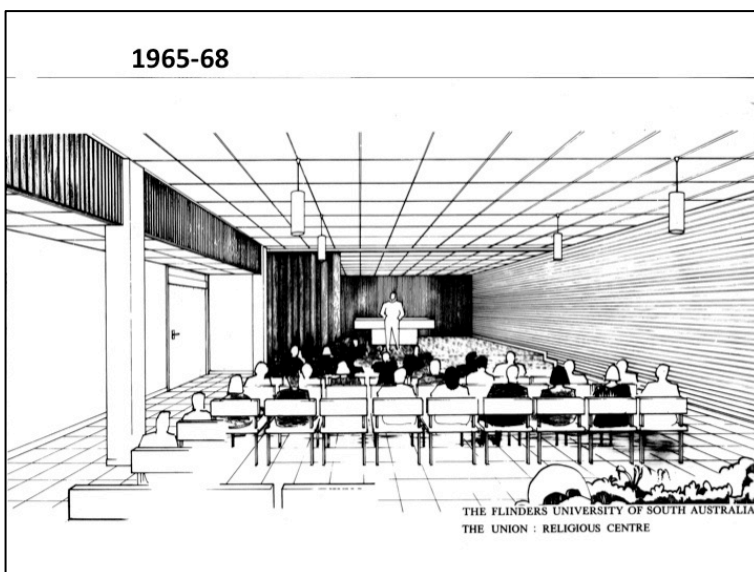




The purpose of this workshop is to sketch the story of Oasis, a centre of spiritual care at Flinders University in South Australia. Clearly there are major differences in how spiritual care is offered in universities and other contexts such as hospitals or prisons. I don't intend to explore these differences, but I hope that participants in this workshop will make their own connections to their own contexts and situations.

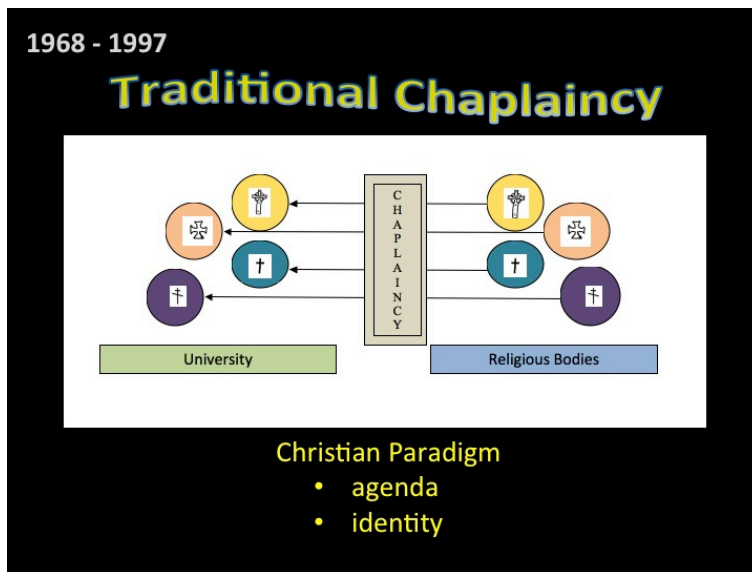
The Flinders story begins in the mid -1960's when the churches and Jewish communities of South Australia raised funds to provide the new university with a Religious Centre at the heart of the campus, 'for the spiritual welfare of all'.

It was understandable that the Religious Centre would be envisioned as a Christian centre and chaplaincy would reflect the views of chaplaincy at the time - that chaplains brought the services of the church to people geographically displaced from their local parish - in the armed services, hospitals, prisons and so on.



