



Story of Accompaniment

Message from International Team



Dear Friends

It is with great joy and hope that I introduce this “Story of Accompaniment” series—a testament to the power of walking together in mutual respect, understanding, and shared purpose. This initiative allows us to celebrate the incredible journeys of chaplains, animators, elders, and students from around the world, each contributing uniquely to the rich diversity of our movement.

Accompaniment is about more than guidance; it’s about fostering spaces where people can grow, feel heard, and truly belong. These stories highlight how leadership rooted in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can create lasting positive change. Grounded in the dignity of every person, solidarity, and a commitment to justice, these narratives call us to live our values boldly and authentically in service of the common good.

I am profoundly moved by the generosity of those who have shared their journeys and by the openness of each of you to engage with these reflections. Let these narratives inspire us to renew our commitment to peace, solidarity, and service in advancing human dignity, equality, and justice in our communities and beyond.



Together, as a global family, we have the opportunity to strengthen one another, learn from each other’s experiences, and build a world rooted in compassion and shared humanity. Thank you for being part of this journey and for all you do to uphold the values of IMCS Pax Romana.



With gratitude and solidarity,

William Nokrek

International President,
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

Message from International Team

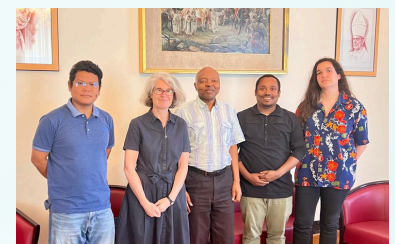
Accompanying university students in their personal and academic journeys is crucial for fostering their development into resilient, compassionate leaders.



My experience, starting in a small Ethiopian seminary and eventually becoming the International Secretary-General of IMCS Pax Romana, has shown me how deeply important this support is. As I worked to build Catholic student communities across various universities in Ethiopia, I encountered challenges like isolation and opposition, yet these obstacles only strengthened my resolve. By creating spaces for community and faith, I was able to help students navigate adversity, build meaningful connections, and find support in each other, which played a key role in their intellectual, spiritual, and social growth.

The need for accompaniment extends beyond national borders. As I worked across Africa and internationally, particularly as the Pan African Regional Coordinator, I saw firsthand how critical it is to empower students to become active participants in shaping their world. The COVID-19 pandemic and financial crises tested the resilience of students, but it also underscored the power of community support. We adapted and innovated to ensure that students' voices were heard, advocating for their rights and helping them thrive in difficult circumstances. My role as Secretary-General continues to involve supporting students through mentorship and providing platforms for them to engage with global issues, from climate justice to interfaith dialogue, ensuring they have the tools to lead and make an impact.

Accompanying students also means addressing gaps in opportunities, particularly for those from marginalized communities. Empowerment, mentorship, and capacity-building are essential to help students recognize their potential and navigate the complexities of university life and beyond. My journey has shown me that leadership is about resilience, teamwork, and adaptability. By fostering inclusive communities, engaging with local leaders, and promoting dialogue, we can provide students with the support they need to succeed. Ultimately, investing in the holistic development of students ensures they become not only strong individuals but also leaders committed to justice and positive change in their communities and the wider world.



I am grateful to the Chaplaincy Commission of IMCS who have taken on the challenge to share their stories of accompaniment. Also, to know that while you accompany me, I accompany you too.

Fasika Lachore Laba

Secretary-General,
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

PROCESS OF SUSTAINED NURTURING



From 1999-2009, the bishop tasked me with setting up the Campus Ministry in the diocese of Melacca-Johore as the one appointed to the Campus Ministry Office of the Diocese. The office was located at the Skudai Catholic Center, Taman University, Skudai, Johor Baru.

Preliminary Contacts: I contacted the nearby parish to get a list of university students attending Sunday mass, then met with them to explain the purpose of the Catholic Students' Society (CSS) and its structure. We discussed forming the CSS and held a meeting to elect office-bearers-EXCO (President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer) with the help of the campus ministry team. We also planned the year-long activities for the the movement activities.



Process of Nurturing:As a chaplain, my role was both relational and structural, engaging in activities at the local, diocesan, peninsular, and national levels. Locally, CSS activities included regular EXCO meetings, welcome and farewell parties, birthday celebrations, mass, and visits to indigenous communities and religious sites like Hindu and Sikh temples to deepen intercultural understanding. At the diocesan level, I participated in quarterly EXCO meetings, the Annual Gathering with talks, group discussions, and mass with the bishop, and the month-long SALT Program, which included immersion, formation, and recollection.



