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## God's intermediaries: a study into chaplains' information behaviour

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** This study investigates the information behaviours that chaplains across the UK and Ireland use in their day-to-day work when interacting with vulnerable people.

**Methods.** Eight chaplains working with vulnerable people were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed to find out how chaplains acted as intermediaries and what other information behaviour techniques they use in their work.

**Analysis.** Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed interviews, the four main themes of information work, work duties, ways of working and faith were discovered.

**Findings.** A range of information behaviours were found to be used by chaplains when interacting with their clients. These information behaviours included information chunking, avoidance and acting as an information intermediary.

**Conclusion.** This paper shows the range of information behaviours that chaplains utilise when working with vulnerable communities.

## Introduction

**The term chaplain is a** historical Christian term dating back to pre-4<sup>th</sup> century (Britannica, n.d.); it was originally denoted for overseers of the St Martin's cape, roughly translated to *capelan in Latin*. These chaplains were appointed by the King of France during the Merovingian and Carolingian periods and were stationed in 'chapels' (Britannica, n.d.). In modern times, chaplains may still be found in chapels or 'special ministries' (The United Reformed Church, n.d.) however they hold a different meaning now. A chapel, now mainly called prayer room (Gilliat-Ray, 2005), is often a small room found within churches or larger institutions such as airports, universities, or hospitals (Gilliat-Ray, 2005). From the 20th century, the profession of chaplaincy is no longer a strictly Christian vocation but serves *'the needs of multireligious careseekers and train caregivers of various religious backgrounds'* and *'open to all comers, including Buddhists, humanists, and atheists'* (Sanford and Michon, 2019, p. 1). However, especially in North America, Europe, and British Commonwealth chaplaincy practices *'many of the educational, training, and professional standards for certification or licensing are still normed against Christian expectations and legacy organizational structures'* (Sanford and Michon, 2019, p. 1).

A chaplain's key role within institutions is to provide spiritual care to those who may need it, however chaplains can offer a range of other services depending on what is required by a client, or the institution and sector within which they work. These services can range from signposting to other services such as debt help or marriage counselling to performing religious services such as funerals and worship (The Salvation Army, n.d.-b). These services are not restricted to any particular faith, with a lot of services being open to people who hold no faith beliefs (Hurley, 2018; The Salvation Army, n.d.-a).

Chaplains are found in many sectors ranging from common areas, such as prisons (Sundt and Cullen, 1998), universities (Aune et al., 2019), hospitals and hospices (Klitzman et al., 2022). Lately, chaplains have been employed into areas

such as shopping centres (Hutchinson, 2013), bus companies (Workplace Chaplain CIGB, 2013) and sea-ports (Cadge and Skaggs, 2019). Although the role may change depending in which sector they are employed, a large proportion of the core responsibilities normally remains the same. Chaplains found in the healthcare sector, offer pastoral support to both staff and patients (Tartaglia et al., 2022); many chaplains are also taking on the role of a mediator in actual patient's healthcare (Głusiec and Suchodolska, 2022; Harris, 2018). Within prisons, chaplains can perform a variety of roles ranging from coordinating religious programmes, to calming inmates (Sundt and Cullen, 1998).

The role of a chaplain as an information intermediary (Buchanan et al., 2019) is underexplored. A lot is known about what chaplains do within their role of providing pastoral care, however there is less knowledge about their information work and their information interactions while working with clients.

## Related work

### What are information intermediaries?

Nicol et al., (2022) defines an information intermediary as someone who acts as a medium or agent of information for others. Information intermediaries carry out many roles within the information sector. Womack (2002) defines an intermediary as collecting, organising, and distributing information to their clients.

Information intermediaries are often associated with librarians, who help people find the information or correct books they are looking for (Stellrecht et al., 2022; Vitak et al., 2018; B. White, 1986; H. S. White, 1992) and nurses, who help people understand diagnoses and find the best place for treatment (Ahluwalia et al., 2016; Buchanan and Nicol, 2019; Fourie and Meyer, 2014). However, the role of an intermediary can be taken on by anyone who has knowledge and experience that can be passed onto a someone who needs or wants that same knowledge or experiences.

