



TAUNTON TEAM CHAPLAINCY

IMPACT STORIES

2023

Foreword

The Christian think tank Theos tells us that chaplaincy is often the place in which people connect with the message of Christ as Good News rather than through conventional church. Whilst churches offer many good opportunities for people to gather to learn about Jesus and to receive help in many ways, we are conscious that Christ instructed his followers to 'Go into all the world' and chaplaincy is one way in which we can be obedient to that command.



**The Rt Revd Ruth
Worsley, Bishop of
Taunton**

Chaplaincy is expanding across our diocese and this booklet affords an opportunity to learn more about what is happening as Christians move out of their comfort zones and engage with their neighbours in the Taunton area.

I pray the stories will encourage you to pray and seek God's will for your own journey of faith.

Bishop Ruth is Patron of Taunton Team Chaplaincy

Who we are

The current community-focused chaplaincy activity in Taunton stems from an appraisal undertaken in 2005 by the Revd Dennis Cavaghan. This was commissioned by the local ecumenical body, 'Taunton Christians Together'. Dennis was asked to explore ways in which the town's churches might work better together to share the Gospel of Jesus and foster greater cooperation in the delivery of social care and action offered by Christians within the town.

Taunton Team Chaplaincy was launched in 2010 and enjoys the support of all the town's churches and the encouragement of civic and community agencies. The first team members comprised a part-time paid lead chaplain with a couple of volunteers visiting local shops.



This has grown to a four days a week paid post supported by a one day a week administrator and forty volunteers serving seven facets of life in the local community: shops and businesses, offices, care homes, the marginalised, the railway, courts and public spaces.

At the time of writing the Trustees are exploring opportunities for chaplaincy in the spheres of housing development (both to construction workers and new residents) and primary schools, building on existing links pioneered by a few churches.

It has been a humbling but thrilling experience to see God bless the willingness of so many Christian volunteers to work together. This booklet records a few of the many stories of what can happen when His people work together with a common purpose to share the love of Jesus in the heart of their community.

Further information about Taunton Team Chaplaincy can be found at www.tauntontc.co.uk

Statistics

Chaplains and Rail Responders provide statistics of their “significant encounters”. These are conversations which they will recall whenever they see that person. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, there were 5,000 significant encounters. In 2020 there were 3,162 significant encounters and 2,712 in 2021. This drop is due to a significant reduction in face-to-face contact due to Covid 19.