Becoming the National Chaplain of Malaysia: Though relationship-building is paramount, particularly in visiting and updating local bishops in charge of each CMO (Campus Ministry Office, usually the chaplain and the assistant who is a lay coordinator), and attending the Episcopal Conference to discuss the challenges of Catholic tertiary students in Malaysia, the structural aspect became more prominent. At the peninsular level, the creation of the Semenanjung Coordinating Council (SCC) allowed the CMO members, including the chaplain and lay coordinator, to collaborate in coordinating activities for student leaders in Peninsular West Malaysia. At the national level, the eight diocesan CMOs collaborated under the Malaysian Catholic Student Council (MCSC), an East-West Malaysian structure. The chaplains (nuns or priests) and full-time lay coordinators from each CMO met annually to plan for the biannual Pan-Malaysian gathering and the KITA initiative, which welcomed new tertiary students from East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) studying in Peninsular Malaysia and vice versa.

Process of Sustaining:

When I was nominated and confirmed as the Asia Pacific Chaplain in 2008, the role of nurturing the working relationship of the two fulltime AP coordinators became pivotal.



Nurturing involves spending time with each one of them where they live, listening to their complaints of each other, reconciling them, watching movies together, celebrate their birthdays, having annual retreat and outing, and spent Christmas together in the Philippines or abroad, in Asia, visiting the chaplains and the local tertiary students of the national movement. In this way, the strong relational bond enabled them to optimize their energy to liaise with and participate in the three regional programs (South Asia, Southeast Asia & East Asia), while they visit national movements in the respective countries and more so, to plan and implement APC (Asia Pacific Council) and PAPA (Pan Asian Pacific Assembly). Last of all, to accompany them in their participation of the IMCS World Assembly and to reflect together on their experiences.

Hindsight: What is perhaps lacking is the regular spiritual formation in nurturing their Christian faith, especially the life of personal prayer, in addition to the devotions, penitential services and the regular sessions on the papal and catholic social teachings of the Church.



Fr. Jojo M. Fung SJ

International Chaplain
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

WALKING TOGETHER:

Reflections from the Chaplaincy Commission Core Team

The “Story of Accompaniment” series is a powerful celebration of what it truly means to walk alongside young people in understanding and becoming part of their worldview. For years, IMCS/MIEC Pax Romana leaders, chaplains, and animators worldwide have reminded us of the profound influence that accompaniment has in shaping young minds to build resilience and a spirit that never gives up.



Unfortunately, these unseen virtues are not often archived. Yet, we celebrate these remarkable chaplains in our history during our dinners and sessions. The Story of Accompaniment series is an effort to bring to life the memory of these great people who sustained the student momentum through their humble and often invisible contributions.

These stories reflect our shared commitment to the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Rooted in the accompaniment of human dignity, this global experience nurtures leaders who are not only academically and spiritually grounded but also deeply committed to transforming their communities.



The establishment of the IMCS/MIEC Pax Romana Chaplaincy Commission (C7) is a fruit of the IMCS/MIEC Strategic Plan 2021–2026. It reflects a spiritual response to the evolving needs of IMCS movements worldwide for deeper accompaniment. It strengthens cross-generational connections and provides both structural and pastoral support. This global network of chaplains, animators, and elders ensures that accompaniment remains a cornerstone of the IMCS mission, enabling leaders to navigate challenges while maintaining a focus on faith, inclusion, and justice.

We invite you to engage with these deeply personal stories, to reflect on how accompaniment has shaped our own lives, and to find renewed inspiration to accompany others. This series is a call to action for all members of the IMCS family to build on this legacy of mutual support, turning shared struggles into opportunities for growth and hope.



Marina D'Costa

Coordinator, Chaplaincy Commission
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

A Journey of Accompaniment: A Strength-Based Approach

I was actively involved in Pax Romana IMCS from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, participating in the local student movement through the Hong Kong Federation of Catholic Students (HKFCS) as both a student leader and animator. During this period, I was also engaged at the regional level within the Asia Pacific network. In 2019, I reconnected with our movement, serving as a lay chaplain on the Asia Pacific team, accompanying our regional coordinator and working closely with students, animators, and chaplains across the region.



Since then, I have been part of the Chaplains, Animators, and Elders Commission (C7) as one of its core members, continuing my journey of accompaniment within IMCS Pax Romana. In parallel, I currently work as a part-time instructor in social work at a local university, where I am privileged to accompany students of diverse ages and backgrounds.



IMCS is a remarkable, cross-generational, student-oriented movement dedicated to building the Kingdom of God on earth. It is a community of peacebuilders, committed to journeying with the marginalized and giving voice to the suffering. While students remain the pillar and focus of our mission, they are never isolated. IMCS offers students the invaluable opportunity to engage with people of all ages and experiences, fostering mutual learning and exchange. As I often say, no society—or movement—can thrive when composed solely of a single generation. Diversity of age and experience is essential for a vibrant and sustainable community.



Different generations, bringing a wealth of experiences, each have a vital role to play in the community-building process. Nevertheless, those endowed with power or a stronger voice must exercise their privileges with humility and sensitivity. Our awareness of how we steward our resources and influence ultimately shapes the story we create together.

