Campus Prophets, Spiritual Guides, 
or Interfaith Traffic Directors?
The Many Lives of College and University Chaplains

The Luce Lectures on the Changing Role of Chaplains in American Higher Education
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What roles do chaplains play in contemporary American higher education? Drawing on the National Study of Campus Ministries (2002-2008), this paper contrasts the post-war chaplaincy with its twenty-first century successor. While a relatively young occupation, the job of the college chaplain has shifted greatly over the past sixty years. Vastly different from the 1950s, the demographic profile of college chaplains has also changed, reflecting the growing presence of women clergy and the diversification of the American campus. Accompanying these shifts, changes in American religion have transformed the context of the profession. Though some things have remained the same (chaplains still preach, counsel, and preside over religious services), other things are very different. On the twenty-first century campus, chaplains have increasingly found themselves occupying the roles of *campus prophets*, *spiritual guides*, and *interfaith traffic directors*, a combination that did not exist in the mid-century chaplaincy.¹

In chronicling these changes, it is helpful to compare accounts of post-war chaplaincy with the twenty-first century profession. Historian Warren Goldstein’s work on Yale University chaplain William Sloane Coffin, Jr. looms large in this comparison. For a whole generation of mainline Protestants, Coffin modeled an approach to chaplaincy that emphasized the public, prophetic components of the role, accompanying the Freedom Riders and protesting the Vietnam War. The quintessential Protestant chaplain, he united the profession with the great social movements of the day, moving chaplaincy beyond the more quiescent approach of the 1950s.²

Princeton University chaplain Ernest Gordon provides another data point from the same era. A World War II veteran who criticized the superficiality of post-war American religion, Gordon enthusiastically embraced the social movements of the 1960s, inviting Martin Luther King, Jr. to preach in the university chapel. A photograph from that day shows King and the Swiss theologian Karl Barth standing with Gordon at the entrance to the Gothic Revival structure. Like the picture with Barth and King, Gordon’s memoir *Meet Me at the Door* (published in 1969) illustrates the liminal role of the college
chaplain. Standing at the doorway of the Princeton chapel, Gordon also engaged the secular thinkers of the post-war era, including Jean Paul Sartre, T.S. Eliot, and Samuel Beckett, believing “their work is a form of prevenient grace.” Summing up his message, Gordon wrote, “What counts for you as human beings is the great debate about existence, human destiny, suffering, sin, salvation, faith, hope, love, freedom, truth, man, God.” While experimenting with psychedelic worship music (a Princeton student had suggested combining “Gothic and ‘grass’”), he showed little interest in interfaith dialogue, framing his ministry squarely in Christian terms.³

Published nearly fifty years later, Lucy Forster-Smith’s Crossing Thresholds (2015) describes the “making and remaking of a 21st-century chaplain,” capturing both change and continuity in the profession. Echoing Meet Me at the Door, Forster-Smith also uses a liminal metaphor. Like the cosmopolitan Gordon, she engages the wider world, though she is more likely to converse with Buddhists and Muslims than with French existentialists. Like Gordon, Forster-Smith is a Presbyterian minister, educated down the road at Princeton Theological Seminary. Yet in place of Karl Barth and T.S. Eliot, she draws inspiration from the writings of Frederick Buechner, Sharon Daloz Parks, feminist liberation theology, and her seminary professor James Loder. Over the course of her long career, Forster-Smith has served as a campus minister at the University of Washington, a chaplain at Carroll and Macalester colleges and as a chaplain and senior minister in Harvard University’s Memorial Church. Each of these appointments has led to encounters with religious diversity. On her very first day as Macalester’s chaplain, she had an intense discussion with a Jewish student who questioned the presence of a cross on the college chapel. Later she established Macalester’s first multifaith council, a student-run group that feted Forster-Smith before her departure for Harvard. Reflecting her interfaith legacy, Macalester’s Center for Religious and Spiritual Life features banners from the Baha’i Faith, the Mac Association of Alternate Spirituality, the Mac Christian Fellowship, and other campus groups. Drawing on her experiences at Macalester, Forster-Smith published College & University Chaplaincy in
the 21st Century, arguing that chaplains must adapt to a “rapidly evolving, multicultural, multifaith context.”

In numerous ways, Forster-Smith exemplifies the commitment of many of today’s chaplains to diversity and inclusion. An ordained woman in ministry, she also reflects the demographic transformation of the American college chaplaincy. In the 1950s, the typical chaplain looked more like Ernest Gordon. The earliest surveys of college chaplains revealed a profession made up almost exclusively of ordained men. As Seymour Smith noted in The American College Chaplaincy (1954), “If one dared draw a picture of the average chaplain he would be a man less than 40 years of age, married, with two children probably under 10 years of age.” Out of the 406 chaplains in Smith’s 1948–51 survey, just seven were female. Today’s college and university chaplains have a very different profile. According to the 2006 National Study of Campus Ministries (NSCM) survey, 46 percent are female, 44 percent are single, and 45 percent are lay. In 1966 the sociologist Phillip Hammond published The Campus Clergyman, describing a sample that was 92 percent male. In light of the demographic changes outlined above, such a title would not work today.

