2022 at 8am and 9.30am

St Jude’s Brighton

Good morning, for those of you who don’t know me I am Susan McLeod, and I am the Senior Chaplain for Health, Anglicare SA, and the community. Thank you for allowing me to be here this morning.

The reading from Acts 16 is particularly relevant to the ministry of Chaplaincy. The Acts of the Apostles records and reflects the early church’s ministry and Acts focuses on Paul’s missionary journeys. The setting is the early Christian church community and its wrestle with “questions that arise due to the changing character, of their expressions of faith, as they become predominantly Gentile. Luke, through his writings, helps his communities to know how to remain faithful to tradition while reinterpreting it for their new circumstances”. This is very similar to the present times where the Christian church, and in particular the Anglican church, is struggling and wrestling with how we express our faith, asking how we remain relevant in Australia and stay true to our faith.

Acts 16:9-10 Paul sees a vision of a Macedonian man “standing, begging him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia to help us”. Paul understands this vision as God’s direction to him, so Paul and his companions set off for Macedonia without delay. They arrive a few days later, and on the Sabbath, day go to a place of prayer, a synagogue, where they meet Lydia. Lydia is a businesswoman of some wealth, a Gentile, a worshiper of God, sympathetic to Judaism. Paul and his companions were not looking to meet with women, they were answering a call to help a Macedonian man, instead they sit and speak with women, and Lydia, a woman not from Macedonia, but from Thyatira, a city in Asia Minor. Lydia’s heart was touched by the message Paul shared with them and begged for her and her household to be baptized. She then invited them to stay with her in her house. Paul and his companions would have had biases around women and their place in their world however they put these aside and are led to prayer with women and God works through this encounter.

Chaplaincy is God’s ministry and God leads chaplains to those God would have the chaplains to meet with. In John, 13: verse 34 Jesus says, A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

As Christians we are very familiar with this verse, and we experience and know that God loves us deeply. The challenge then is to ask ourselves do we love one another, do we love the people we encounter each day, do we love our neighbours, our colleagues, do we love the sick, the needy, the different? This is not only a question for us now but has influenced the direction of the church’s ministry in the world.

Chaplaincy emerged during the 19th Century as part of the church’s response to their religious beliefs which was to ‘care for the poor, sick, and needy, and defend their faith. Chaplaincy in our major public hospitals, up until as recently as 2012, was provided by the major denominations. The Anglican church paid for clergy to be present in the hospital and to minister to Anglican’s in the hospitals. Chaplaincy also extended from our parish churches, with the clergy taking weekly services in the Residential Aged Care homes and visiting the Anglican residents offering support and care. Parish Priests, alongside many parishioners acted as chaplains in the community, supplying visits, meals, transport, home communions, using their vocations such as nursing, social work, trade skills, and the list can go on, to offer God’s love to those around them.

Overtime constraints around how we deliver chaplaincy has evolved. Anglican chaplains currently work in diverse contexts. We have chaplains who minister in the major public hospitals in Adelaide, the Glenside Health Service and in the private sector, and the Adelaide Clinic. We have chaplains in Anglicare SA supporting and caring for residents in our Aged Care Centres and working with and supporting Anglicare SA staff across the whole organisation. The diversity of chaplaincy in the community is clear when we look at where our community chaplains minister. They are found at Flinders University, Somerton Lifesaving club, A Bikers Club for men focusing on mental health, in the SA Police, in Yatala Prison, St John Ambulance, RSL Veterans Aged Care Centre Myrtle Bank, Mothers Union, Emergency Disaster Relief, and Community Chaplaincy. Our Chaplains are a hardworking, caring, passionate, people, some are lay-people and some are clergy, some are paid, and many are volunteers. Our Chaplains are the church’s face of God, meeting, and supporting the community, bringing God’s love, peace, reassurance, and comfort, by being a listening presence when asked. Chaplaincy is life giving for both the chaplain and the person they are supporting.

Our Anglican Chaplains do not work alone. They work as part of teams within bigger organisations. Chaplaincy is a multi-faith, ecumenical, approach to assisting community to grapple with the issues of life and to search for meaning, and like the early church, chaplaincy services are re-evaluating how our faith can be expressed in our ever evolving and changing multi-cultural Australia.

Before I started in my current role as Anglican Senior Chaplain for health and community, I was the Anglican Chaplain at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Part of the role was 1 day a week spent at the Glenside Health Service. I volunteered to do this and when I began was very nervous to be in this space as the clients in the service were very mentally unwell and at times unpredictable and the staff were somewhat suspicious of me the new chaplain. Overtime I began to build relationships with the clients and staff. Each week I would sit in the lounge areas of the Inpatient Rehabilitation Service and chat with clients. I would say hi to the staff and ask for any clients who may value a visit or conversation. I would engage in conversations with the staff, how was your weekend, how are you today. I attended the morning hand over meeting with all the allied health staff. My agenda was not to convert people but to bring Gods love and care to Glenside Health’s community and offer Christian ministry when asked.

About six months into my role, I accompanied a client who liked to have conversations each week, to a Glenside Health BBQ. I had my name badge on as we joined in the event. The psychologist from the Forensic Science Unit saw me and contacted me later to ask if I could take a service in his unit. I let him know that I am not a Priest and that I would be happy to take a service. I asked him what form he would like the service to take and he said he would be guided by me. So I took along my phone and speaker with praise and worship songs, we studied a Bible study booklet, we shared in reflecting on the bible reading, we prayed together, and we shared Communion from reserved sacrament. Each week I was always surprised at how elated I was after this service, the hope that I was able to share with them that Jesus was able to offer them forgiveness and transformation into new people, and the promise of eternal life. These men had committed serious crimes and this message was transformational for them. From a unit of 10 men I got from 2 – 9 people joining in.

Members from the Inpatient Rehab Service also saw me sharing a Bible reading with a client who requested this and they also asked to join me in weekly Bible reflection. Staff started to share their life challenges and joys. It was such a meaningful ministry for me and for those who engaged with. I went in with no agenda, I was there to offer support, care and compassion to all. I listened. Amazing things happened at Glenside Health through the grace of God. As we read in Acts, the church was going through challenging times of change, like the challenges we are facing in the church today. Our context has changed and new ways of engaging with people in the community is needed. Chaplaincy is one way of achieving this.

Our Chaplains, like Paul and his companions in Acts, are led by God. They are available to the community, to clients, patients, residents, staff, regardless of their religious or denominational boundaries. Chaplains listen, and are present, while the people they meet think about the big questions of life, respecting and valuing their perspectives.

An important part of chaplaincy is also to support Anglican’s. A brochure listing the contact details for Anglican Chaplains in most contexts is available on your way out. Please contact the chaplains or their team and let them know if you would like pastoral care and they will offer support. Or please contact me and I will connect you with a chaplain. We are also always recruiting new volunteers to support our chaplains especially in our public hospitals and in residential aged care sites. Please contact me if you would like more information.

I began with the verse from John 13 verse 34. How will you and I respond to this? Is chaplaincy something that God is calling you to be involved in. Are you already acting as a chaplain in your community? We are commanded – to Love one another as I have loved you.

I would like to finish with a A prayer for chaplaincy sourced from MITE Chaplaincy in Liverpool 2019.

Lord,

May we all be moved to be chaplains wherever You place us.

May we be your hands and feet, bringing blessings to those we encounter as we receive your blessings.

May we be your voice as we speak into distress and chaos, speaking for justice and love as you speak through us.

May our hearts be wholly yours, loving all without exception as you love us.

Give us the faith to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with you, our God. Amen.