

The Continuing Professional Education of Police Chaplains as a community of practice

Rev Melissa Baker
University of Technology, Sydney (UTS)

Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings of an ethnographic doctoral study of police chaplaincy in Australia focusing on strategies for understanding and cultivating a community of practice. It argues that police chaplains are engaged in a complex community of practice with overlapping demands. Whilst they share notions of purpose and a conceptual value system, developing appropriate ways to understand and balance these demands has been a difficult process, especially since Continuing Professional Education (CPE) has been a scarcity for these practitioners. Consequently, there is little understanding of police chaplains' needs for CPE to facilitate their roles.

One major critical success factor emerging from this research is the need for a functioning system of CPE. Using results from a written survey, completed by a representative sample, and findings from fieldwork observations and interviews with police chaplains in New South Wales (NSW), a number of key factors for understanding and sustaining this community of practice are identified and discussed. These issues include the role of a chaplain, geographical location and work of police chaplains across multiple communities, and the emergence of identity. In addition, strategies for learning and barriers to developing further education and training are discussed. Finally, preliminary findings on criteria for creating a fair, well-resourced system of CPE for a geographically dispersed community of practice are proposed.

Introduction

'Communities of practice' is a contemporary term used to describe groups of people who share a passion and a common purpose. It is presumed that members of a community of practice empower one another, give meaning to their activity, have connective leadership, have an attitude towards learning, and interact regularly in order to learn how to do community better (Morris 2001; Schwier, Campbell & Kenny 2004; Wenger 2004). A community of practice is a learning community that is defined by a geographical link or some other shared interest (Morris 2001). Fenwick and Tennant (2004) suggest the key to individual and community learning in a community of practice is participation in a continuing process of dialogue and cooperation with the people who belong to the community. In other words, through participation, which is essentially relational, individuals are able to learn together in a community to focus on developing their practice for a purpose.

For such communities of practice, Continuing Professional Education (CPE) can provide opportunities for individuals to participate in activities to further develop their skills, attitudes, values, behaviour and understanding (Hager 2005). Since ongoing learning is a key role in communities of practice, learning via CPE can play an important function in the future of communities and their increased capabilities. In Australia, police chaplains may be regarded as an emerging community of practice.

It is argued in this paper that the police chaplaincy community of practice shares notions of purpose and a conceptual value system. As this group is still forging their professional roles in an emerging community of practice, it may be difficult for the members to understand and

recognise the need for CPE to facilitate their roles more efficiently and effectively to the NSW Police Service.

The aim of this paper is to examine the preliminary findings of a research study of police chaplains as a community of practice with a need for CPE. First, a brief description of the methodology will be given. Secondly, the initial findings of ethnographic research will be explained, focusing on the chaplains' role, the geographical location of police chaplains across multiple communities where they perform their service, the emergence of identity, and barriers to developing further education and training. Thirdly, four strategies will be proposed for creating a fair, well-resourced system of CPE for police chaplaincy.

Methodology

The main objective of the study is to explicate how police chaplains perceive themselves and their individual and social learning in their role in order to improve the service of chaplains by developing, through mutual dialogue, the potential of collaborative support of peers in a community of practice. Police chaplains know very little about their role, their learning, and how they perceive themselves or how the police community perceives them. Consequently, interpretive ethnography and autoethnography frames this research study of police chaplaincy, as I am a police chaplain myself as well as researcher in this group. Ethnography literally means to write the culture of a group (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2002; Denscombe 1999; McIntyre et al. 1999). This study involves creating a detailed reconstruction of the police chaplains' culture and roles, from the chaplain's point of view. The ethnographic study (using a survey, participation-observation, interviews, facts, stories, focus groups) and the autoethnographic study (using journal entries, stories, photographs) provides inside information and tools about the work of police chaplaincy in New South Wales, Australia.

Police chaplains completed an anonymous survey in 2005 at the annual training seminar in Goulburn. This survey provided initial data on the culture. Twenty police chaplains subsequently volunteered to be part of a qualitative participant-observation and interview process to capture further the role and culture from each chaplain's point of view. These data collection *in situ* include: 'the walk' on entry of a police chaplain to his/her assigned police station; 'the reflective narrative' on the researcher's perceptions of the chaplain and the role played as the researcher and colleague as a police chaplain myself; and 'the in-depth chat' on interview of the chaplain by the researcher. The interview questions address four key areas based on: (1) the professional work of the police chaplain; (2) notions of community of practice, culture, and identity; (3) the major challenges police chaplains face; and (4) the continuing professional development and training of police chaplains. At the time of writing, the fieldwork period had not yet included all twenty police chaplains; therefore, findings represented in this paper are preliminary.