## The chaplain's role as an information intermediary

The role of a chaplain as an information intermediary is under-explored within literature. Chaplains often act as intermediaries in the traditional sense, for example between departments at a hospital (McCurry et al., 2021) or acting as intermediary between the state and their organisation (Furseth, 2003).

Within an information intermediary role, chaplains provide guidance and knowledge pertaining to an individual's personal life that may be sensitive and specific. They do this by signposting to other partner organisations who may be specialised and may need referrals that an individual cannot get themselves (Salvation Army Housing Association - SAHA, 2014) or by providing knowledge and information regarding spiritual and pastoral care.

Within prisons the chaplain's role has changed significantly. In the past, chaplains previously held many roles including teaching and facilitating family contacts, and become a key figure in this sector (McKelvey, 1977). However, these roles have slowly been replaced with other specialists, resulting in chaplains once again having mainly a religious role.

Unlike other intermediaries, where information is given and received without the need to build rapport with clients, this rapport build-up is crucial for chaplains when discussing sensitive topics (Allen et al., 2014).

## How chaplains meet the information needs of clients

When discussing sensitive needs or situations it is important for both the chaplain and the client to tune in with each other so that communication issues can be mitigated, and the chaplain can provide the best guidance and best meet the needs of the client. This can be both speaking their preferred language if possible (Macritchie, 2001) or by using simple language that does not need to be explained in depth. Chaplains are advised to employ a motivational interviewing style (Miller and Rollnick, 2012) in their interactions with

patients who have alcohol (or other mental health) problems.

As chaplains work with people of different faith to their own, or no faith, it is crucial that they can adapt and provide the best possible guidance and support irrespective of beliefs. At times these may be challenging; Abu-Ras and Laird (2011) discuss that specific needs by Muslims were not addressed by interfaith chaplains, and that chaplains may hold unconscious prejudice against Muslims as some chaplains may not know the specific needs of Muslim clients.

While it is known that chaplains act as intermediaries in various situations, there is little research into how they carry out this role and what techniques they use to do it effectively.

## Research questions

1. What techniques do chaplains use to be an effective information intermediary?
2. What are the information behaviours that chaplains use during their work?

The first research question came from reading literature such as Furseth (2003) and McCurry et al. (2021) and how chaplains act as an intermediary in a traditional sense, rather than from an information science perspective. The second research question came from a lack of research based on chaplains in the information science field. This question was kept vague to focus on most information behaviours without necessarily excluding specific ones.

## Methodology

Semi-structured interviews with eight chaplains (5 women and 3 men) were conducted in 2023. This data collection type was chosen over other methods as it allows participants to share their stories and experiences in more detail than possible in surveys (Connaway and Radford, 2021). Participants of the study were given the choice to be interviewed in person or Zoom; most interviews occurred on Zoom. Interviews were scheduled to last one hour however some kind chaplains took part in

longer interviews with one interview lasting three hours.

Initial recruitment was via a chaplain working within a managerial position of the Salvation Army who passed on recruitment information to colleagues. Once five interviews were completed, further recruitment was done by emailing organisations within the homelessness sector, who had chaplains working within and asking if they would be interested in partaking. The chaplains were chosen to be those working within the homelessness, elderly people, or veterans care sectors. This was to give a focus on chaplaincy work with vulnerable populations rather than in organisational settings.

The interviews had six focus points relating to a chaplain's information work and aimed to gather information an overarching idea of what chaplains do within their role and how the information behaviours fit into this role. The interview prompts were:

1. How long have you been a chaplain?
2. What training did you need to become a chaplain? Did you need any specific training for any specific sectors or roles? Who gave this training?
3. What kind of pastoral/spiritual care do you provide support with?
4. How formal are encounters? i.e. formal offices?
5. What connections do you have to other organisations to provide specialist help?
6. Is there any else we have not discussed that is important or distinctive to chaplaincy?

Interview questions were framed to focus on the chaplains' techniques and own experiences during their time working with their clients

rather than focusing on the experiences of said clients. This focus allowed the chaplains to be broad and avoid any client's specifics.