The increased presence of women has changed the profession. So has the impact of feminism. In the era of #MeToo, chaplains frequently address issues of rape and sexual violence. Many are also survivors. Sexually assaulted as a seminarian, Reverend Lucy Forster-Smith has helped students deal with similar trauma. Recounting an informal gathering of Macalester women, Forster-Smith recalled being surprised at how many “had been raped or abused in relationships both prior to and during college. That night I was a fellow traveler with them, all of us looking over our shoulders to times of innocence in our past, to a moment of fear and shock.” Compare this to the flippant way that Princeton Chaplain Ernest Gordon talked about the sexual behavior of World War II officers: “As young officers our standing order of the night was: ‘Seduction if possible, rape if necessary, but fornication at all cost.’ I am not sure that present attitudes are better or worse. Probably they are about the same.” Though Gordon
criticized the sexual conduct of both soldiers and students, his comments trivialized the violence of their actions. Fifty year later, no chaplain would use such language in a work about the profession.  

**The Study and the Sample**

As the memoirs of Gordon and Forster-Smith make clear, the profession of college chaplaincy has changed dramatically since the post-war era. Drawing on the National Study of Campus Ministries (NSCM), this paper will explore the ways that twenty-first century chaplains view their jobs. Conducted between 2002 and 2008, the NSCM was the first large-scale study of Christian campus ministers since the 1960s. Based on a 2006 survey of 1,659 staff in six denominations and two parachurch groups, it included a subsample of chaplains employed in private colleges and universities (see Appendix). This paper focuses on the subsample of 335 college and university chaplains, as well as 80 in-depth interviews with chaplains at church-related colleges and universities. The subsample was restricted to respondents who worked in college or university chaplain’s offices at the time of the survey. The vast majority were employed at religiously affiliated colleges and universities (65 percent) and other private institutions (34 percent).

Whenever possible the findings from the NSCM will be compared to earlier studies, including Seymour Smith’s *The American College Chaplaincy* (1954), Merrimon Cuninggim’s *The College Seeks Religion* (1947), and Phillip Hammond’s *The Campus Clergyman* (1966). Given differences in samples, these comparisons will necessarily be imperfect. Excluding chaplains at Catholic colleges and universities, Smith’s survey drew on institutions belonging to the Association of American Colleges (now the Association of American Colleges and Universities). Hammond also confined his survey to Protestants. Including a broader range of church-related institutions, the National Study of Campus Ministries surveyed chaplains employed at colleges participating in Lilly Endowment’s $225 million vocation initiative, along with college chaplains listed on the rosters of six Christian denominations.
(Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian Church USA, and Assemblies of God). A fuller exploration of twenty-first century chaplains would include the members of the National Association of College and University Chaplains and the Association for College (NACUC) and University Religious Affairs (ACURA). Reflecting the diversification of campus religion, NACUC and ACURA include a growing number of Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu chaplains. According to the Los Angeles Times, at least four non-Christians serve as head chaplains or deans of religious life at non-sectarian institutions and many more serve on the chaplaincy staffs of American colleges and universities. Though the NSCM sample overlaps with these groups, it is primarily focused on chaplains in Catholic and Protestant church-related colleges and universities, who are far less diverse. Despite these limitations, it can tell us something about the goals and dreams of chaplains in the twenty-first century.

Multiple Roles: The Many Lives of College and University Chaplains

What does it mean to be a college and university chaplain in twenty-first century America? Like their colleagues in hospital and prison chaplaincy, campus chaplains take on a wide variety of roles. In the 1950s, Seymour Smith noted that there were “probably few professional people on the academic or religious scene who are called upon to perform as many different roles as the chaplain. He is a preacher, teacher, counselor, and pastor; a leader of group activities, both religious and secular; a public relations agent; and a conference speaker. He is a member of the faculty and an adviser in administrative circles, yet he is a confidant and intimate friend of students.” In the 1960s, chaplains assumed the role of campus prophets, taking part in the Civil Rights and antiwar movements. In the words of Yale chaplain Ian Oliver, they “stepped into that familiar, established role of chaplain and then used it against itself.”

Commenting on the multiple roles of the “campus clergyman,” sociologist Phillip Hammond argued that the field was too ambiguous to have a coherent identity. In the 1970s, a study of United Methodists in collegiate ministry found that college and university chaplains were more likely than denominational
campus ministers to emphasize “ministering to all persons on campus, identifying and nurturing pre-theological students, and providing for a worshipping community on campus.”

What does the role of chaplain look like today? In an effort to get at this question, the National Study of Campus Ministries asked chaplains to identify their top three goals on a rather long list. Their most common choices were: facilitate the spiritual formation of students; provide worship or sacraments; help students integrate faith and learning; foster a commitment to social justice; create a community that respects and appreciates diversity; and help students discern their vocations.

Some of these goals show up in Seymour Smith’s *The American College Chaplaincy* (1954). Both then and now, chaplains lead worship, talk about faith and learning, and assist students in discerning their vocations, though they may not use the same vocabulary to describe these tasks. Newer to the list are the goals of fostering a commitment to social justice (largely absent in the 1950s but palpably present in the 1960s), facilitating the spiritual formation of students (largely absent in the 1950s and the 1960s, at least in those terms), and creating a community that respects and appreciates diversity (rarely mentioned until the emergence of the interfaith movement). These goals are also part of the emerging literature on the changing character of the chaplaincy. They can be found in Forster-Smith’s *Crossing Thresholds* (2015) and *College & University Chaplaincy in the 21st Century* (2013), as well as in the deliberations of professional associations like the National Association of College and University Chaplains and the Association for College and University Religious Affairs. They also animate innovative programs in chaplaincy training at Hartford Seminary and New York University.