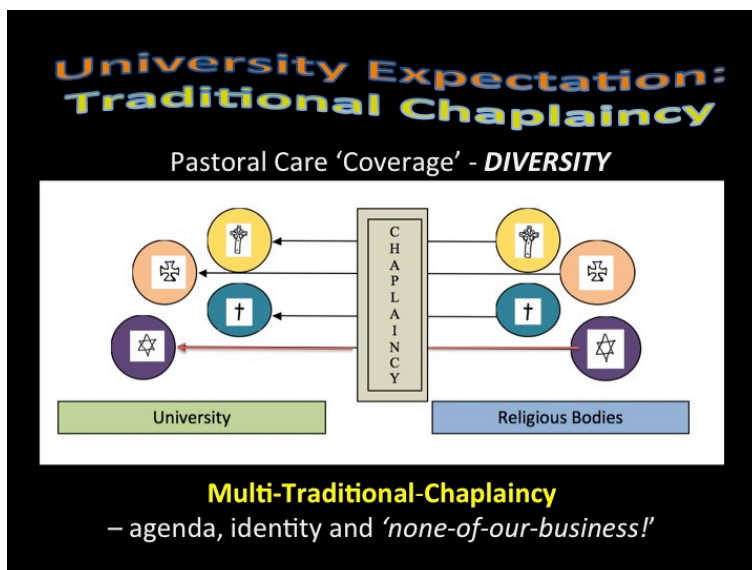
Architect's impression of the inside of the Religious Centre - looking very much like a church!

Traditional Chaplaincy

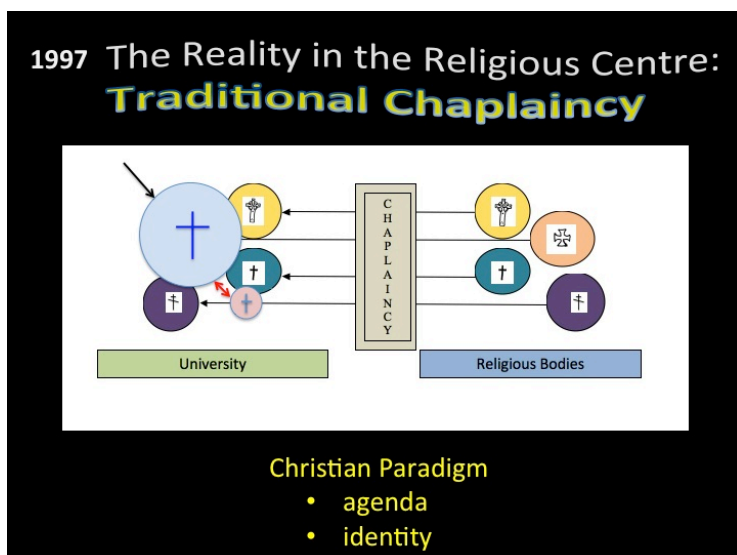


University chaplaincy had always been a 'gentleman's agreement' with the university. The churches appointed chaplains through a moderating chaplaincy sub-committee of the Heads of Christian Churches and the university 'recognised' those appointments.

The chaplains oversaw their related student society, carrying the agenda and promoting the identity of their sponsoring church.



The university seemed to be happy with this historic, traditional arrangement. In a Christian paradigm, from the university's point of view, pastoral care was 'covered', if one assumed that everyone on campus was Christian, and therefore an adherent of one of the many denominations represented by chaplains on the campus. And anyway, the university was 'secular', so pastoral care linked inextricably to religious affiliation was considered none of its business.



When I arrived on the scene in 1997 chaplaincy was in decline. The four Christian chaplains were all part-time and only one was ordained; and the denominational societies were reduced to helping each other get the numbers to be able to register their societies with the Students Association.

However one group, the Christian Fellowship, was flourishing. It was supported by an external organization, the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) who

appointed its own 'staff-worker' independently of the churches and the university. They were intent on evangelization and excluded others who would not agree with their version of the Christian faith. They marginalised the chaplains and conflicted with a small rival group, the Student Christian Movement, which had a more liberal, inclusive stance.

The Pagans upset the apple cart!

But soon after my arrival, a Pagan Association formed, challenging the hegemony of the Christian Fellowship in the Religious Centre. They sought the right, and won the support of the chaplains, to utilize the centre. Conflict initiated by the leader of the Christian Fellowship ensued!