From the first day I joined the movement, I was blessed to be accompanied by an exceptional chaplain, the late Fr. Stephen Tam, whose wisdom and theological reflection exemplified the true spirit of student accompaniment. His approach empowered us to grow, to realize our potential, and to embody our beliefs on an equal footing—free from hierarchical subordination. I am also deeply grateful to many animators and alumni who were formed within the movement and who taught us the importance of social analysis and the integration of faith with action.

I consider myself fortunate to have had such inspiring role models. As an animator with an alumni background and a social work educator, I have consistently emphasized a strength-based approach. I am convinced of the critical importance of active listening and authentic, equal-footed sharing. These qualities are fundamental to building effective cross-generational collaboration and nurturing a culture of peace within our communities.

The Story of Accompaniment series seeks to capture and preserve our collective wisdom from across the globe. It offers an opportunity to deepen understanding of how IMCS continues to be an instrument of positive societal transformation. Thank you for being part of this journey—as a reader, a contributor, or a witness to our shared mission. I look forward to sharing more with you in the future.

Law Lap Man

Lay Animator, Asia Pacific
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

Walking with Students:

Reflections from the Chaplaincy Commission Core Team

From January 1994 to January 2024, I served as a counsellor and lay animator at the Catholic Chaplaincy (Katholische Hochschulgemeinde Würzburg – KHG) in Würzburg, one of the largest university parishes in Germany, comprising one priest and seven full-time counsellors. From 2001 to 2008, I was a member of the national board of university chaplains in Germany, and from 2014 to 2023, I served as the deputy chairman of the Working Group for Catholic University Communities. Since 2022, following a visitation by the IMCS Board, I have been a member of the C7 (Chaplains, Animators, and Elders Commission) of IMCS Pax Romana.

In Würzburg, alongside my daily pastoral tasks, I accompanied students as a counsellor and coach, particularly supporting them in preparing for exams. I also worked closely with students volunteering to assist prisoners and people living with mental illness. Furthermore, I organized diverse social activities such as hiking trips, canoe excursions, and quiz nights, making my ministry dynamic, multifaceted, and fulfilling.

University chaplaincy is, at its heart, a continuous exchange. Meeting students on an equal footing — regardless of their religious affiliation or nationality — was both a challenge and a profound blessing. The positive feedback I continue to receive reaffirms the enduring value of this work.

It has been a privilege to accompany many individuals, some of whom were initially distant from the Church. Thanks to the welcoming atmosphere at KHG and the sincerity of our liturgies, many rediscovered a sense of community in faith and daily life, forging lasting relationships that often culminated in marriage. Beyond their academic formation, students had opportunities for meaningful social engagement, which not only strengthened societal cohesion but also prompted them to reflect on and deepen their personal values. These experiences helped shape them into responsible citizens, firmly grounded in life after graduation and valuable contributors to both society and the Church.

At KHG, we have been fortunate to benefit from the strong and unwavering support of our diocese and bishop, which has been vital to sustaining our mission. The need to accompany young academics throughout their university journey remains critical for nurturing — or sometimes rekindling — their relationship with the Church.



Richard Hübner

Lay Animator, Germany
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

Walking with Students: Reflections from the Chaplaincy Commission Core Team

Through my involvement with the German student chaplaincy, I first encountered the European reality of the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) in 2019. This initial encounter marked the beginning of a deep engagement with the movement. Since then, I have been actively involved in supporting the re-establishment of the European branch of IMCS/MIEC and nurturing a renewed sense of community, particularly during the difficult years of the COVID-19 pandemic.



This journey of accompaniment and service naturally led me to collaborate with the International Team of IMCS/MIEC, offering me the opportunity to engage with the broader global community of Catholic students. Through this experience, I was able to reflect more deeply not only on the global dimensions of faith and student life but also on my personal journey of faith within the local Church context.



Accompanying young people in this dynamic, cross-cultural movement has been a source of profound inspiration, reminding me of the universal call to community, solidarity, and faith in action that lies at the heart of IMCS/MIEC Pax Romana.



Federica Demattè

European Chaplain
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana

Walking with Students:

Reflections from the Chaplaincy Commission Core Team

Leading Catholic student movements in Africa, such as IMCS/MIEC Pax Romana, presents a set of unique challenges that are deeply intertwined with the continent's complex realities. Africa's immense cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity makes it difficult to maintain a unified Catholic identity while ensuring that all students feel represented, heard, and included. These challenges are further compounded by political instability, economic hardship, and social unrest, which often restrict student participation and place young leaders at personal risk. In many countries, underfunded educational systems leave student movements with limited resources for growth, sustainability, and consistent leadership formation.