Rather than focusing on every aspect of the chaplain’s life, this paper zeroes in on the three roles that capture the changing role of the chaplaincy in the twenty-first century: campus prophets, spiritual guides, and interfaith traffic directors. Going deeper than the NSCM survey data above, it draws on the in-depth interviews we conducted with eighty college and university chaplains, looking at the ways they talk about social justice, spirituality, and religious diversity. After listening to the voices of
today’s chaplains, we will have a better idea of the direction that chaplaincy is moving in American higher education.

**Campus Prophets**

Prior to the 1960s, the occupation of campus chaplaincy did not focus its energy on social justice. For most chaplains, afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted were not part of the job description. Reflecting this neglect, there was little or no discussion of social justice or the Social Gospel in Seymour Smith’s *The American College Chaplaincy*, except in a section on supervising student religious organizations. Lamenting the “failure of these groups to deal widely or intensively with political and economic issues,” Smith noted that among the “least frequently mentioned in the program were promoting economic justice” and “developing political effectiveness.” In Smith’s judgment, there was “no suggestion that chaplains feel strongly about major expansion in these areas.” To be sure, there were exceptions to this political quiescence. Student religious organizations participated in the nascent Civil Rights movement, as did chaplains with a social conscience. While Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer addressed the quadrennial meetings of the Student Christian Movement, Howard Thurman preached on equality and justice in Boston University’s Marsh Chapel and before that at Howard University. Yet such rhetoric was not the norm.

That is why the arrest of William Sloane Coffin on May 25, 1961 marked a symbolic shift in the role of the chaplain in the Ivy League. A Freedom Rider who spoke out for Civil Rights, Coffin also courted controversy by protesting the Vietnam War. By the end of the 1960s, mainline Protestant chaplains and campus clergy had become “segmented radicals.” While Coffin modeled an activist style of chaplaincy at Yale, the landmark Danforth Study of Campus Ministry focused on “the church, the university, and social policy.” Employing the biblical types of the prophet, priest, and king, principal investigator Kenneth Underwood saw campus ministry as a vehicle for the prophetic. Most mainline Protestant chaplains agreed. According to a 1977 study of United Methodists, 76 percent of chaplains
“thought they should spend at least 20 percent of their time working in the prophetic mode.” Drawing on the resources of Catholic social teaching, chaplains at Roman Catholic institutions emphasized the “faith that does justice,” while Jesuit Daniel Berrigan became the face of Catholic radicalism at Cornell. While some evangelicals rediscovered their tradition’s heritage of social reform, a 1970 study of conservative Protestant chaplains found little interest in social justice.19

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the role of the campus prophet is both more widespread and less visible. Far from unusual, a commitment to social action can be found across the theological spectrum, though with varying degrees of emphasis. In the National Study of Campus Ministries survey, 77 percent of college chaplains said that fostering a commitment to social justice was a very important goal, with 32 percent ranking it among their top three priorities. Not surprisingly, there were significant differences across institutions, with 46 percent of chaplains at Roman Catholic colleges, 29 percent of chaplains at nonsectarian private institutions, 22 percent of those at mainline Protestant schools, and 10 percent of chaplains at conservative Protestant colleges making social justice a top three goal. Yet when no ranking was involved, a majority at all four types of schools affirmed their support for social justice. Demonstrating near unanimity, 89 percent agreed that “social justice is at the heart of the gospel.”

What does it mean to foster a commitment to social justice in the contemporary chaplaincy? Unlike William Sloane Coffin, today’s chaplains are rarely the central actors in the drama of social protest. Though chaplains still go to demonstrations, they do not always lead them. Recalling a protest against the infamous School of the Americas, a Roman Catholic chaplain noted that the trip was student led: “So they wanted to go to the protest in Georgia against the School of the Americas. . . . They did and I went with them. I said if you’re going to make all the arrangements . . . you’re going to do the organizing, I’ll just pay the bills with you, and I’ll be happy to go.”
Rather than holding a bullhorn on the campus green, today’s chaplains are more likely to mentor students in their offices. Assisting students with vocational discernment, they gently nudge them toward socially engaged occupations. When asked to tell a story about a successful student, many chaplains focused on vocational themes. Such narratives often had a beginning, middle, and end, tracing the student’s journey from college service projects to a career of social service. Echoing “languages of redemption” from religion, politics, and psychology, they often have a hopeful trajectory. Summing up the impact of mission trips, one chaplain noted that “what starts out being kind of a social justice project really helps them in their own personal growth.” A second chaplain cited an alumna’s journey from an inner-city project to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, adding that she “has really devoted her life to living simply and to being in solidarity with the poor and to teaching.” Describing the student’s deepening commitment to social justice, the chaplain noted, “She went from a student who really, really struggled and asked serious questions about the existence of God to an image of God that is a God of profound love and generosity.”