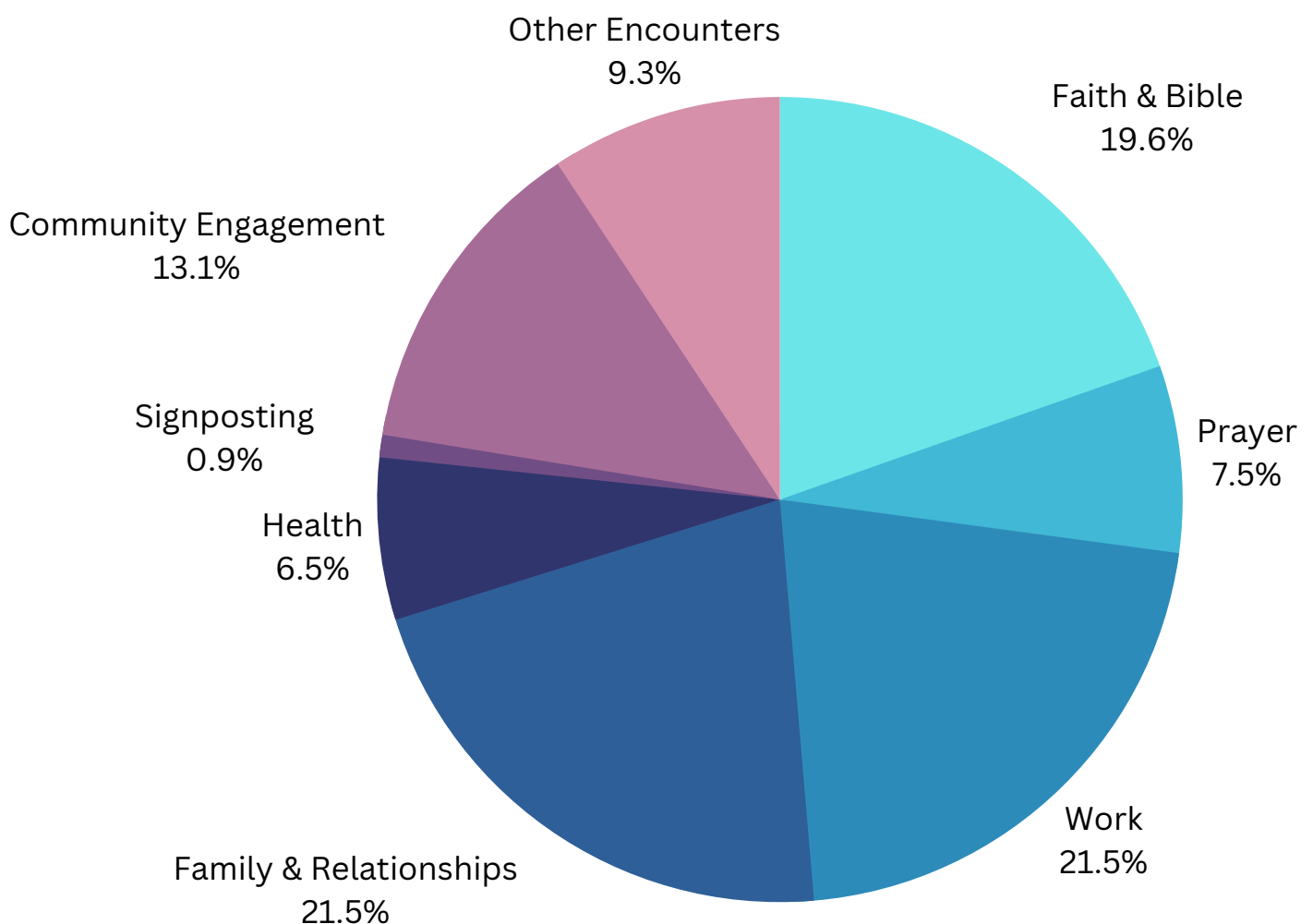


Lockdowns, office closures, prevention of care home visiting and lack of rail traffic led to chaplaincy being conducted by phone, Zoom or very occasionally attendance wearing PPE. Numbers are now steadily increasing again.

Statistics are an important part of reporting back to our supporters but they do not tell the whole story, as the encounters in the following pages will testify.

The chart below shows a breakdown of encounters for 2019, before the pandemic, showing the topics which our volunteers cover when they meet people in a “normal” year:

Pre Pandemic significant encounters



Chaplaincy to Offices

Adrian Prior-Sankey serves as chaplain to the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office in Taunton.

As a consequence of getting to know the Chief Executive and many of his 800 staff members the chaplain was telephoned by the 'boss' and asked what provision the town had for feeding homeless people. The call was very timely as Taunton's weekend food kitchen for such people had just stopped. By the remarkable coming together of local Christians and volunteers from among the UKHO staff, some of the most vulnerable people in the community are now guaranteed a hot meal and support every weekend when other provision is not available.

Chaplaincy can have many unexpected outcomes and advocacy, networking and information sharing can be fruitful, drawing in other aspects of the Church's provision of social care and action in the town.

Retail Chaplaincy

Margaret Gibbins leads a team of chaplains who visit staff in shops in Taunton town centre.

In May 2021, Debenhams department store closed in Taunton with the loss of about 200 jobs. Some staff retired, but others needed to find alternative employment.

Margaret had been the store chaplain for a number of years. During the final weeks of business Bishop Ruth visited the staff and offered her support (see photo). Taunton Team Chaplaincy produced a leaflet for staff entitled 'Coping with Redundancy' which offered advice concerning the impact of job loss and providing links to a range of resources which offered assistance.



Retail Chaplaincy

Margaret set up a support group, which met in a local church near the store. About 12 staff members came along. Initially, Margaret encouraged the staff to talk among themselves, but they subsequently asked her to join them. Although the closure was expected, it still came as a shock for those who had worked there. Chaplains continue to pray for everyone affected and those that needed employment gradually found other jobs.

Margaret says: 'It is difficult to measure the impact you have as a chaplain. Trust has to be gained amongst people who don't know you. After I started at Debenhams, I felt I had broken through when a member of staff said "I'm glad I've met you. Would you pray for me?"'

A community survey undertaken by a church benefice near Taunton, received a comment from one of their respondents: 'I'm not religious, but always appreciated the chaplain that used to come and check on the workers when I worked at Debenhams. She was brilliant.'

Courts Chaplaincy

Michael Hayes leads a team of chaplains serving in Taunton Magistrates Courts.

A service to users and staff at Taunton magistrates' court began in February 2022. A team of six has been providing two chaplains once a week, operating mostly in the large waiting area where defendants, family and supporting friends, and witnesses can spend several hours often in anxiety and bewilderment.