Analysis of initial findings of an ethnographic study

The Chaplain's role

In New South Wales, Australia, there are 5 paid Senior Police Chaplains and 102 honorary police chaplains, 67 (of which 65 are male) in the country and 34 (of which 31 are male) in the city. One requirement of being a police chaplain in NSW is to be an ordained minister. This creates an issue of gender in two male dominated cultures: the church where only three mainstream denominations accept women (Uniting and Baptist, and country Anglican churches) and the police culture itself has one third of the total as female officers. The majority of police chaplains are male Anglican Ministers (37%) followed by male Catholic Priests (18%).

Police Chaplains are available 24/7 and provide care, guidance, and counselling through any hardship for police officers, staff and their families. After an extensive police check and interview process involving three different organisations (the Police Chaplaincy Service, the

NSW Police Service, and the Denominational Head), the new police chaplain is assigned to a particular Local Area Command (LAC) as a part-time honorary chaplain. They are given a uniform of the State (the regulation uniform with some markings that clearly designate the wearer as chaplain), a police identification wallet, and a learning compact disc (CD). The chaplain provides all other resources, including a vehicle. Chaplains are expected to provide ten hours a month (approximately two hours a week) to police chaplaincy. The demand of the LAC sometimes means that ten hours a month is an impossibly low figure to maintain. (On average I have done 13 hours a month, my highest was 22 hours in September 2004; my lowest was 6.5 hours in September 2005. It depends on how many call outs one receives and how many police officers need the chaplain in a given month.)

Often the public and some police officers misunderstand the police chaplain's role. Given that there is little specific training, police chaplains may differentiate their role significantly. Preliminary findings suggest that police chaplains appear to have written their own understanding of the role of a police chaplain. This is indicated by the survey and interview results cross-referenced with written documentation on the role of a police chaplain. Police Chaplains 1-7 expressed in their interview:

PC1: support, encouragement, available, friend, spiritual help to them

PC2: support through all aspects of life, friend

PC3: support, resource person, available, friend

PC4: offer care, creatively loiter, available

PC5: support, creating relationships, counsel

PC6: offer care, friendly presence

PC7: visual, approachable, available, impacting

It can be seen that 'support' (4), 'being a friend' (5), and 'being available' (4) were the three most common descriptions used in the interviews. In the survey, thirty-five police chaplains responded to the question 'describe a police chaplain'. Only eight stated support and being available; four saw it more being concerned for the well-being of officers; four described police chaplaincy as serving, listening and learning; two used the expression to 'creatively loiter'; and two others said it related more to counselling. However, documentation written by the Senior Chaplains at various times suggests a moderately different list with only two roles described similarly ('available' and 'counselling'). Senior Chaplain Alan Lowe (1996) states that the police chaplain's role is to facilitate effective pastoral care and provide a channel through which advice, guidance, counselling, and assistance is given to the staff in their LAC. The learning CD (*Chaplaincy Course Participant's Manual 2003*) states that a police chaplain is to be available, to be visible, to adapt easily to the environment, to have credibility, be a person of faith, to be accepting of all people without judgment, and guarantee confidentiality. It goes on to say that the key words in chaplaincy are 'service', 'presence' and 'building trust'.

Other survey findings in the areas of cultural customs and symbols also represent the police chaplain's role as often being misunderstood. Police chaplains were asked which cultural custom they associated most with police chaplaincy: the top three out of a possible nine were communication (23%), interaction (19%), and dress code (16%). The same cultural customs were listed in association with the police service, the chaplains chose hierarchal structure and dress code (17%) and communication and interaction (14%). It is interesting that morality (for chaplains) and work ethic (for police) were not rated much higher than 12%. The symbol that police chaplains associate strongest with is the cross (65%). The cross is represented in the police badge, instead of the eagle represented in the NSW Police logo, and chaplains wear the cross on their epaulettes so that they can be easily identified as a chaplain. Even though the chaplain's uniform is different to that of a normal police officer, the public cannot often tell the difference between a police officer and a police chaplain. Chaplains are often mistaken for police officers on the street or even in their personal unmarked vehicle.