Always a part of chaplaincy, this emphasis on vocation has increased in recent years, responding to philanthropic initiatives from Lilly Endowment and other foundations. In the NSCM survey, one-fourth of chaplains made helping students discern their vocations a top-three goal. Support for this goal was even higher among chaplains at schools that participated in Lilly’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) initiative, with 38 percent making it a top-three priority.

On many campuses, social justice is part of vocational discernment. Reflecting this dual focus, the twin themes of justice and vocation can be found in chaplaincy program mission statements. Asked to describe the central purpose of her office, one chaplain noted that “the campus ministry program has as its mission the University’s mission, which is to educate students as full persons to be agents for change.” Rare in the 1950s and 1960s, such statements are ubiquitous today in church-related and non-sectarian chaplaincy programs. Many mention social justice. Exemplifying this trend, the University of
Dayton’s Campus Ministry Center for Social Concern is “committed to faith-based social justice education, including direct service to the poor and marginalized, work on behalf of social justice, and changing unjust structures in society that oppress and marginalize human beings.” Such language can be found on the websites and Facebook pages of college and university chaplains’ offices. While William Sloane Coffin exemplified such commitments, he did not formalize them in a chaplaincy mission statement. Today’s chaplains rely less on personal charisma and more on institutionalized programs and policies.²¹

Like Coffin, today’s campus prophets challenge the status quo. Questioning the union of God and country, an evangelical chaplain urges students to not be “so patriotic and nationalistic with their faith,” adding that “they cannot separate church and state very well.” Another pushes students to widen their conception of Christianity and politics, noting that “some of our kids come out of churches who have been taught that it is impossible to be a Christian and a Democrat or a Christian could never believe in any kind of evolution or that the worst sin in all the world is homosexuality.” In his judgment, “our role is to take these little Christian minds and just kind of explode them and push the boundaries and challenge them and make them think things that they have never thought and challenge these assumptions that they come with.” On many mainline Protestant campuses, the chaplains’ office is one of the few places where LGBT students encounter an open and inclusive theology of human sexuality or a pro-choice approach to Christian social ethics. Other chaplains challenge students from the other end of the political spectrum, taking students to the March for Life and criticizing Planned Parenthood.²² As a whole, however, the chaplaincy leans to the left. Echoing his mentor William Sloane Coffin, Stanford’s longtime dean for religious life wrote Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All (2009). Articulating a similar vision, the United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry published The Prophetic Voice and Making Peace (2016), a collection written by campus ministers and college chaplains. While most chaplains do not deserve the title of “segmented radicals,” they could be
described as segmented moderates. In the 2006 NSCM survey, the average chaplain rated herself a 3.18 on a scale of one to seven (with one being “extremely liberal” and seven being “extremely conservative”). Whatever their ideologies, today’s college and university chaplains embrace the role of the campus prophet.²³

**Spiritual Guides**

Uniting the active and the contemplative, today’s chaplains also identify as spiritual guides. For many it is their primary identity. In the National Study of Campus Ministries survey, 52 percent of chaplains selected spiritual formation as a top-three goal, making it the most popular choice. This focus could be found across Catholic, conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, and other private institutions. To be sure, some traditions were more committed to this goal than others. While 69 percent of conservative Protestant institutions listed spiritual formation in the top three, just 41 percent of mainline Protestant colleges gave it the same emphasis. In spite of these differences, it was the leading goal in all four groups.

Ubiquitous today, the word spirituality did not roll off the tongues of post-war college and university chaplains. It does not appear in Warren Goldstein’s biography of William Sloane Coffin or in the first volume of Coffin’s Riverside Church sermons. According to Goldstein, “Coffin never developed the knack of reflection and self-exploration,” focusing his energy “on productive engagement with the exterior world.” When Coffin did get around to preaching about spirituality (the word appears in a 1983 sermon), he did so with great skepticism, noting that “[s]o much so-called spirituality is superficiality, pure laziness.” Coffin was not alone. The term spirituality cannot be found in Seymour Smith’s *The American College Chaplaincy* (1954), Philip Hammond’s *The Campus Clergyman* (1966), or in the landmark Danforth Study of Campus Ministries (1969). Though most of these authors discuss the domain of the “spiritual,” they tend to use it as a synonym for religion or faith.²⁴
In sharp contrast to the generation of William Sloane Coffin, the chaplains interviewed for the National Study of Campus Ministries are at home with such language, referring often to spiritual growth, spiritual formation, and spiritual guidance. Many respondents talked about spirituality. The overwhelming majority used the word spiritual. Far from peripheral, these words are at the heart of twenty-first century chaplaincy. When asked to describe the central purpose of their campus ministry programs, today’s chaplains embraced a holistic vision of student development. As one chaplain put it, “Our mission is closely tied to the university’s mission where we’re forming students intellectually. We’re also forming them spiritually and those two are very closely tied.” Along with the discourse of formation, chaplains also spoke about accompanying students on their spiritual journeys, a task that often proves demanding. As one respondent put it, “Campus ministry is wonderful, but it can be draining because of the enormous needs students have, especially for someone to listen to them and to walk with them through their various life issues and crises.” Using a similar metaphor, another explained, “I think everybody’s on a journey. Everybody is in process.”