The interview questions acted as prompt points with each question being tailored to the participant, where they would be encouraged to share experiences and stories specific to them. This led to chaplains sharing their various experiences, and although some chaplains did apologise for not directly answering the question asked, it was at this time that they shared their most interesting experiences and stories.

During interviews, when discussing the concept of *information* and what it is, it was found that this term was not helpful to some chaplains. When asked about their information intermediary working, some chaplains stated how they acted as intermediaries in a managerial sense, rather than their role as an information intermediary to their clients. To further clarify what information could mean, the terms 'guidance' and 'advice' were used.

## Analysis approach

Before analysis could be conducted, the transcripts of each interview were cleaned and polished for ease of reading. Analysis was conducted in multiple stages. A first pass was carried out on printed transcripts using different coloured highlighters to find reoccurring themes between participants and their stories, while also finding anything interesting that stood out (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

After the first pass, themes and codes were carried into Excel where further cleaning and analysis took place find missing themes and refine any existing themes further, until four themes were identified (Table 1).

Theme	Description
Work Duties	This theme covers the tasks chaplains carry out in their workplace.
Information Work	How chaplains work with information on behalf of their clients.
Ways of Working	This theme covers how chaplains describe their work.
Faith	This theme covers the ways that chaplains mention faith and its related activities.

**Table 1.** Themes identified in the chaplains' interviews.

## Findings

In this section we report on the major findings under each theme listed above. All names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

### Work duties

The work duties of a chaplain can range from advocating for clients and being available for pastoral care. Alongside these responsibilities, some chaplains work with other support workers to help their clients develop. This can range from helping with documentation for jobs and places to stay and 'accessing online and getting an email address' (P5), or to more larger tasks such as helping them 'learn the skills that they need to learn to keep the family together' (P1).

Chaplains also stated that they discuss whatever is on their client's mind whether this is faith related or not and act as a listener. This can range from bereavement, which came up a lot during the interviews, to the weather. One chaplain mentioned that they meet with one of their clients once a week and the client 'offload[s] the week' (P4).

### Funerals

Chaplains often get called to carry out funerals, most of the chaplains interviewed stating that they were asked to perform or attend a funeral on behalf of their clients or client's loved ones. The high frequency of funerals may be due to the relationship between the chaplain and the clients bringing a personal touch to the funeral.

*When the funeral director phones me, I will take them. If they have been a resident in the home or in the hospital and or if they have a connection with the hospital. One of the staff looks after their mum at home, and she asks me, yes, the answer is, yes (P6)*

Another chaplain stated that they were asked to play the bagpipes at a client's funeral. This shows that even though the chaplain could take the funeral procession, clients may just want them to attend as support (P5).

### Information work

This theme details the various information roles in which the chaplains engage on behalf of their clients. In many of these cases they are providing support with information and conducting information tasks that the clients could not carry out themselves.

#### Information sharing: External organisations

Chaplains act as intermediaries between their clients and other organisations. Most chaplains stated that due to the nature of the people they help, they often act as intermediaries between clients, local emergency services and local government. One organisation that chaplains mentioned frequently is social services, an organisation within the local government that helps people maintain standards of living. Social services were mentioned as chaplains and their organisation refer people to and from social services:

*Families who have been referred through social services are at risk of having their*



*child removed for safeguarding reasons and it's really as an intervention and an assessment to see if there's something that can be done with that family to help them. (P1)*

#### **Information sharing: God**

Chaplains often act as intermediaries between God and their clients, with some clients asking chaplains whether they can pass messages or prayers to God directly, acting as an intermediary:

*People with quite a strong thinking that they're really not worthy to approach God at all and people who have fallen out with God say they've got anger towards him, but still, they're happy enough to leave a message with you for you to pass on. (P2)*

*one of our residents thinks I have a direct line to God. (P6)*

Chaplains stated that they will pray with their clients present, or alone in their own time. The chaplains stated that they will always ask for permission to pray with their clients so that if a client agrees to be prayed for, the chaplain says the prayer aloud so that the client can hear it. If a client disagrees, some chaplains stated that they will still add their client to their prayer list and pray for them in their own time.