Geographical location of police chaplains across multiple communities

NSW Police Service is the fifth largest police force in the world, totalling fewer than 15,000 sworn and unsworn officers. There are six regions in the NSW Police Service. The three country regions are Northern, Southern, and Western, and the three city regions from January 2006 are city central metro, city north west metro, and city south west metro.

Interestingly, there are more police in the city (6,903 compared to 4,674 in the country), yet more chaplains in the country (67 compared to 34 in the city). The ratio of chaplains to police in the country is 1:73 and in the city is 1:140. There are not enough police chaplains to cover the whole state. There are 21 LACs in the country and 14 LACs in the city that have more than one chaplain. In the past, Senior Chaplains have allocated different denominations in the one LAC. Whilst there are 14 LACs that do not currently have a police chaplain, which are mainly located in the city. There are also a number of remote stations and city police stations that no chaplains regularly visit, for example, Parkes and Redfern respectively.

Preliminary findings indicate that there is a lack of police chaplains in the city and fourteen gaps across New South Wales. It is hard for the Senior Chaplains to find willing ministers to do police chaplaincy on top of their normal church / ministry activities. These findings point towards a need for a better system in police chaplaincy for (1) finding chaplains, (2) improving work environments, particularly those who travel long distances, (3) improving resources to police who currently have no access to a chaplain, and (4) ensuring police chaplains are allocated uniformly across LACs regardless of denomination.

The majority of police chaplains spend more time ‘practising’ as a minister in their church community than anywhere else (100% city; 93% country) followed by their police community (86% country; 75% city). Country police chaplains also interacted with their local community (64%) and their school community (57%). As a citizen, police chaplains continue to operate in the church community (71% country; 63% city). Again country police chaplains spend considerable time in their local community (64% country compared to 38% city) and in their police community (43% country compared to 13% city).

The complexity of the police chaplains’ communities of practice can be seen in Figure 1. It would seem that city police chaplains are not involved in multiple communities as much as country police chaplains. As a city girl, I also did not understand why country police chaplains socialised with off duty police, until I started my fieldwork in the country and recognised the intersecting communities. Police chaplains regardless of where they live are involved in multiple communities, the difference is that country police chaplains live and work in the same geographical area. (This can also occur in the city, but it is rare.) This is represented in Figure 1, however, every police chaplain has a unique community of practice diagram; what is represented in figure 1 is a typical scenario, more so in the country, than the city.

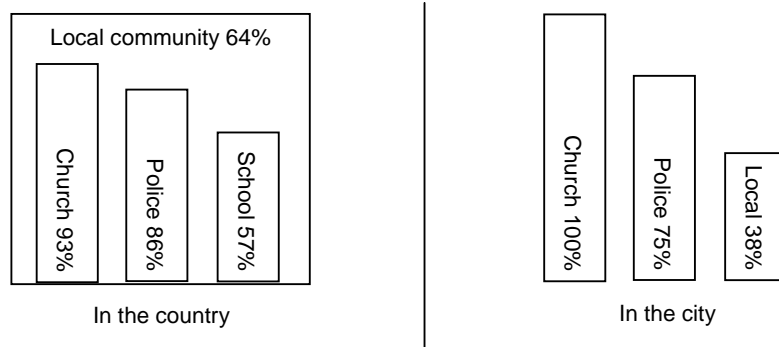


Figure 1: Typical involvement in communities of practice as a minister

Wenger (2001) suggests the following questions can be asked to determine whether police chaplaincy is a community of practice or not – What is the purpose of the community of practice? Who belongs? What holds them together? How long will the group last? Preliminary findings are represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Police Chaplaincy as a community of practice

What's the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds them together?	How long will the group last?
To engage with other communities (ie. Police Service); to participate and learn; to share knowledge and experiences; to develop member's capabilities	Ordained ministers from various faiths who are appointed as Police Chaplains	Passion, commitment, identification, and motivation	As long as there is interest from the Police Service (another community of practice) to continue chaplaincy

Police chaplaincy is emerging as a community of practice. It is important for its future and ongoing development and training to establish further its passion, common purpose, practice of empowering one another, connective leadership and connection to other chaplains, interaction, continuing process of dialogue, and individual and group learning.