Some NSCM respondents used the language of psychology to describe the process of spiritual development. Drawing on psychologist James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*, an African American chaplain described the changes in student spirituality: “[A]fter the initial internal struggle that many young people have with deconstruction of their internalized belief system, they really begin to understand what James Fowler uses in his faith development model as a religion that can sit alongside another tradition and not be threatened,” adding that “they leave with a much broader understanding of a God that embraces all people and all religions.” Welcoming such soul searching, today’s chaplains portray students as open and inquisitive, given to big questions and spiritual exploration. Reflecting these concerns, Sharon Daloz Parks’ *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* is also a favorite title. For chaplains influenced by developmental views of spirituality, the goal of campus ministry is to help students move from narrowness and rigidity to a more tolerant faith. This view of chaplaincy is articulated in Reverend
Scotty McLennan’s *Finding Your Religion*, a work that asks students, “What stage are you in?” According to McLennan, “There is a spiritual mountain that all of us (or at least a lot of us) are trying to climb,” adding that there are “many paths up that mountain—many paths than can reach the top.”

While open to religious exploration, many chaplains also see spiritual formation as a form of cultural transmission. In the words of a conservative Protestant chaplain, the purpose of campus ministry is “to transmit what we receive from our ancestors safely to our heirs, and in such a way that we don’t fossilize in the past nor fall prey to every whim and fad that comes along in the future.” Such work takes on greater urgency at a time when many students identify as spiritual—but-not-religious. As one chaplain noted, “The students of today seem more interested in spirituality and less interested in religion.” Pushing back against generic spirituality, many church-related college chaplains employ the vocabularies of their sponsoring traditions. Articulating a faith that is Benedictine, Franciscan, Jesuit, Lutheran, and Wesleyan, they embrace a *spirituality with modifiers*. Summing up the central purpose of chaplaincy at her institution, a Catholic respondent said that the mission of campus ministry was “to foster the Benedictine values.” Another chaplain emphasized the distinctiveness of Quaker identity in a multifaith community. As this respondent put it, “I have to stand solidly in the tradition that I am from, and so as a Quaker I really do believe there’s that part of God in every person.”

Such adjectives help explain the spiritual turn in contemporary chaplaincy. Rooted in what sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls practice-based spirituality, the embrace of all things spiritual has been shaped by several strains in American religious life, including liberal Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and the metaphysical tradition. As Leigh Schmidt notes in *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, one of the most influential spiritual traditions can be traced to the Society of Friends. Anticipating today’s emphasis on spiritual practices, the African American mystic Howard Thurman used similar language during his time as chaplain and Professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Resources at Boston University. Echoing his Haverford mentor Rufus Jones, an influential Quaker, Thurman wrote
that the “true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us.” Reflecting on his years as founding pastor of San Francisco’s Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, Thurman wrote, “My basic concern was the deepening of the spiritual life of the gathered people.” The focus of a major PBS documentary, Thurman is enjoying a comeback in American public life. Chaplains are among those watching. Quaker spirituality has also shaped evangelical campus ministries, mainly through the work of bestselling author Richard Foster and his colleague Dallas Willard. While liberal Protestants and African American Christians read Thurman’s Disciplines of the Spirit, evangelicals turn to Foster’s Celebration of Discipline. Significantly, both Thurman and Foster were shaped by the work of Quaker Rufus Jones. Other Quaker voices in American higher education include the late Earlham College president D. Elton Trueblood and the writer Parker J. Palmer, a perennial contributor to conversations about spirituality and campus life.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spiritual traditions have played an equally significant role in shaping contemporary chaplaincy. At both Catholic and Protestant institutions, chaplains have drawn on the insights of Ignatius of Loyola and Thomas Merton. Influenced by Merton, Thomas Keating and Palmer, one mainline Protestant chaplain has combined Catholic and Quaker traditions, explaining, “I’m very big into contemplative prayer, centering prayer.” Another respondent cited the influence of Robert Webber’s Ancient-Future Faith, noting a return to “classic ancient forms of worship as well as symbols.” An evangelical Episcopalian who taught at Wheaton College, Webber was also the author of Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail. Publishing works on “spiritual formation and contemplation,” InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has drawn on similar traditions. As Keith and Gladys Hunter note in their history of the ministry, “Spiritual formation became the new in-word” during the 1980s. Twenty years later, Intervarsity President Alec Hill asked, “what can we learn from the early Jesuits?” Today InterVarsity Press’ Formatio imprint publishes titles on Taizé prayer, the patristics, and the Rule of Saint Benedict. Slowly but surely, evangelical Protestants have appropriated the spiritual practices of other Christians, a
development that has also influenced chaplains at evangelical colleges. Reflecting the wider influence of Catholic contemplative spirituality in the world of ecumenical and multifaith college chaplaincy, the National Association of College and University Chaplains and the Association for College and University Religious Affairs featured Franciscan Richard Rohr at their joint meeting in 2019. The founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Rohr builds on the work of Merton and Keating.28

While drawing on a wide range of Christian traditions, the chaplains interviewed for the National Study of Campus Ministries were less likely to speak about spirituality rooted in other religious traditions. None used the adjectives Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, or Hindu to modify the word spirituality. This is not surprising given the overwhelmingly Christian composition of the sample. Out of 335 chaplains surveyed, only two identified as non-Christian. All of the head or solo chaplains interviewed by telephone identified with a Christian tradition. Despite this homogeneity, several respondents mentioned the spiritual development of non-Christian students. As one Roman Catholic chaplain explained, “We want every student who comes here—Catholic or non-Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Mormon—to develop their faith lives. We want to be able to provide for them a safe environment in which to question, to pray, to grow, to develop. We want to walk with them.”