#### **Information sharing: personal and stories**

Chaplains were often called upon to share personal information with other individuals. One chaplain mentioned that they were asked by their client to share some bad news that they received at the hospital with the client's father, as the client was worried about how the father would react due to already being sick himself (P3).

Another chaplain, discussing world war veterans under his care, stated that he sees his own role as a storyteller and archiver. He reported that, after clients die, he shares the stories they have told him either at their funeral or directly to their family. He said:

*The staff all get quite close to the residents, so when they die there's a lot of hurt and upset and as Chaplain, part of my job is to sit and talk with them if they want to and tell*

*stories. They have stories to tell about this person's life, and if I'm taking at that said person's funeral. Those stories are important because the family might not know those bits. So, when I can add those in and tell the family, that even in the hospital. Their dad didn't lose his sense of humour, or he told this story to one of the nurses. They quite often say, do you know, we didn't know that. (P6)*

#### **Information chunking**

The types of people that chaplains interact with may change every day and they may have different levels of information literacy or capacity to deal with information. Some chaplains stated that they make information simpler by using easy to understand words and by breaking down and 'Just giving them what they need for that time and then you can go back and build upon it' (P1).

This is echoed by other Chaplains stating that when speaking to clients, they keep what they say simple and speak in simple terms, avoiding long words that may be misunderstood: 'I say it how it is, why would I write something that's not people, long words and nobody understands? When I speak, I don't use the long words, none whatever.' (P3)

#### **Information Provision**

Chaplains stated multiple different ways that they provide information to their clients. One chaplain stated that they create 'a newsletter for all the activities up to December' (P3). They have also translated all their leaflets into Ukrainian so that it is more accessible.

When new members join their organisation, most chaplains stated that they give their clients a welcome leaflet detailing information about themselves and what services are available. This is further echoed by chaplain stating that they give their clients a card welcoming them to their new home along with some information. 'When someone moves from the centre, we try and get their address and I'll send a card and just say welcome to your new house. Here's my number if you need me.' (P3)

#### **Information avoidance**

Information avoidance was a behaviour that appeared in multiple interviews, used to help

clients avoid information overload. *'Just give them what they need for that for that time. Then you can go back and build on that.'* (P1)

Although the client might need the information in the future, the use of holding information back that the client avoids overload and allows the client to carry on and take actionable steps.

One chaplain helps clients cope with too much information at once, by occupying their mind with another unrelated activity even though the activity was faith related. The chaplain (Sandra) discussed spending the day with her client (Angela) at the hospital where Angela received bad news. Sandra and Angela went for food at McDonalds where Angela had questions about the future. Sandra didn't believe Angela was able to deal with these answers at that point in time so gave Angela a Bible verse to colour in to calm her mind and therefore avoid receiving more information until she was in a better position to deal with it.

### Information finding and use

When a chaplain is not able to give information directly, it is important that they are able to help their clients find and use the correct information. Any information that is found and used, must be personal to a person's situation. If not, it will not be as useful and could be worse for the client if it is too generic.

One situation a chaplain discussed was taking a client to a mosque, as he wanted to explore the faith of Islam however, the client didn't know where to start. As the chaplain was not a Muslim herself, she was able to facilitate the client to talk to the local Iman and learn about his faith:

*He's a Muslim, but so, he does not practice every day. So, in the conversations, he was like, asking me about it, and he was kind of questioning, thinking about things. So, I actually facilitated the fact that said, listen, if you'd like too, I'll take you along. So, I went along to the central mosque with them, and I just parked and stayed in the car park and facilitated them to go in to be able to speak to like one of the Iman.* (P3)

### Ways of working

This theme focuses on the findings that are related to how a chaplain describes the way in which they carry out their work duties listed above.

#### Love

Love was a recurring theme that chaplains mentioned during interviews. They embody it during their work; some chaplains mentioned that they tell the clients that they are loved during their interactions: *'some people haven't been told they're loved. You know, and just telling somebody that they are loved, and they burst into tears.'* (P3)

Chaplains stated that they tell the clients they are loved as some of the clients may not have been told that they are loved in many years if they have fallen on tough times. Telling a client that they are loved, has an emotional effect on them but also it helps build a relationship with the client.

