When Chaplaincy answered the call!

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Though, I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.
Thomas Merton

Chaplains in their ministry among young people work and walk alongside all those involved in their education and formation, serving them all. They echo the story of the risen Christ and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13- 35).

Fr Gerard Devlin of Woldingham School

WOLDINGHAM SCHOOL

On the 8th November 1831 St Madeline Sophie Barat, the founder of the Society of the Sacred Heart, spoke to St Rose Philippine Duchesne before she departed on her life changing journey to America where she had the vision to found new schools. There was a sadness in the parting and Madeline Sophie said, "Times change and we must change too." These words are so apt for us today, as a Sacred Heart School community, times have changed so abruptly, and we had to change as individuals to embrace a new way of teaching and learning and, for keeping in touch with one another.

When the first lockdown started, as the Chaplain I had to adapt to a different pattern of work and be creative in ministering to our community, as we all had a sense of being displaced in a monochrome time where we all missed the daily interaction of staff and students. I kept in regular contact with staff, students, parents, and governors, helping families who suffered a bereavement and supporting others where a family member was ill. I was able to communicate with those who had feelings of isolation, anxiety, and helplessness. I was greatly impressed by the members of our community who were reaching out to the elderly and the marginalised to spread a message of hope. I was busy delivering PPE which was made here in the school by our DT department and gratefully received by local doctors and the local hospice.

Since returning to school, I am grateful to the Theatre staff who have helped to live stream our Masses from the School Chapel, as one parent kindly remarked, "Having the opportunity to share in the Mass as a family has been a very positive result in these very strange times, despite the distance, we have all felt very much part of the Woldingham Community." When we returned in September we were able to complete our First Holy Communion programme and it was lovely that parents and close family members could join in the Mass from Australia, Thailand and Ireland.

I have been able to continue with our weekly meeting of Sacred Heart Year Reps. Our Sacred Heart Ribbon is still at home in Hong Kong but still organises the students who are participating in the Sunday Mass, Year Masses and House Masses. With the help of other 6th form students, the Sacred Heart Ribbon has helped organise a quiz based on the Sunday readings and the homily which encourages everyone to engage with the theme for the week. The students write prayers each week which I incorporate into my weekly reflection and the bidding prayers at Mass. As a Sacred Heart group, we are still able to share in Lectio Divina and praying the rosary, and I have also organised a parents and staff group who meet in prayer. I continue to meet with our boarding community "bubble" for night prayers which gives us time for personal reflection and a quiet time when we can pray for the whole school community who are still not able to be with us in person.

During Lent I have written a short daily reflection which hopefully inspires prayer, thought and discernment in our Lenten observance. During Lent, as a school community, we are all involved in raising funds for the Cardinal Hume Centre in London. On the 17th March, after a tutor group liturgy prepared by me, we took part in a sponsored walk in year groups; it was an opportunity to pray, take time away from screens in the fresh air, and raise money for a great cause. International students also took part, walking with family members in various places throughout the world.

Outreach Cardinal Hume Centre

We may have been surrounded by pain and uncertainty over the past year, but we can be sure that we do continue to inspire and motivate one another with a new imagination of what will be possible at Woldingham in the months ahead. There is great hope for the future, in the words of St Madeline Sophie Barat:

"Don't be nervous about your interior storms, they are necessary, and the sea is calmer and more beautiful after the storm."

Mrs Annmarie Sylvester Charles, Lay Chaplain and Dr Louise McGowan, Headmistress Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College, London

We have come to know that Covid does not discriminate; it sweeps in like a whirlwind and touches all who fall in its path. In our community in north west London, Brent was reported to have the second highest mortality rate in the country at the start of the first wave in spring 2020. We had lived through February with growing trepidation of what was coming and as it became increasingly clear that the danger was closing in, we

were ordered to close the school on Friday 20 March. Suddenly our classrooms were empty, our corridors silenced, our playground deserted.