Interfaith Traffic Directors

At the time of the survey (administered in 2006), the campus interfaith movement was in its infancy. Founded in 2002, Interfaith Youth Core was just beginning to engage college and university religious life. Though some of our respondents attended a 2005 Princeton conference on multifaith councils (the first such national gathering), most did not. At the same time, the vast majority of chaplains (81 percent) agreed that it was very important to create a community that respects and appreciates diversity, while 30 percent made it a top-three goal. Though just 6 percent ranked interfaith dialogue among their top three priorities, 40 percent called it very important. Reflecting their lack of
exposure to this topic, 36 percent of chaplains wanted more training in ecumenical or interfaith dialogue.²⁹

To be sure, support for interfaith dialogue was much lower in the 1950s. In The American College Chaplaincy, Seymour Smith begins a section on “interreligious responsibilities” by noting that the “discussion in this section is confined to relationship with Roman Catholic and Jewish students.” While acknowledging that “other faith groups are represented on some campuses,” Smith wrote that “they are for the most part small groups.” Published around the same time as Will Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew, Smith’s book reflected the religious perspective of “tri-faith America.” In The College Seeks Religion (1947), Merrimon Cuninggim discussed the religious needs of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews at several leading programs. While citing Syracuse University’s “sincere spirit of tolerance and cooperation,” he noted that the “interfaith character which was sought in the beginning is now largely absent, owing to the failure to hold the Catholics in any sort of cooperative endeavor.” Landmark studies from the 1960s also failed to transcend Herberg’s “triple melting pot.” In The Campus Clergyman (1966), sociologist Philip Hammond discusses “ecumenical attitudes” rather than interfaith cooperation. Asked whether they would like to see campus ministry associations of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, 74 percent of Hammond’s respondents replied in the affirmative. Likewise, the Danforth Study of Campus Ministries focuses almost exclusively on Christian and Jewish groups. Reflecting this cultural context, Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin forged coalitions with American Catholics and Jews while paying little attention to other religions. As Warren Goldstein notes, Coffin preached a “version of Christianity to which Catholics and Jews could relate easily.”³⁰

By the time of the National Study of Campus Ministries, chaplains were beginning to operate in a multifaith environment. In the 2006 survey, 43 percent reported the presence of Muslim student organizations on their home campuses, while student Jewish groups were noted by 37 percent of the chaplains. About one-fourth of chaplains welcomed a student Buddhist association (the same proportion
had Hindu organizations), while 18 percent of reported the presence of neo-pagan groups. Most respondents reported positive relationships with non-Christian groups. While Jewish groups had an average score of 4.30 on a five-point scale (with one being highly negative and five being highly positive), Muslim groups (including the Muslim Student Association) received a score of 4.21. As one chaplain explained, “My role on the campus is to make sure that we remain a community of respect for all people and all faiths, and that includes my helping the Muslim students find a place to pray.”

Not surprisingly, attitudes towards diversity vary greatly by religious affiliation, with Catholic and mainline Protestant chaplains expressing a more inclusive orientation. In the words of a Catholic chaplain, “What we say is everybody’s welcome, because we are a Benedictine institution and hospitality is important.” While privileging a single religious tradition (what one study called “one party rule”), such institutions welcomed multiple religious groups to their campuses. By contrast, some colleges reported little diversity. As one respondent noted, “[We] really don’t have any from other religions out of the Christian persuasion. We just don’t.” Though many evangelical colleges participate in interfaith dialogue and service projects (including those sponsored by Interfaith Youth Core), they are not multi-religious institutions.31

At the time of the study, only a minority of church-related colleges had established organizational structures to deal with religious diversity. At one mainline Protestant school, the chaplain created an ecumenical council to serve as an umbrella organization for all of the student religious groups, including Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. Another chaplain planned to create such a structure, noting that “we have a multifaith roundtable here . . . but we do not have a multifaith council yet.” Still others have experimented with multifaith chapels, modifying Catholic and Protestant spaces to accommodate other groups. Recounting this process of negotiation, one chaplain noted that the “Jewish students want to make sure that when they use the chapel that the Jerusalem cross is taken out,” while the “Hindu students would just as soon we leave the cross in and they would just put other images right
alongside it.” Multifaith spaces come with new rules. Inside Pacific Lutheran University’s meditation and prayer space, students are asked to respect the religious practices of other traditions. The “posting or leaving of materials of any kind is prohibited.” So are food and drink, “as some food items are not permitted in worship spaces in some traditions.” Not everyone follows the rules. In the interviews, several chaplains complained about excessive proselytizing. In the words of one mainline Protestant respondent, “[W]e don’t want parents from India or Pakistan calling us up distraught that their child has been told they’re going to hell,” adding that “it’s been a difficult dialogue with the Campus Crusade folk.” In extreme cases, chaplains have restricted access to their campuses. Yet, in most cases, they have tried to reach an understanding. As one chaplain put it, “I need to create space for religious pluralism on campus, making sure that nobody’s hurt and that there’s space for the FCA and the InterVarsity and the Catholic group and all that and sort of nurture those groups along as I can. But I’m the official Presbyterian.” Rather than ministering to a single tradition, chaplains have served as interreligious peacekeepers. Directing the religious traffic at the University of Southern California, Dean of Religious Life Susan Laemmle and her successor Varun Soni have modeled a new form of campus religious leadership. Commenting on the new religious pluralism, National Public Radio reporter Monique Parsons mused, “In a way, chaplains like Soni are more like interfaith cruise directors than traditional pastors.” At more and more institutions, this is the future of chaplaincy.