This is built upon chaplains telling clients that God loves them, even if the clients cannot feel it, even if they have had a bad experience with God:

*God loves you; you know you are loved by God, and actually, within these human relationships. One community is being bad, the other community, at least, for now it's been very helpful and very positive. But, you know, where does this leave you with God?* (P2)

#### Reactive

Unlike other support worker roles or more structured chaplaincy role such as those in hospitals or prisons, where meetings are structured and may take place in private rooms, all chaplains we interviewed stated that most of their meetings are sporadic and often are casual in nature. With many chaplains stating that it's about *meeting people where they are:*

*I'll read the room literally to see what's going on, and literally go from there.* (P1)

*Where they start a conversation, it can often be where they want to carry it out.* (P2)

The above quotes show that both the chaplain and the client may start a conversation with each other anywhere they are. This does depend on whether the conversation is sensitive in nature. In these circumstances, the chaplains stated that they are likely to take it into an office or a nearby private room.

One chaplain has a distinctive way of interacting with their clients stating that they have a chair outside of their office, designated as the 'chaplain's chair' (P3). This chair is intended to foster conversations with the chaplain while limiting formal barriers. They go on to state that if a client would like to have a formal chat, they will go into their office.

### **Building relationships**

Building relationships with clients was a key subject that was brought up during interviews with all chaplains agreeing that the relationship that they build is critical to how much the clients trust and are willing to share with them. Building relationships can be done in many ways with some chaplains finding that sharing their own vulnerabilities and stories working: 'Unless you're open and genuine with them then, yeah, they're not going to trust you. They're not going to. They're not going to tell you the story and they're not gonna want to.' (P6)

Some chaplains found that just being friendly and interested in a client's life and asking questions about their day starts the spark of a relationship and going from there:

*It's gradual building that trust and you have to work at it. But it's it. It's sometimes as simple as not, just asking the How are you? But it's like, so what did you do this weekend? And then just developing that relationship or listening to something they've said and just going deeper. And then them realizing actually you're interested in them. It might even be down to just sending somebody a birthday card or having a recognition of something. (P1)*

### **Quotes**

Chaplains often use quotes for inspiration and motivation within their work. Chaplains stated that they use both faith related and non-secular material. Multiple chaplains stated that both

clients and staff liked seeing the quotes as forms of inspiration with one chaplain (P3) stating that she has created 'Monday musings, Wednesday wonderings and Friday feelings' as a form of frequent motivation during the week'.

### **Faith**

This section shows the findings regarding faith related behaviours and activities that do not fit into another theme or have a higher focus on faith than other themes.

#### **Prayer list**

Most chaplains, specifically those working in the Salvation army mentioned that they keep and update a prayer list. This list details those who the chaplain is going to pray for and why they are going to pray for them. After praying for a client, chaplains stated that they tell them that they have prayed for so that they know that they have been prayed for.

*If it was, like, say really serious thing at times I will say, listen. I'll keep you on my on my prayer list. (P4)*

*I'll say just to remind you, you were on my prayer list this month. If there's anything that you need specific prayer for, you know where I am. I'm always here and I'm always listening. (P3)*

#### **Acting as an Agent of God**

Chaplains mentioned various ways that they acted as an agent of God and that they embodied God in their work. This was mainly stated as God carrying out the main work and the chaplain simply being a vessel for 'God to do His job': 'it's not my job to save people. That's his, that's God's. I can only take them so far'. (P3)

One recurring theme that chaplains mentioned is the idea that God has given us all 'gifts' in the form of skills and talents and we can use these skills and talents for the betterment of others.

*You know it's amazing what God can do with your gifts. (P1)*

*Not everybody's got the gift of time and energy to do this, and that's all the difference. (P8)*



### Adapting to other faiths

While chaplains may be predominantly Christian, they still interact with both people of different faiths and people without a faith. Due to this, it's important that chaplains can adapt to these different needs and still able to offer information and guidance if required. As shown above, one way that chaplains adapt to other faiths is by signposting people to more experienced people who may have the correct answers.