DBS checks for two of the team were held up, and we prayed 'Lord, clear this blockage'. Within five days both certificates came through. A chaplain felt God gave him the word 'mercy' several times and the first person he met told him of their feeling a need to repent. As a consequence, the team has a readiness to pray; in addition, they are refreshed by going onto 'away ground'. One chaplain, as a former minister, was often inviting people to 'come' – to church, to groups, to events; yet now appreciates that Jesus calls us to 'go into all the world'.

The unfamiliar setting of the courts requires listening before speaking, being present and available without necessarily appearing useful or busy, being uncomfortable and reliant on God – a new skill set!

The team is received warmly. Words of appreciation are given, an offer of prayer is readily accepted, people are willing to share their situations and feelings. Chaplains are learners in a place where mistakes can be costly and upsetting to many if the legal process is affected. The weekly visits demand more from our team, and we are recruiting – God's timing is always good!

Drawing near to a person who had come into the courts looking very nervous, a chaplain explained she was a volunteer there to listen and support in any way she could. The two of them then spent over an hour and a half together, the chaplain being attentive throughout. The chaplain felt it was a privilege to listen to this person who subsequently let her pray with them. After the court hearing, the person came to the chaplain and thanked her for spending time with them and said how much it had helped.

The chaplain says ‘Chaplaincy to me is about the real value of each human life, and I try to convey this every time I come alongside a person in need’

A chaplain spent some time with a person who told her they were currently homeless and were very grateful to a community-based charity and churches who have helped them. The chaplain accompanied the individual into court where they admitted to their charges and were referred to the probation service.

They spent about ten minutes with the probation officer and at this point the chaplain wondered if she might have sat in with them as they had no representation. She spoke with the probation officer who agreed she could sit with them.

They talked for a few minutes and when they returned into court, the officer referred to the conversation she had had “with the chaplain” which was acknowledged by the magistrate with a thank-you. The homeless person was referred to probation for on-going support as they were clearly vulnerable. They were grateful for the chaplain’s offer of prayer.

Chaplaincy in the Open Spaces

We have a number of Chaplains who enjoy engaging with people in the parks and open spaces.

A chaplain observed a gentleman sitting on the same seat each day in the town's Vivary Park, looking forlorn and decided to speak to him. It transpired that he was Eastern European and had lived in this country for 7 years on his own. He said that since Covid 19, he had not been able to find work. The weeks passed and the chaplain spoke to him most weekdays.


This gentleman never spoke English in a broad sense but appeared to generally understand what was explained to him. The chaplain accompanied him to the Department of Employment and learned that English lessons had been arranged for him. He was a Painter and Decorator by trade and was seeking employment so the chaplain promised to make general enquiries on his behalf, hoping to find casual or regular work.

Rail Responders



Chaplaincy on and near the railway in Taunton is offered by a team of 'Rail Responders' who volunteer in partnership with British Transport Police to support those who are anxious or even contemplating suicide.

Two Rail Responders arrived at the station earlier than usual and saw a young lady and then a young man running past them. The man paused to say that the woman had just announced her intention to jump from one of the nearby bridges.



Neither of the young people were in view when the Responders reached the bridge. They were joined by a railway staff member who got in touch with the town's CCTV control centre and alerted the police. While looking down on the street below the Responders spotted the young lady and witnessed her erratic behaviour. A Police Community Support Officer swiftly came into view and seconds later a police car came to halt beside the woman and thus ensured her safety.

The Responders could do no more as she was now in safe hands. However, many people at the station were disturbed by what they had seen and were able to be reassured that all had ended well. Subsequent conversations with staff, passengers and taxi drivers led to a commendation by the station manager who appreciated the pastoral care for her colleagues and customers offered by the chaplaincy team members.

Chaplaincy to the Marginalised

Mike Newberry is chaplain to rough sleepers in Taunton town centre and Sue Morrice is chaplain to Canonsgrove temporary hostel for the homeless.

A homeless person came to the temporary hostel in difficult circumstances. The police had picked him up because he was accused of being unkind to his wife. He was very traumatised and kept away from the other residents.



After a couple of conversations whilst serving food at lunchtime he asked the chaplain and another church volunteer who were serving food if they were Christians. He said he was desperate and needed help. They listened to his story and prayed that he would find accommodation for him and his wife. They also prayed that he would feel God's presence with him.

Within two days he had been offered a room in a house for them both through a church in a neighbouring county. The police decided that there would be no charges as his wife was clearly suffering from PTSD. She was an overseas refugee who had been through a very difficult time in the past.

A few days later after the man had left the hostel he texted the chaplain to say 'thank you'. He said the experience and support given to him had completely changed his life. He was extremely grateful and said that his faith had increased and that he and his wife were moving forward positively and receiving support from members of their new church. He also said he had really valued the fact that Christians had prayed with him.