Conclusion

What roles do chaplains occupy in the twenty-first century? In today’s universities, are they best described as campus prophets, spiritual guides, or interfaith traffic directors? As this paper has demonstrated, chaplains and deans of religious life inhabit all three roles, along with countless others. In sharp contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, many of today’s chaplains focus on religious diversity, serving as interfaith traffic directors and accommodating multiple faiths. The vast majority also act as spiritual guides, accompanying students as they ask the big questions about religion, spirituality, and life. Finally,
like William Sloane Coffin, Jr., today’s chaplains function as campus prophets, though less through fiery oratory and more through their quiet presence. By facilitating campus activism and by steering students into socially responsible careers, they have worked to advance social justice.

Are chaplains doing too much? In the past, the multiplicity of occupational roles led some to question their effectiveness. In The Campus Clergyman (1966), sociologist Phillip Hammond argued that role ambiguity undermined the coherence of the profession. In the twenty-first century, the situation is much the same. In our 2008 report to Lilly Endowment, the National Study of Campus Ministries echoed Hammond’s critique, citing a “troubling diffusion of professional goals.” In Crossing Thresholds (2015), Lucy Forster-Smith described a similar tension. Looking back on her time at Macalester College, she noted, “I often muse over the contested roles that define my work,” asking herself, “Am I staff to the student crisis line? Or am I there for everyone in the community, to foster a safe space for each one to express his or her truth? Am I there to placate traditionalists by delivering ‘nice prayers’ at nice occasions? Or am I there to prick the conscience of the campus on ethical and moral issues many would rather ignore?”

In the final analysis, the diffuse roles of the college chaplain can be viewed as both a strength and a weakness. Reflecting the competing demands of a complex environment, chaplains have worn many hats.

How will chaplaincy evolve in the future? In answering this question, it is important to specify which chaplains are being discussed. The findings reported in this paper are based on a sample of chaplains employed largely at church-related colleges and universities. Reflecting the situation in Catholic, evangelical, and mainline Protestant higher education (along with a few nonsectarian institutions), they do not represent the entire profession. In assessing the future of chaplaincy, it is important to look beyond the church-related sector. In particular, future research should pay more attention to the major chaplaincy professional associations, especially the National Association of College and University Chaplains (NACUC) and the Association for College and University Religious
Affairs (ACURA). Founded in 1948, NACUC includes over 160 institutions, many of which are not affiliated with a religious tradition. Focused on large independent private institutions, ACURA is equally diverse. In assessing the future of multifaith chaplaincy, it will also be important to study the members of the Association of Muslim Chaplains and other non-Christian organizations.

In conclusion, a word should be said about the involvement of New York University in the future of college and university chaplaincy. Founded in 2012, the Of Many Institute for Multifaith Leadership has fostered fresh conversations about the role of spirituality in American higher education. Beautifully portrayed in the documentary Of Many (2014), the friendship between Imam Khalid Latif and Rabbi Yehuda Sarna shows the possibilities for new interfaith partnerships in American society. Funded by a grant from the Henry R. Luce Foundation, this lecture series and the university’s new doctoral program on campus religious life have launched a fresh conversation about the future of the profession. So has the summer institute, focusing on topics such as mindful leadership and spiritual diversity. Observers interested in the changing role of chaplaincy in American higher education should pay attention to what is happening at New York University. If the past is prologue, it is poised to make a valuable contribution to the development of the profession.
Appendix: Data and Methods
This paper draws on the National Study of Campus Ministries, a project conducted between 2002 and 2008 by Betty DeBerg and John Schmalzbauer with support from Lilly Endowment. Doug Magnuson and Sarah Ehlinger also assisted with this research. DeBerg served as principal investigator for the project. The larger study focused on campus ministers in denominational and parachurch settings, as well as individuals employed in college and university chaplains’ offices. This document draws primarily on the subsample of 335 college and university chaplains, as well as 80 in-depth interviews.

In order to maximize our understanding of the campus ministry profession, the larger study utilized a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

1. Interviews of chaplains at schools participating in Lilly’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. Eighty chaplains agreed to hour-long telephone interviews about their goals, their professional backgrounds, and their situations at their schools. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded according to major themes articulated by the chaplains.

2. Week-long site visits. DeBerg and Schmalzbauer “job shadowed” twelve individual campus ministers for a week each, including two chaplains at church-related institutions. We observed the campus ministers work, and interviewed them regarding their goals, strategies, and perspectives on their work. Extensive, often verbatim, field notes were taken, which were shared among the research team for interpretation. Two site visits were made to college and university chaplains’ offices.