School was taken away from our community. The safety net that catches so many of our children and upon which they rely, fell away. Never has the work of Chaplaincy in a Catholic school been so prominent, so urgent, so critical. As the weeks passed by and we settled into a routine of weekly calls to our families, the shadows of sorrow crept over and around us. One by one, week by week, death touched the lives of our children; the loss of parents, carers, grandparents, mothers, fathers cruelly taken by Covid, some children left orphaned.

What could we do? We were separated from our community. Children and families were too frightened to step outside let alone send their children to school as a vulnerable or keyworker child. We were there but they would not come. We had to find other means of reaching them.

As the school acclimatised to an increasing use of technology to educate our students, we quickly appreciated the way in which Zoom and Google meetings enabled us to reach out to the students, and ultimately their families, on a pastoral basis. These were additional and vital tools which, along with phone calls, we utilised to keep the school-family partnership going, once we were notified of loved ones passing away. It was a privilege to be able to listen to those in our community who were bereaved, suffering or fearful; to walk with them and help them to process their experiences and their grief. We talked about returning to school, what was happening in the world, when would things return to 'normal' and how they were accessing the curriculum using Google Classroom, our online bridge between home and school. Before each of the calls, prayer, asking for guidance and the ability to 'hear' what was being said; for the courage to be strong, yet empathetic.

The support offered through Chaplaincy

was not exclusive to the students in our community; pastoral support was also offered to parents and other family members. Families welcomed the opportunity to talk about their unique challenges. When the need arose, our

Chaplaincy and Pastoral teams made socially distanced visits to vulnerable households. We extended the hand of friendship, ensuring that our families knew we were still present for them and had an important role to play in their children's lives. We maintained our sense of community at a time of increasing isolation.

Chaplaincy support was extended to colleagues too. Increasingly staff found themselves in uncharted waters, running a largely 'virtual' school while facing their own domestic dilemmas and difficulties. We were unsure of what was happening in the world around us, but our joint and primary concern was to maintain stability for the students in our care. Chaplaincy work involved conversations with staff members via phone calls and socially distanced coffees and chats with colleagues at school. Our school Chapel remained a place of tranquillity and reflection, even as it filled with the flickering flames of candles of remembrance lit for those of our community who had died.

The distinctive nature of school Chaplaincy is a gift, both for the Chaplain and for the school; and in this darkest of times it was indeed a privilege to be able to bring the light of faith into our community of many faiths and of none. We are not always aware of the impact we have on those we reach out to until they say:

"You don't know how important you are to us. Thank you for being there."

An Unexpected Vocation

Dominic Mulcahy – Lay Chaplain All Hallows R.C. High School, Salford.

Having spent 42 years in Catholic primary education I was certainly looking forward to my expected and well-earned retirement in the Spring of 2018. Ten days later I was back in another primary school in our Diocese of Salford and within a month I was working in two schools, as a Primary Head teacher in the morning and as a Secondary Lay Chaplain in the afternoon!

During my 28 years of headship, I had the honour and privilege of contributing regularly to the Catholic Leadership Programme of the North West Dioceses and, ironically, focusing on the theme of Vocation which I presumed was for the duration of a teaching career. That old adage comes to mind....'What Man Proposes, God Disposes'!

So, for almost three years now I have found myself in a completely new and unexpected role as a Lay Chaplain in an inner city Catholic High School. At first, like a fish out of water not being used to dealing with around 700 teenagers and about 90 staff, many of whom, though non Catholics, have become so supportive and active. In time, I have found that my experience and practice as a Catholic Head teacher has been a tremendous advantage in helping me carry out my duties as Lay Chaplain by promoting the theme of Christ as the centre of all that we do and connecting with my new clientele as a messenger of hope.

Dominic Mulcahy and students

Our school, as most schools, closed for the majority of pupils last March except for the children of key workers and those we identified as vulnerable. We opened again in September but by January 2021 our doors were closed again and so many of our pupils were again left isolated and confused.