



The current chairperson of the School Chaplains' Association, **ELAINE O'SULLIVAN**, is the full-time lay chaplain and religion teacher in a West Cork school. She describes some of the work of a school chaplain, which impacts on many aspects of school life.

THE SCHOOL CHAPLAIN

I am often asked, 'What does a school chaplain do?' It can be difficult to put the role into words.

The primary role of the school chaplain is that of a faith presence in the school context, a person of faith accompanying adolescents on their journey. The chaplain teaches, works as part of a student support team and looks after the pastoral and spiritual well-being of students, teachers and parents in school communities. The chaplain's work involves listening to students, planning liturgy and prayer, making links with the local parish, supporting staff and those who have been bereaved as well as intervening when students are experiencing difficulties. The chaplain is a witness to the Christian way of life.

The role was traditionally held by a priest or a religious sister or brother, but this has changed over the years. Now the majority of full-time school chaplains are lay people.

Religious second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland have a sacramental chaplain assigned to them by their bishop who takes on this role in addition to his work in a parish. In addition to this support, some schools also have a full-time chaplain. Community and comprehensive schools, and some Education Train-

ing Board (VEC) schools (called Designated Community Colleges), have a full-time, state-salaried chaplain, and a few of the voluntary secondary schools have created a paid position for a chaplain, but unfortunately this is not the case in all schools. Traditionally, in days of greater numbers, voluntary secondary schools would have had either a diocesan priest or a member of the religious order who would have served the school community as chaplain.

Students whom chaplains meet today are exposed to more external pressures than ever before. Growing up in a world where they are technologically connected, they are often disconnected from those around them and experience loneliness and bullying as a result. Their self-esteem and dignity is eroded by our consumer culture, but there are many in the Irish education system who care greatly about their students. These people create caring environments which treat students as individuals and allow them to develop to their full potential in a supportive community. With teachers under increasing time pressures, the chaplain has more time to be available in school, meeting students on a one-to-one basis to confidentially discuss problems. Sometimes they just need a



listening ear, someone to recognise their distress and to work out issues together. The chaplain may also refer students to relevant outside agencies. The development of student self-esteem encourages positive behaviour, happiness and well-being.

The prayer room is a place for reflection and quiet contemplation. In my experience, young people embrace opportunities for prayer and meditation. While many are disconnected from the institutional Church, they have a faith which has been handed down through generations and are prayerful, especially in times of worry and illness. Many speak of their grandparents' faith as a positive influence in their lives.

In appropriate ways, the chaplain organises worship throughout the liturgical year. The beginning of the school year is usually marked with

a Mass or prayer service and in November they prayerfully remember deceased relatives. Christmas is a busy time with Advent carol services, and at the end of the academic year prayer intentions change as students seek assistance with exams and career paths. The chaplain welcomes, listens, advocates and guides in the spirit of the gospel. It is so rewarding to watch the students whose tears you helped wipe away in their first year hold their head up high during their graduation in sixth year. It is a role that truly involves 'faith, hope and love' with daily opportunities for growth (1 Cor.13:13). ❤️

The School Chaplains' Association of Ireland's annual conference will take place in Limerick on 20-21 October 2017; further information can be found at www.schoolchaplaincy.ie.