The lack of institutional support from universities and government bodies exacerbates the situation, making it difficult for IMCS/MIEC movements to implement and sustain meaningful initiatives. Gender inequality remains a pressing concern; women often face cultural and structural barriers that limit their access to leadership roles and full participation in movement life. Yet, despite these obstacles, African Catholic students demonstrate remarkable resilience, commitment, and creativity as they engage with critical issues ranging from rural development to peacebuilding and social justice.

The establishment of a Chaplaincy Commission (C7) in Africa could offer the spiritual and structural support that these movements urgently need. By fostering Catholic Social Teaching and providing ongoing moral and pastoral guidance, such a commission would empower young leaders to face the realities of their contexts with faith and purpose. It would also create safe and inclusive spaces for dialogue, mentorship, and accompaniment — especially for women and marginalized groups — affirming their rightful place in leadership and community building.

Africa's future rests in the hands of leaders who are spiritually grounded, socially conscious, and committed to the common good. Through collaboration, sustained accompaniment, and contextualized pastoral care, IMCS/MIEC Pax Romana and its partners can help transform present challenges into meaningful opportunities. With the right support, Catholic students across Africa can grow into visionary leaders, capable of integrating faith, academic excellence, and a lifelong commitment to justice and equity.



As a former Pan-African Coordinator of IMCS, and now actively engaged with the African Coordination Team in supporting today's students, I hold a deep conviction: that sustained pastoral accompaniment through a C7 in the African context — particularly when rooted in faith — is essential for empowering young people to become responsible, transformative leaders for Africa and the Church.

Aaron Fenu

Lay Animator, Pan Africa
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS/MIEC) Pax Romana



Story of Accompaniment

Best practices of Student Accompaniment: A Chaplain's Perspective

1. Introduction

I was the IMCS International Chaplain (1999-2007), visiting 48 countries and participating in many meetings of students and chaplains, globally and in all the regions of the movement (Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, North America, and the Middle East), where I was able to get to know their joys, hopes and challenges, and the accompaniment these require. While the world has changed dramatically over these past 14 years, including the reality, consciousness and needs of students, hopefully my ongoing contact with the movement along with my continual involvement with Justice and Peace structures can prevent my sharings today from being too outdated!



Mike Deeb OP
Former IMCS/MIEC
International Chaplain
(1999-2007)

While many different names are used to refer to adult (or older) companions of the university students in our movement, in this presentation I will use the name “chaplain” which will equally refer to all the other denominations of the role.

2. Goal of Chaplaincy

All that I have seen and what I will share with you emerges from certain assumptions I have about the goal of chaplaincy in IMCS. So, I will begin by identifying these assumptions. For me, therefore, the goal of chaplaincy is:

- To bring the Good News of Jesus to students, and since, as Jean Vanier said at the IMCS World Youth Day event in Toronto in 2002, “to love is to bring people to freedom”, we aim especially to bring them to freedom – in all dimensions of their lives.
- To evoke commitment in students. While many of them are often coming simply for short-term nourishment or entertainment, we are there to help them to develop a passion – a desire - for something new; to develop a commitment to the way that Jesus offers: to grow in compassion for the poor, the suffering and the marginalized, and to grow in a spirit of global solidarity.
- To build strong moral leaders. Since we are working in a milieu that consists of people who in the very near future (if not already) will be the leaders in all sectors of society, we have a particular responsibility to be helping build leaders with a critical consciousness who will be able to exercise whatever profession they are going to be doing with a good strong moral basis and commitment, and who will have some capacity to deal with the major problems facing Africa.

In order to realise these goals, my experience has revealed vast differences in socio/political/cultural contexts, between and within the different continents, which demand particular responses in chaplaincy. Yet, even in these differences, there are many similarities which pose many common challenges to us. I will begin with a few examples of the differences.

3. Differences in Socio-politico-cultural Contexts Demanding Particular Responses

3.1 Poverty vs. Material complacency

Some of us are ministering in contexts where the students are very poor and are struggling to meet very basic needs, such as finding money for fees, food, accommodation, etc. This impacts on all other areas of life, such as forcing many female students to resort to prostitution to survive and, in turn, increasing the incidence of AIDS. It also leads to violence on campuses and strikes that disrupt their studies. A chaplain is often one of the first persons called on to assist them in that need.

This especially calls for an accompaniment that will:

- Encourage solidarity among the students,
- Assure them that it is no shame to be poor, and
- Promote self-help projects and fundraising possibilities to counter a spirit of dependency being reinforced.
- On the other hand, if you are in a place where there are relatively few material problems, the discovery that material wealth does not necessarily bring happiness results in searches for new meaning, such as in religion or simply in pleasure-seeking. This calls for an accompaniment that will: help students to discern between objects of meaning that lead only to short-term satisfaction, and those that are durable, provide deeper theological training.