Another chaplain stated that they find other faiths are likely to engage once they know *'that you're not trying to like, you know, bang on their door and tell them to convert to Jesus Christ the Lord'* (P2). They go on to discuss that they will offer Christian advice if the client chooses. *'When it's another religion particularly, you can share with them what the Christian tools are'* (P2).

## Discussion

Previous work such as Aune et al. (2023) suggested that the interactions with clients and patients were more structured, taking in place in rooms with seats and often scheduled. However, at least within the vulnerable people sector, the interactions are more free form and sporadic with interactions taking place wherever the client and the chaplain meet, and moving to somewhere more formal if the topic demanded it. This sporadicity also helps build connections with the clients, allowing them to share information without the walls that could come from these formal interactions.

A reoccurring theme that appeared in interviews was the theme of love. Every chaplain stated that the work they do comes from this position of love and more specifically, channelling God's love into their work and passing this love onto their clients. Using love in this way allows chaplains to gain a closer relationship to their clients through acceptance and non-judgement, this in turn helps chaplains to further their support of their clients by building a relationship, another common theme stated above. Therefore, the information work undertaken by chaplains we have spoken to are motivated by love. The position of love is echoed in Torevell and McHugh (2022) who

found that chaplains use love as a base in which spiritual guidance. They go onto discuss how self-love should be used to measure self-worth rather than achievement in examinations or by how much wealth someone has.

The building of relationships itself was brought up many times during the interviews with it being a recurring theme with chaplains all in agreement that without these key relationships, then clients would not share sensitive information. Chaplains also need to allow clients to follow their own faiths and beliefs, without feeling pressured to adhere to the same beliefs of the chaplain as this could add further tension (Cadge and Sigalow, 2013).

Over time, the relationships built at the start lead to further trust which in turn will strengthen the relationships in a virtuous cycle. Due this relationship focus, chaplains activities often focus on relationship building (Jeuland et al., 2017). As shown above, when clients, or their loved ones get to know the chaplains, they may be asked to perform funerals due to the closeness of the chaplain and client, allowing them to speak on their behalf. This trust also allows chaplains to be able to advocate and personalise their relationships allowing them to help their clients even more.

Working with other organisations, both as an intermediary and generally linking with them is key to carry out the role of a chaplain (Furseth, 2003). The chaplain may need to share information with the other organisations or may be able to refer a client to them if they think it will be in the client's benefit. This can include formal situations, such as referring to an organisation such as social services or to an informal situation such as referring the client to the local community centre or sports club.

When dealing with information, both giving and receiving, chaplains use various techniques such as information chunking (Mayzner and Gabriel, 1963) and information avoidance (Sweeny et al., 2010) to allow their clients to get the most out of the guidance and advice, while also ensuring that they do not feel overwhelmed by large amounts of complicated or unnecessary information which could do more harm to the clients than good.

Chaplains often act as intermediaries between organisations. However, findings also show that some clients ask their chaplain to share messages and prayers between God and themselves for many reasons. This intermediary role is unique as although they are passing messages to God, they are doing so without receiving a response back with the chaplain only speculating what God might respond with.

Even though a chaplain comes from a position of faith and is more than happy to discuss this with their clients, most chaplains have found that this is not always helpful with their clients and choose to only use faith and its literature and stories, when the client is happy to hear it either by asking questions regarding faith or by agreeing to the chaplain asking if they're happy for faith to be brought up (Cadge and Sigalow, 2013). Chaplains may offer to pray for their clients, and add their name to their prayer list, even if they did not talk about faith in their interactions.

Although chaplains of different organisations were interviewed in this study and they spoke about a range of different scenarios, this is not representative of all organisations and religions. Any findings that discuss other faiths are of the chaplain's own views and experiences.

## Conclusion

Building a relationship of trust and love is key for chaplains so that the clients and people they interact with are comfortable sharing potentially sensitive topics. Chaplains have many ways to build the relationships ranging from just asking someone how they are to sharing their own vulnerabilities.

The findings and discussion above show that a chaplain's role within the homelessness and vulnerable sectors far exceeds the role as an agent of God on Earth. A chaplain's day is never the same, with many people coming from different backgrounds seeking support and guidance, both spiritual and not.

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