I have found in my research, when one has a sense of belonging to a particular community they crave the foundational elements of a community of practice. That is, participation, learning, regular interaction, empowerment, and a place to share their passion. Whereas, a lack of participation, learning and dialogue within the community, leads to disconnection in the community of practice.

If police chaplains continue to serve as honorary part-time chaplains, then the complexity of working in multiple communities continues. Each chaplain has a variety of multiple communities, this can range from three (the minimum - local, church, police) to potentially twenty. The majority of police chaplains, like myself, have 8-10 multiple communities.

The emergence of identity

Studies have indicated that we create and recreate identities for ourselves in order to fit into various social structures (Atkinson 2001; Stuart 1995; Tennant 1999). People have multiple identities (Atkinson 2001) that guide us in our decision making (Olesen 2000) and our identities play an important role in our communities of practice. There is no research on issues of professional identity for police chaplains such as: whether chaplains hold similar identities because they hold similar roles; whether they allow society to change their identity; how their identity is shaped by what they do; and whether formal or informal learning informs their identity. Learning involves acquiring identities that reflect both how a learner sees the world and how the world sees the learner (Brown & Duguid 2001). I have discovered in my research that identity is complex and it is difficult for someone to describe his or her identity. I have also found that individuals are not aware of their identity until they are asked probing questions.

Most police chaplains described their identities as 'chaplain' (87%) and 'minister' (87%). The Anglicans saw a third identity as 'pastoral carer' (80%), while the Catholics also saw themselves as a 'leader' (80%). Other protestant ministers saw their third identity as a 'learner' (56%). Catholics rated 'learner' the lowest at 20%. The other identities that police chaplains rated low were 'counsellor', 'professional', and 'teacher'.

It seems that chaplains see themselves as having similar identities with mixed sub-parts. While chaplains perform similar roles this does not mean that they hold similar identities. Stuart (1995) states that if we are offered a social definition of who we are within a social structure, then the structure (eg. a hierarchy) is perpetuated through the process of self-identity. In other

words, police chaplains are defining and redefining themselves because there is no accepted social definition of the police chaplain community within the larger police community. However, as the community of police chaplains is evolving, police chaplains do chaplaincy in their own way, and consequently their identities are different at the deeper levels of identity.

Barriers to developing further education and training

Isolation is a barrier to the development of the police chaplain, particularly in the area of education and training. The more isolated a police chaplain may feel from the police chaplaincy community, the less s/he may involve themselves in further education and training. The survey indicated that chaplains in the country felt more supported (41%) than chaplains in the city (14%), yet those who support them (the Senior Chaplains) are based in the city. A majority of chaplains do want better CPE. The survey indicated that the changes that chaplains would like to see happen in the next five years are training and education (25%) and on-going professional development (23%). They have also expressed to the researcher that they would like to feel more of a part of the chaplaincy community, be more informed about the happenings in that community, be more challenged about how to do chaplaincy in their LAC, meet more regularly with other police chaplains, and know more about protocol issues.

Survey findings indicated that police chaplains found the annual training seminar held at Goulburn to be 'useful' to 'very useful' (90%), the informal gatherings with peers in their regions to be useful (68%), and the learning CD at their own leisure to be 'neutral' (53%). For the future, they ranked the annual training seminar and a new idea on having specific police chaplains' workshops as equal first (both scoring 60% 'very useful' and 40% 'useful'). The informal gatherings were 56% 'useful' and 44% 'very useful'. The learning CD did not rate highly as a useful source of education, mainly due to time available and lack of resources for chaplains over 50, but future use of CDs was rated as 'useful' by 59%. A majority of 55% of those surveyed wanted the annual training seminar to be held every year compared to 35% for every two years. These figures indicate that police chaplains want to continue their education. Therefore, the introduction of workshops and regional meetings could be pursued. Barriers to these extra learning opportunities are resources and availability of participants.

There may be a barrier arising from changes of policy by decision makers with the police chaplaincy service. There is enormous potential for this research to provide a more consistent quality of service through continuous improvement of practice in consultation with peers. It also has potential to provide a stronger, more collaborative, police chaplaincy community that will further aid that community's decisions and directions for a good CPE system. At present, the research has the full support and backing from the current Senior Police Chaplains and the Human Resource department of the NSW Police Service, however there is always the risk of key people leaving. There is a risk that change may be introduced that is incompatible with research findings yet to be published and made known to the police chaplaincy community.

