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# Discipleship and chaplaincy

Discipleship is not the purpose of most chaplaincy roles, writes hospital chaplain Sarah Crane – but it still features in surprising ways



**Y**ou might not expect to read about institutional chaplaincy in a magazine about discipleship. This is probably particularly true in health, though would apply to other settings, because of what I would see as appropriate boundaries of restraint in a system that is for people of all faiths and worldviews. It was only when applying for my first full time chaplaincy role I discovered the word 'proselytization', and having looked it up it seemed to me this was going to be one of the key differences between being a church minister and a healthcare chaplain.

If discipleship is about following in the way of Jesus, being his apprentices perhaps, then it might seem true to say discipleship is not a feature of healthcare chaplaincy in an NHS hospital. However, It is true that among the people I meet in my work there are many Christians, patients, visitors and staff. One might argue that Christians are more likely to access chaplaincy in a hospital due to its long history as a 'Christian ministry' which pervades, despite the broadening of healthcare chaplaincy and the inclusion of many other worldviews, including non-religious and non-theistic.

When meeting those Christians in hospital, or those who are curious about Christianity and how they might engage with it, there could be said to be an element of discipleship for a healthcare chaplain. In walking alongside them. In being a sounding board about how they might engage with their faith alongside their experience. Often in puzzling through how they make sense of their pain, of their uncertain future, and of their changed relationship to themselves, the people who matter to them, the world around them and - that which is beyond them - the existential. This is a faltering and stilted form of discipleship, forged in moments of raw struggle and real human experience. This sometimes takes place in a single encounter or might be spread over many years when a person or their loved one is dealing with an illness that sees them admitted to hospital repeatedly.

Interactions with staff present another area of, at times, unexpected discipleship opportunities. I have been at Milton Keynes University Hospital for 10 years this autumn and it has been such a privilege to walk with some of the Christian members of staff who are trying

to puzzle something out in their own discipleship journey.

The enormous way their setting adds to their own discipleship journey is a final area of discipleship that is a reality for chaplains in every context. To witness so much pain and suffering, to see the NHS at work, particularly through a challenge like Covid-19, to work alongside dedicated and skilled professionals, both registered and not, to see people of every worldview facing their own ending, and so much more besides, has profoundly impacted my practice of following Jesus in every area of my life.

Discipleship might not be the purpose of most chaplaincy roles, but I can see it woven through my own chaplaincy in surprising, creative and life-giving ways.

**Sarah Crane is the Head of Chaplaincy at Milton Keynes University Hospital and Chair of the Baptist Chaplaincy Forum and the Free Churches Group Healthcare Chaplaincy Steering Group**

*The enormous way their setting adds to their own discipleship journey is a reality for chaplains*