3.2 Dictatorships vs. Democracies

Where people are oppressed, with no space to talk, to express their feelings and views, or to be themselves, provoking conflict and even war, the chaplain cannot be neutral. It is vital to become involved with the students one is working with, which may require a more active, although prudent, political involvement. I know from my experience in South Africa, there was no way to be neutral under the Apartheid regime. And it is like that in many of your own countries today, where there is little freedom to speak. The students will often turn to the chaplain to give them hope and strength, and to help them know how to respond in that situation. Such situations normally also require the chaplain to play the role of a peace-builder.

On the other hand, there are democracies, where there is generally a tolerance for different points of view, leading to a negative attitude towards chaplains who take one side or another and hence become labelled. The priority here therefore should be on promoting dialogue. Thus, different contexts give rise to very different attitudes towards political involvement.

3.3 Traditional Homogeneous vs. Industrialised Heterogeneous societies

In traditional, relatively homogeneous societies, where people are still strongly influenced by traditional culture (very evident in Africa and amongst indigenous groups everywhere), a big challenge to chaplains is the issue of inculturation - how to make the Christian faith relevant in that particular culture - especially since they all already have their own religions which are an integral part of their culture.

On the other hand, in industrialised heterogeneous societies, where people have come together in a melting-pot of different cultures, there is often a big problem of cultural dislocation. Of course, even in these societies, many people still have strong traditional cultures, so this distinction is not so absolute or clear. Nevertheless, especially with urbanisation, many people become culturally dislocated, and it is a big challenge to chaplains to help them feel at home and to discover an identity with which they feel comfortable and yet does not lead to an exclusive tribal mentality.

3.4 Sacralised vs. Secularised Societies

In sacralised societies – where faith is assumed – it is unusual to find someone who doesn't have faith. It is then very easy for many extraneous elements to get accumulated as unnecessary baggage which are then presumed to be an integral part of their faith. This raises many questions, such as where faith begins and superstition ends. In such a context, the chaplain is challenged to help the students to unpack the baggage, and identify the true essentials.

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3.5 Societies with Catholic/Christian minorities vs. Catholic majorities



In some of our countries, Catholic/Christian minorities often feel under attack, and very threatened. The big challenge facing a chaplain in such a context is to strengthen the students in their faith without proselytising or becoming chauvinistic and rejecting of others; and to help them open themselves up to the richness of the other faiths (through direct contact and dialogue), while still being able to talk about what is particular/specific about being Christian.

On the other hand, in societies where there are Catholic majorities, where people are so used to the Church being there, and where it is difficult to know the difference between being a citizen and being a Catholic, chaplains are faced with the very different challenge to give a fresh experience of the faith. This particularly requires a personal accompaniment of students, and the development of joyful, spiritually nourishing communities.



4. Similarities between All Contexts Posing Common Challenges

Even though our different contexts call for so many different pastoral responses, as we talk amongst each other, we will nevertheless find many similar things that we all have to deal with. I will point to a few of these.

4.1 Psychological and Social Similarities

4.1.1 The Psychological Stage of students

Most students are at a similar age and therefore stage of psychological development (in transition from adolescence to adulthood) - a stage where they are trying to clarify their identity in the face of a university context where everything is becoming relativised. While adolescents have a big need for heroes (who, as role models, give them a clear sense of identity), as they move out of this stage (as students normally are), they start seeing their heroes' weak points – they become relativised –which throws them into confusion. If this conflict is not positively resolved, it can lead to them either becoming totally cynical (nothing is true anymore!), or it can lead to them becoming fundamentalists, rejecting any sense of relativisation, clinging to one idea, and just following that, and refusing to look at any others. And such fundamentalism, unfortunately, we see is an increasing tendency in our world today.

Furthermore, in their struggle to clarify their identity, students are all seeking acceptance – a non-judgemental space where they can do this clarification. They are also trying to assert themselves as responsible adults (being in the stage of transition), which may lead them to kick a bit, exaggerate at times, and do the sorts of things that parents find very difficult to handle. Part of this assertion is the need to be part of a clearly identifiable “gang” – which can be clearly distinguished from other similar “gangs”. This competitive dynamic has often been at play, for example, in the history of tensions and conflicts between IMCS and YCS at various levels of the movement.

4.1.2 Global Social Context

But besides their stage of psychological development, the global social context, especially in the last thirty years has developed in such a way that the pressure on students has become enormous. With lots of academic pressure, a shortage of jobs, a need to have enough money just to survive on campus, etc., everyone is under enormous pressure to compete. Also, the world has become increasingly relativised. Especially with internet now, there are no longer clear moral points of reference. The Church, whereas it used to be a central point of reference in society, no longer provides that. It is just one among thousands of other points of reference. People are finding truth in many other areas. As everything becomes relativised, people feel less and less secure, because there is nothing to cling to and say, “This is it!”.