Strategies for a fair, well resourced system of CPE for police chaplaincy

A discussion of strategies for learning by participation in a learning community suggests four ways or strategies where police chaplaincy can change in order to create a fair, well-resourced system of CPE. For instance, learners and providers of learning practices no longer need to be in the same place for learning (Edwards & Nicoll 2000). Flexible learning and web based learning have overcome geography. Specific individuals no doubt will learn through these methods in 'digital spaces', but those who enjoy community around them (like myself), can find it difficult to participate in such a learning environment.

Newman (2000), based on Freire's work, argues that participation in learning is exercised through dialogue with one another (in action and reflection) through an emancipatory focus (social transformation). Carl Rogers integrated psychotherapy and education to propose that learning heightens your awareness of yourself and others through participation in group

processes (Cited in Foley 2000). Gonczi (2004) states that learning is a process developed through doing. Learning involves our emotions and the formation of our identity in the community of practice. Engeström's activity theory suggests that the learning process involves objects, artefacts, and the perspectives of participants (Cited in Fenwick & Tennant 2004). Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) argue that learning is foundational for communities of practice and it is when the individual participates by interacting with the community that he or she learns. The objective of a community of practice is to provide a variety of means of participation for the members, for example, to meet individual and group learning needs (Fenwick & Tennant 2004; Turnbull 2000). Hager (2005) links learning to 'becoming' where individuals 'construct' and 'reconstruct' themselves. In order to reconstruct ourselves and explore our challenges while participating with others, we need to ask reflective questions (Baker 2003). Questions that invite response, reflection, and exploration reveal inner meaning to ourselves, others, and society, and so, constitute learning.

These authors agree that participation happens in a social setting. However, others advocate that participation and learning can easily happen from places around the world simultaneously through the Internet and telecommunications. Lifelong learning, self-directed learning, e-learning organisations, and experts in e-learning maintain that CPE is facilitated for individuals by on-line methods and access. Many people like the flexibility of this approach compared to classroom learning. Many authors have argued that on-line education can be dialogical, critical, and social (see Spencer 2004, p200). Nevertheless, worthwhile participation in a virtual learning community may depend on: first, how well the program and on-line components are structured, and used by the community; and secondly, how well an individual responds to this type of new media environment.

Gerry White, CEO of *education.au limited* (2004) has argued strongly for the benefits and achievements that can be produced by participation in e-learning. He claims to have already seen an increase in motivation for learning, communication, empowerment, and acquiring new skills through their program EdNA On-line. White (2004) states that learners have endless choice of learning collaborations across boundaries and domains that reach rural and often isolated individuals. For police chaplains in a geographically dispersed community, there could be a place for on-line learning, as long as the community meet together face to face once in a while.

Therefore, learning is enhanced through: a continuing process of dialogue (Freire 1998); participation in social forums (Brown & Duguid 2001; Fenwick & Tennant 2004; Gonczi 2004; Turnbull 2000); building and exchanging knowledge (Wenger 2001); a sense of belonging to the community (Brown & Duguid 2001; Wenger 2004); and the formation of identity (Boud & Solomon 2000; Olesen 2000; Stuart & Thomson 1995; Tennant 1999). Full participation in a community of practice can help us to make meaning of the world around us (understanding others), contribute to our identity (understanding ourselves), and share that understanding with other members (understanding the organisation) (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Figure 2 represents a functional community of practice as a learning community that needs certain key elements (dialogue, participation, knowledge, belonging, identity) to continue to evolve and learn in three different overlapping areas (others, ourselves, organisation).

In order to learn from each other, construct knowledge, methods, tools, and documents and to share stories it is important that the whole community can participate. Police chaplains currently come together once a year and many leave the seminar changed and challenged having experienced dialogue and participation with other chaplains, knowledge on a variety of topics, feelings of belonging to the community, and shared learning as indicated in Figure 2.