Sean* was found homeless by the police just after the Covid 19 pandemic had started. He was brought to the temporary hostel as there was nowhere else to send him. He was a young man with huge potential but easily led by others to dabble in drugs and 'experiment'.

Over a long period of time all of the Christian volunteers who provided the food at the hostel talked and listened to him. Sean decided one day that he would come to the Bible Study group run by the chaplain. When he started reading the Bible passage Sean began laughing and this is what he said:

‘I have been searching for this all my life and I know this is true’. He said he just felt so happy. Sean had begun searching because he felt that all the Christian volunteers were ‘different’ from other people he had met and he wanted what he perceived we had.

Sean has since been given accommodation locally and the chaplaincy no longer has contact details for him. They do know he is happy and they continue to pray that he will follow the Lord.

*name changed

Leon* has been homeless, in prison and on drugs. He was released from prison on the condition that he did not take drugs again. He was placed in a ‘Dry House’ with support. The first thing he did was go and visit his family.

Of course, he was then offered drugs which he managed to resist. For a couple of days he paced up and down trying not to give into the craving of taking something. He was invited to church so he went as something to do to keep his mind distracted. When he walked into the building and heard worship music he just broke down. Throughout the service people were praying for him. By the time he left the church that evening he felt that God had taken away the spirit of addiction. To this day he has never taken drugs again. Leon gave his life to Jesus a few months later and now spends his days telling others about Jesus.

A chaplain arranged for him to share his story at Taunton's temporary hostel for the homeless. Many of the residents have lost hope that they can ever get off their drugs and are unable to look any further forward than the next day. Leon shared his story and chatted for quite a while and subsequently six people gave their lives to Jesus. Although they are now living in the community the chaplain rejoices that they have taken their first step.

*name changed

Care home chaplaincy

Bob Hart and Jason Organ have pioneered chaplaincy provision in a number of care homes in Taunton.

From the beginning of Covid, it was not possible to offer weekly chaplaincy visits to the Care Homes, as the staff and management were quite rightly very protective of their residents. A chaplain was allowed to meet a small group on the patio or in the garden, but this was not ideal and very weather-dependent. The chaplain kept in touch via Zoom and with Christmas and Easter cards and magazines, but longed for the day when they could move freely from room to room and meet friends face to face. He admitted to becoming somewhat frustrated and disheartened, though he trusted God to show him the way as He always had.

In February 2022 the chaplain had a phone call from the home inviting him to visit a lady who had just been transferred from hospital. She had met a Hospital Chaplain, and was asking to see a chaplain in her care home. He visited the next day, and for the next 2 weeks he was able to share Bible readings and prayer with her, until she died quite peacefully.

This experience opened the door for the chaplain to visit weekly, with the freedom he had dreamt of. There were still barriers – proof of a Covid test, wearing gown, gloves and mask and looking like a surgeon (which he once was!) – and the challenge of meeting and remembering the names of staff and residents who were almost all new to him.

The chaplain still has a strong sense of the Lord's presence and his guiding hand in the contacts he has week by week, advising his fellow chaplains: "Be patient, wait upon the Lord, and He will show the way"

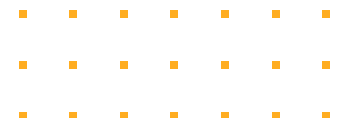


Chaplains develop many relationships with both residents and staff, some having faith and some professing to having no faith. Being available to all was of great significance during the challenging times of the covid-19 pandemic. Visiting restrictions meant chaplaincy visits changed from seven hours a week to periods of no visiting at all.

Then, communication had to be made via post and phone calls, talking through windows and in gardens. Finally, as restrictions were being lifted, chaplains were able to return, initially in full PPE.

For one chaplain, on return to his care home an air of uncertainty, anxiety and apprehension was apparent. The management team and staff were providing amazing support to the residents. Two lady residents appreciated contact with the chaplain who, over many occasions, talked with them, read from the Bible, and prayed. It was clear that because of the constant news updates in the media, they had both felt an air of darkness, and despair. As chaplain, he was able to come alongside and vividly remembers one telling him that just having someone who was able to listen to her, similar to the care staff, was so important. What she said which made the encounters even more important was that they were able to pray, to put their trust in God and that this gave her the feeling of “Light in the darkness”. The chaplain felt that these encounters set the scene of how God used him through the pandemic, saying, “I bring myself as a chaplain; God uses me as that light in the darkness”.

Contact Information



 07851 442020

 info@tauntontc.co.uk

 1st Floor Market House, Taunton

 www.tauntontc.co.uk