3. Web-based survey. A survey investigating campus ministers’ demographics, professional preparation, ministry goals, terms of employment, job descriptions, and satisfaction levels was completed by 1,659 respondents, including a subsample of 335 individuals employed in college and university chaplains’ offices.

Some survey questions were adapted from previous studies, including the Pulpit and Pew survey of American clergy, Phillip E. Hammond’s The Campus Clergyman, the Danforth Study of Campus Ministries, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate’s studies of Catholic campus ministries, the Cooperative Clergy Research Project, and a United Methodist survey from the 1970s.

Very early on in the planning of this project we limited the study to Christian ministries, and within that field limited it even further by selecting representative Protestant denominations and organizations for study alongside Roman Catholics. Our intention was to roughly “divide the pie” into thirds based on denominational or organization affiliation—Roman Catholics (RC), conservative Protestants, and mainline (or liberal) Protestants. We chose campus ministers in the Assemblies of God (AG), the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IV), and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) as our conservative Protestant sample. Our mainline Protestant sample consisted of campus ministers in the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), as well as those campus ministers in denominational personnel data bases who were employed by campus ministries supported ecumenically by more than one mainline denomination. In addition, we sampled college and university chaplains as they were present in the denominational databases and in personnel information from PTEV schools.

Another way to look at the total sample is to see it as consisting of three main types of campus ministers—college and university chaplains; denominational campus ministers, and campus ministers
employed by specialized ministry organizations such as InterVarsity and FCA. Here is the breakdown of the sample according to these three cohorts.

1. Chaplains 335 respondents (20% of total)
2. Parachurch campus ministers 549 respondents (33% of total)
3. Denominational campus ministers 747 respondents (46% of total)

This paper examines the subsample of college and university chaplains (335 respondents). It does not focus on campus ministers employed by parachurch or denominational campus ministries.

Following Seymour Smith’s 1954 study, we defined college chaplain as a “person who is appointed and/or approved by the college administration and responsible to it for campus religious work.” College chaplains do not work for externally supported campus ministries, such as parachurch groups or denominations. Our survey and interviews with chaplains were confined to respondents employed in college or university chaplains’ offices at the time of the study.

Contact information for all respondents consisted of campus ministry/chaplaincy personnel data we received from national or regional headquarters of Protestant denominations, the Catholic Campus Ministry Association (CCMA), the national headquarters of the FCA and InterVarsity, and the presidents of PTEV schools. Many chaplains are listed on these denominational rolls.

In May 2006, campus ministers on these lists were sent an invitation letter, via email, which contained an internet link to the survey. Two reminders were sent via email encouraging them to complete the survey. The survey was closed in September 2006.

In all, 3,788 invitations to complete the survey were sent. With 1,659 individuals responding, we achieved an overall response rate of 44%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCA</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>InterVarsity</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBC</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>703</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELCA</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCUSA</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTEV</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMC</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>551</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A portion of the survey was given only to those who indicated that they were directors of their campus ministry programs, rather than staff members. 1,012 respondents indicated that they directed their programs. Thus, the surveys completed by directors, with their staff and budget numbers, represent data from just over one thousand separate campus ministry programs.
All survey respondents were asked, “In which type of campus ministry program are you currently employed?” One of the options was “College or university chaplain’s office.” This question was used to select the subsample of 335 college and university chaplains. In addition, some of the survey respondents were classified as college and university chaplains based on their presence on a list of chaplains from 88 institutions that participated in Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation institutions. All of the college and university chaplains in the sample worked at private institutions.

7 Forster-Smith, Crossing Thresholds, 51.
8 Gordon, Meet Me at the Door, 78.
10 Rosanna Xia, “Most College Head Chaplains are Christian. At USC, a Hindu Leads the Way,” Los Angeles Times, 3 April 2017.
14 Smith, *The American College Chaplaincy*.
15 Forster-Smith, *Crossing Thresholds*; Forster-Smith, ed., *College & University Chaplaincy in the 21st Century*.
21 For more on the University of Dayton’s campus ministry, see [http://catalog.udayton.edu/graduate/generalinformation/studentlifeandservices/campusministry/](http://catalog.udayton.edu/graduate/generalinformation/studentlifeandservices/campusministry/).
22 See the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) discussion of abortion in Thomas Wurtz, “5 Things You Can Do to Stop Planned Parenthood,” 30 July 2018, available at [https://focusoncampus.org/es/content/5-things-you-can-do-to-stop-planned-parenthood](https://focusoncampus.org/es/content/5-things-you-can-do-to-stop-planned-parenthood). Wurtz urges readers to consider “joining in the March for Life in Washington DC or a local march within your state.” FOCUS is active in both public universities and church-related colleges.


31 On “one party rule” institutions, see Jacobsen and Jacobsen, No Longer Invisible, 86; On evangelicals and interfaith service projects, see Chris Norton, “Christian Colleges Part of White House Interfaith Service Push,” Christianity Today, 8 August 2011.


34 Hammond, The Campus Clergyman, 111-121.


36 Forster-Smith, Crossing Thresholds, 4.


38 Smith, The American College Chaplaincy, 7.