So, along with the rapid economic and cultural transformations, the world has become a very insecure place and Covid has exacerbated this enormously, preventing access to resources and creating volatile home environments. Now there is less and less institutional support for people. For example, whereas before, in a university or school course, it was very clear what the student had to do to meet the expectations of the teachers, now more and more emphasis is placed on the individual to be creative, and to show a capability to develop things oneself – especially with the explosion of online teaching. This puts a lot of pressure on students today and, with the digital divide, many are being left behind. Often, they feel they don't have the capacity for such creativity, nor sufficient personal resources to enable their growth and development. Despite the proliferation of social media, many also experience acute loneliness. All this results in a diminished interest in thinking, reflection, and social commitment.

The combination of these psychological and social factors leaves students with an increasing lack of self-esteem, which is critical for most endeavours. While this is a normal part of their psychological stage (to be unsure of themselves and who they are), the conditions in the world today are making this more and more acute. This leads to a diminished ability to experience and accept the love of God in such a way that they can share it with others.

These similarities of experience lead us to be able to identify the common challenges facing us as chaplains and the required practices to address them.

4.2 Common challenges

4.2.1 To foster Self-Esteem

In my reflections and experience, I find the primary task for chaplains is to foster self-esteem amongst the students. How can we do that? I will suggest four things which fit well into categories/principles articulated by some native North Americans (Brendto, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern).

4.2.1.1 Fostering belonging

Since humans are social creatures, and “belonging” is fundamental to personality development, the first task in fostering self-esteem is to foster a sense of belonging or a sense of community. We need to be helping to create spaces where students can find joy, warmth, and fun together, and where they can develop relationships and friendships. Then we should be enabling the celebration of liturgies that will inspire them, and give a sense of community; liturgies where care is taken, where they can participate fully, where there is joy and creativity, and where student issues are highlighted. We should also be creating spaces for them to share their lives and their faith in small groups. Too often, in a church context, people just sit and listen, as a passive audience. But that doesn’t build anything. To build a sense of community, people have to be able to participate, and they cannot do that in a big group. We need small groups. So, there is a crucial priority for developing small group dynamics within our particular campuses.

We can also foster a sense of belonging by encouraging and facilitating a deep insertion of our student groups into the Church through having strong links with the local bishops and the Church’s broader youth ministry. Frequently our students have a difficult relationship with the Church arising from their critique of many negative Church practices. We therefore need to assist them to understand more deeply the nature of the Church, and their own role as Church which will enable them to be integrated despite their difficulties.

A last point I will suggest to foster belonging and a sense of community is to develop a sense of internationality. In working for IMCS, I have come to see how crucially important a sense of international movement is at a local level – to be able to feel that you are part of something broader. It is always inspiring for students to realize that they are not just a small isolated group on one campus, but that they are part of something that exists throughout the whole world, in different continents, and within different cultures. And wherever I have been, I have seen the effect it has on them when they see someone who is part of their movement and from another place. It gives a remarkable sense of belonging to be part of something much bigger!



4.2.1.2 Fostering mastery

A second task in fostering self-esteem is to foster mastery or competence. And how do we do that? By giving students responsibility, and enabling them to exercise leadership. That is why, within our movement, a central principle is that the students themselves should be the leaders. The chaplains are always there to accompany and support them, but the students have to make the decisions. If I as a chaplain make all the decisions, they will always remain dependent, always remain children. But I think this is the biggest difficulty for chaplains: how to sit and watch students making mistakes? We mostly have a tendency to go in and put things right. But it is only through allowing them to make mistakes, through them exercising leadership and taking responsibility for it, that they can actually grow up, and become competent in their own field. Of course, such opportunities for exercising leadership have to be accompanied by training in what leadership entails: in pedagogy or methodology, how to run meetings, how to involve people – basic things that we often take for granted. And as chaplains, we can play a big role in that training. We are thus all educators in this sense.

4.2.1.3 Fostering independence

A third task in fostering self-esteem is to foster independence. As chaplains, we need to aim to reduce the students' dependence on us. We need to develop the spirituality of John the Baptist: "I must decrease and he must increase"! Adolescents need someone on whom they can be dependent – a bit of a hero! But when they get to the age of university/tertiary students, they need to have someone there, not to offer dependence, but someone who can affirm their own integrity. And through this, they can become independent. We can also foster this by being adult companions who can accompany them, by being listeners, open, flexible (even tolerating shocking things that they will say or do), and patient (probably the biggest virtue). We develop independence in students through an adult accompaniment that can offer a vision – of self, of the world, of God - that makes sense to them. In other words, we don't just come in with stock answers: "This is what the Church teaches, believe it or not!" Any approach like that, we know, just doesn't work! We have to listen to them, let them talk, come in afterwards and help them to see other things, get them to discover themselves. That way we help them to become independent! This is what we mean when we talk about "empowering".