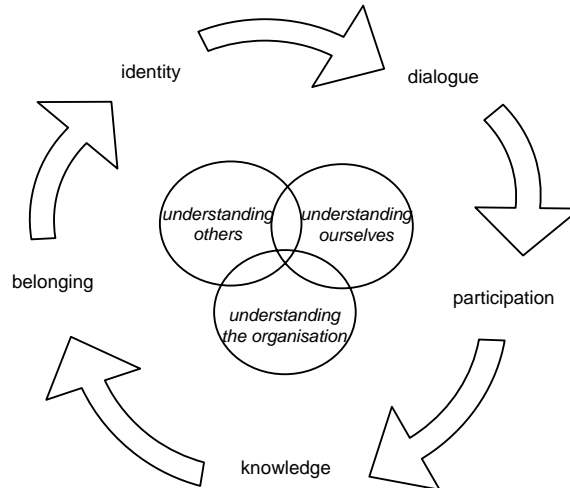


Figure 2: A functional community of practice as a learning system

How can a fair, well-resourced system of CPE be created for a geographically dispersed community of practice? With participation as an important aspect of any learning system, the following four strategies are proposed:

1. *Establish and foster a community of practice*
The police chaplaincy community needs to see themselves as a community of practice. If the police chaplaincy community saw that the foundational elements of the service are in fact a community of practice, then the community may begin to understand the importance of CPE, particularly since on-going learning is a vital characteristic of a community of practice.
2. *Implement functions for learning* (see Figure 2)
After seeing themselves as a community of practice and wanting to improve their CPE practices, then they need to provide a foundation that puts Figure 2 into practice. How can the police chaplaincy service dialogue, participate, share knowledge, have a sense of belonging, and form their identities as police chaplains? My suggestion would be to introduce specific training workshops on various topics in key regional areas embracing dialogue, participation, knowledge, belonging, and identity. This added learning will help chaplains to understand themselves, others, and the organisation for which they serve.
3. *Make suitable use of on-line learning*
A majority of police chaplains are over 50 years old with little computer experience. This means that a learning environment that only contains an on-line component would not be participatory and relevant to this community. However, providing an on-line service to enhance dialogue and participation across the police chaplaincy network would be worthwhile considering.
4. *Establish new positions for leadership on learning*
Rearrange the paid Senior Police Chaplains to fill the following positions that will create more of a community feel and aid the ongoing learning role both in city and country areas.
 - a. One full-time Senior Police Chaplain as Coordinator (city based)
 - b. One full-time Special Operations Police Chaplain (city based)
 - c. One full-time Police Education Police Chaplain (Goulburn based)

- d. One full-time or part-time CPE Police Chaplain (NSW based)
- e. Four part-time Regional Team Leaders (one based in each of the three country regions (Northern, Southern, and Western) and one based in Sydney)

Currently there are five full-time Senior Police Chaplains. The new positions, d) and e), will facilitate the training and development of the police chaplains to improve its service, embrace the potential of a community of practice, and be more professional in its overall service. It is important to see this restructure as a building on the current values and practices in this emerging community of practice.

These strategies should not add to the demands that police chaplains already experience, rather chaplains should be more informed, empowered to do their role more effectively and efficiently, and better trained for the role, with more confidence. These suggestions accommodate the difficulty of a geographically spread service by combining training in both the regions and a central location accessible to all. The provision of updated information all year round posted on a user-friendly website that can be easily assessed by chaplains anywhere at anytime should also add to the ongoing CPE and development of the police chaplain community.

This emerging community of practice will only be developed and sustained if the current Senior Police Chaplains, the whole community, and the NSW Police Service (who pay for the chaplaincy service) embrace the benefits of moving to a more effective CPE system for police chaplains.

Conclusion

This preliminary ethnographic research has revealed the need for an enhancement of current CPE practices within police chaplaincy. More specifically, the introduction of workshops will enhance learning, use of an on-line website will inform one another, the introduction of a specialised chaplain will further aid training and professional development, and the provision of regional team leaders will enhance police chaplaincy as a community of practice.

Preliminary findings have been discussed concerning the chaplain's role, geographical location and work of police chaplains across multiple communities where police chaplains serve, the emergence of identity, and barriers to developing further education and training for police chaplains as a community of practice. Within this emerging community of practice there are major challenges for police chaplains, which need further research, on the professional role and professionalism, the issue of gender in a male orientated culture (the police service, police chaplaincy, and the church), and the nature of effective management, leadership and communication.

It has been argued that when police chaplaincy acts more effectively as a community of practice for strategies to facilitate CPE could be utilised. Participation in learning including via a fair and well-resourced system of CPE should benefit chaplains, flow into the police service and then to the wider community.

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