Chaplaincy in hospice care

Review by John Lampard, first published in the Methodist Recorder

WHAT do hospice chaplains do? How do they see their role? Do they still have a role in an increasingly secular society? In Chaplaincy in Hospice and Palliative Care edited by Karen Murphy and Bob Whorton (Jessica Kingsley, £18.99), nearly 30 chaplains reflect on what they do, how they do it and how they see their changing, yet unchanging, work.

Bob Whorton is a leading Methodist in the field of hospice chaplaincy and has written two well-regarded books on the subject; here he works as an editor as well as contributor. The book explores among many subjects changes in title, such as the one from chaplain to ‘spiritual care co-ordinator’, reflecting changed perceptions of the role; chaplaincy as part of a multifaith (and no faith) team; the importance of chaplains’ critical reflections on their roles; how chaplains find their own spiritual nourishment; handling tensions in a hospice; and the contributions of volunteers in a hospice.

While there is much of interest and value in the book, the fact that it reflects nearly 30 voices, some contributing only short comments, can sometimes lead to repetition and a lack of space to develop arguments. In view of this I want to concentrate on two chapters which I found the most interesting and valuable, both which reflect theologically on hospice care.

In the first, Margaret Whipp reflects on a good death. She illustrates the way in which our ancestors were prepared for a good death in literature and liturgy. Today, in a culture which has lost confidence in much traditional religion, she still argues powerfully that, “Enacted in prayer or sacrament, or simply held in naked accompanying beyond any empathetic or therapeutic intervention, chaplains represent in their own being a well of mercy, a touch of grace or a door of transcendence opening onto the abundant lightness of God’s heaven.” Elsewhere, the famous words of Dame Cicely Saunders, a founder of the hospice movement, are quoted, which reflect for many of us the nature of a good death. “You matter because you are you, and you matter to the end of your life. We will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die.”

The other contributor whose article particularly caught my eye was our own the Rev Dr Jonathan Pye, writing about a theology of palliative care. Hospice care, he argues, reflects the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasising a ‘person’ rather than a ‘patient’. Our understanding of compassion is not just about ‘feeling’ but about ‘an orientation of the self towards the other that involves the whole of who we are’. In this way a chaplain can mediate the mercy of God. The moments of birth and death are both ‘holy ground’. Whether or not a person in a hospice is ‘religious’ or not (whatever that means) a chaplain offers a self-giving of time and of personhood, which reflects God’s self-giving to all humankind. As several contributors note, a chaplain has to leave ‘self’ behind at the hospice door.

Anyone who is involved in hospice work, or anyone working with people who are ill and lost, will fund much in this book which is of value.

##### The Rev John Lampard is a supernumerary minister in Wesley’s Chapel, City Road circuit.