And a particular thing that is related to this particular psychological stage of development is the need to accompany them in the development of their faith – in the transition from a faith that is conventional (that needs someone to give clear rules and directives) to a faith that is relativised (that can absorb diversity and challenge). It is normal at an adolescent stage of development to have a conventional faith, but then when one moves to another stage of development - when things become relativised – it is necessary to start making one's own decisions about what is good and bad, and making one's own free choice about it. We need to help them take that step. Some sociologists of religion have shown that the majority of Catholics never move beyond a "conventional faith" – remaining stuck in just following the rules, without being able to engage with them and to internalize them ourselves, in relation to all the other relativised views going around. Now if we want to have students that are really engaging with the world, and who will be credible in the world, and who will be able to courageously face the aggressive Pentecostal-style groups that are growing everywhere, we have to help them to move beyond that conventional faith stage, otherwise they may end up becoming either cynics, or fundamentalists, who just cling to one thing! Chaplains thus have a very important role to play in helping students to become independent.

4.2.1.4 Fostering generosity

A final task that I propose in fostering self-esteem is the fostering of a spirit of generosity. We don't want people to be focused only in on themselves. We want them to be focused on others. We are Christians not for ourselves alone; we are here for everyone! So, we need to be offering the students opportunities for social action – for them to look beyond themselves – to engage with others. How do we do that? Through enabling the functioning of small groups, where they can reflect on their own experience, and see what they can do. A powerful methodology that we have in our movement is the “Review of Life”, or “Action-Reflection-Action”, with which we are trying to get people to reflect on their lives, make a judgement in the light of their faith, and then doing something about it – even if it is a very small action! That helps them gradually to be educated in what it means to go beyond just themselves. Or we can also do it through exposures, by enabling them to encounter marginalized communities, for example, or by bringing people in to give talks or share their experiences with them.

It is these four things, in my experience, which constitute the structures that have helped chaplains to foster self-esteem in students and helped them to become people who can resist, to some extent at least, these pressures in the world.

4.2.2 To offer a message that will bring Good News (freedom)

Another cluster of challenges that we are faced with as chaplains is how to really offer good news to students (and not just pass on a message that they ought to believe!). What sort of message or content needs to permeate the structures identified above? In my experience, there are three broad areas in the lives of students in which they are thirsting for a message that will bring good news:

4.2.2.1 Liberating faith

The first challenge is to help them to discover a liberating faith. This means freeing them from a legalistic or moralistic understanding of God, into which so many of them are locked. I have found almost everywhere I have been, in many parts of the world, that many students still see God as a grey-bearded authority figure, who is looking over their shoulders, and is about to shake a finger at them. So, they anxiously toe the line to gain his approval! Those with a more relativised or secularized consciousness, on the other hand, have no alternative but to reject this God (and often any other God!). We need to help all these students to move away from this legalistic understanding of God to a more compassionate, loving, and forgiving God, whose authority does not lie in assumed established structures, but in a passionate vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed.

This is a vision of a new world, with a freedom that comes from working for unity, justice and peace. In this context, an open, inclusive and ecumenical spirit becomes a priority (since Jesus came that the whole world might be saved), which means really engaging with people of other faiths, other religions, or no religion, not being afraid of them, not trying to be apologetic or defensive with them, but engaging with them because often they can reveal a truth to us that we ourselves don't have! Just as Jesus was prepared to learn from that Syrophenician woman, who challenged his discriminatory refusal to heal her daughter, and disarmed him with her faith (Mk 7:24-30)!



4.2.2.2 Liberating hope

A second challenge in the quest for a message that will bring good news is to offer a liberating hope. The students are thirsting for hope or meaning in a hostile world. In almost every place I have visited in the past years, as students have spoken about their problems or difficulties in school, or wherever, I have repeatedly asked them what they are doing about it, and the stock response I have received has been: “There is nothing we can do! It is too big! Those people who have power must do something about it! I can’t do anything!” I have had a real sense of an increasing sense of hopelessness amongst students almost everywhere! Although, admittedly, not everywhere! There are still a number of places where students are still very energetic. But generally, there is a feeling of helplessness. The system is too big. Especially with globalisation and climate change today, decisions that drastically affect our lives are being taken now by people far away from us - people that we will never see. So, we suddenly find that our currency collapses, and we don’t know why. Because someone has pressed a button in New York, or London, or wherever. Or those with power to stop environmental destruction and arrest climate change show little political will while our world and all of us are increasingly its victims. How do we build hope in this context? What can constitute a message of hope?

The first step to empowering students is through raising awareness about all these global realities, and stimulating ongoing reflection and analysis about it amongst them. Growth in understanding always gives a sense of hope, even if no solutions are readily apparent. We particularly need to be analysing the roots of the major African problems: the incessant wars, the struggles for self-determination, the neo-colonial, foreign and local economic exploitation, failed forms of democracy.

While an analysis of the global dynamics usually reveals their many negative effects, it is important to identify the many positive opportunities that they give rise to, especially the opportunity for greater international solidarity and engagement amongst those genuinely working for a better world. By thus developing a sense of internationality (which our movement is trying to do), and if students can be encouraged to engage at this level, any such initiative could be a major source of new hope for them.

The enormity and power of the global influences can often prevent students from seeing the local possibilities that lie within their grasp. We therefore need to help and encourage them to start talking about what is happening in their lives - their issues and experience - so that they, in turn, can discover something manageable to do to address these issues at a local level. We need to help them understand that there is no action that is too small. Even the smallest of actions can have an impact! The parable of the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32) is very relevant in this context. Developing such a sense of local action (“to think globally, but act locally”) can be a powerful source of hope.

The enormity and power of the global influences can often prevent students from seeing the local possibilities that lie within their grasp. And finally, we need to have a continual focus on healing, which enables the students to express the feelings that need it – feelings of uselessness, helplessness, insignificance, and pain. Such a focus, whether it be through healing services, through confessions, through talking to friends, or through a loving relationship, can give a deep experience of solidarity and a sense of support, which brings new hope. If this solidarity is expressed in terms of a broader socio-political, economic or theological understanding, it can become even more and enduringly empowering. . We therefore need to help and encourage them to start talking about what is happening in their lives - their issues and experience - so that they, in turn, can discover something manageable to do to address these issues at a local level. We need to help them understand that there is no action that is too small. Even the smallest of actions can have an impact! The parable of the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32) is very relevant in this context. Developing such a sense of local action (“to think globally, but act locally”) can be a powerful source of hope.

4.2.2.3 Liberating love

A final challenge facing chaplains is to be able to offer a message of liberating love. How can we help the students to find the love, intimacy and acceptance that they are searching for? We all know that, especially at their age, probably the biggest issue and concern in their minds is about finding a loving partner - someone they can be intimate with, someone who will accept them - even if they may not talk about it! Yet, I have been struck by the reluctance to deal with issues of sex among a number of groups of chaplains that I have encountered – because it is a very delicate and sensitive issue! Most (if not all) of us are finding difficulty in dealing with it in our own lives, and therefore we find it very difficult to deal with students who are asking honest and probing questions, and will not easily accept the stock answers that we are so often accustomed to giving! How, then, can we help them in their search?

A first step should be to provide spaces for them to talk about their feelings, their desires, preferably in small groups where they can find acceptance and be free to share personal issues. We have to help them to break through the taboos, by emphasizing more and more the importance of talking about sex and relationships. But we should avoid any legalistic approach, which simply focuses on what the Church teaches. We have to discover a non-legalistic approach, which enables them to start from their experience – what they feel – even though such approaches might vary with different cultures. But I have found that if we start with what the Church says, the students might verbally agree, but they will not feel free to talk about what they are really feeling. We have to offer them what the Church says about sex and relationships, but the crucial thing is to help the students themselves to clarify and establish their own moral criteria. They have to own the reasons why they should or should not have sex. They are not going to listen to someone saying that sex before marriage is wrong and they should abstain, unless they themselves have decided from their own experience that it is important!

We have to help them, for example, to see the consequences of sex without commitment. They have had experience themselves, they have experienced hurt, and they see unwanted pregnancies and AIDS. Those people trying to do AIDS education in many countries have discovered that they can talk and talk and talk, and yet very few change their sexual habits. I have heard many people in the Church saying that we are fighting a losing battle on that front! We are not going to change sexual habits! I don't know if I would be so negative about it! I would hope that it could be possible, especially as we see the devastation caused by unwanted pregnancies and AIDS around us. But, that is the reality! It is a bit like trying to tell smokers to stop smoking! They won't stop just because I say it is bad for them! They have to come to their own sense of what is right or wrong. And we can help them come to that decision themselves through a gentle exposure to the consequences.

Another important part of this reflection is to help the students to see the connection between their own personal desires and the attitudes and expectations about sex and relationships in their respective cultures. For example, in South Africa today, over 60% of children are born into single-parent homes. This is a bit of an indication of some of the attitudes towards sex, family, children, etc. Of course, there are many historical and social causes for such a dislocated situation, but there are also a lot of cultural elements that feed into it. Furthermore, in many, if not most cultures, there are very strong sexual taboos (including in the Church). This often results in sexuality being repressed for many years leading to inappropriate expression without a link to intimate relationships which, in turn, is significantly guilt-provoking. Thus, because of the variety of sexual cultures that exist in different parts of the world, it is important to help the students to reflect on what the sexual culture within their particular culture is, and how that relates to their own feelings and drives – in order to develop a sense of integration.



5. CONCLUSION

These then are some of my experiences of challenges and best practices of chaplaincy around the world. Hopefully, through deepening these reflections, personally and in groups, we can develop a form of accompaniment that can really lead our students to freedom and commitment, and enable them to play a transforming role in making God’s Reign of justice and peace a reality in Africa and, indeed, in the world.



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