At the same time, a film was being shown in the cinemas that bore an uncanny similarity to what was being played out in the Religious Centre.

Chocolat tells the story of a pagan lady who comes into a traditional Catholic French village and sets up a Chocolaterie on the village square, right opposite the church.

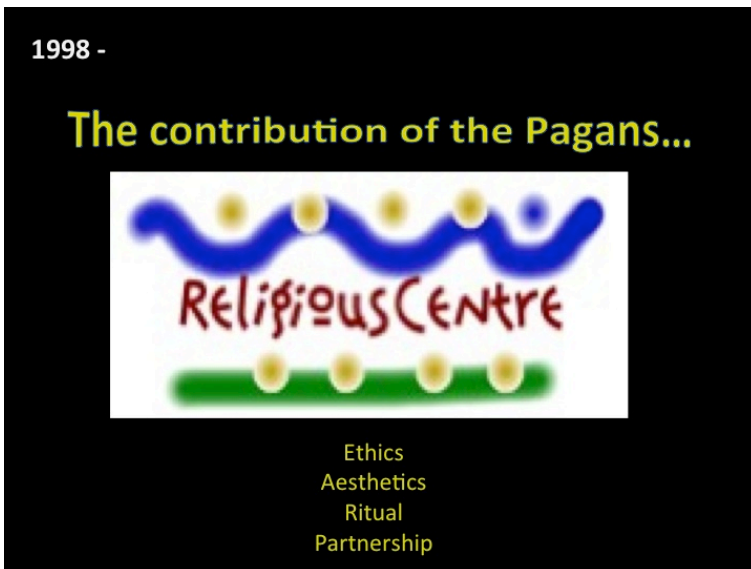
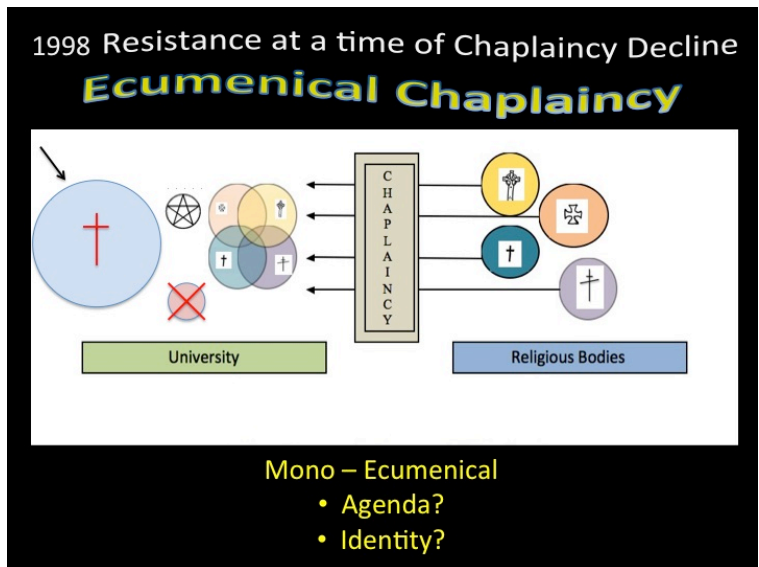
And it is Lent!

The warm hospitality of the chocolatier wins over some who are outsiders to church.

And soon the inevitable disapproval of the Mayor, upset by the threatened loss of religious consensus in the village, as more and more of the villagers succumb to the chocolate charm, begins to play out.



The chaplains drew closer together as a natural reaction to the aggressive sense of entitlement of the leader of the Christian Fellowship. The chaplains began to have lunch together each week. The Pagan leader was welcome! The chaplains began to work together to try to provide a Christian alternative to the Christian Fellowship – but without much success. In the conflict the Student Christian Movement also dissolved. To support the Pagan’s right of use of the centre, I began to invite other excluded minority groups into the centre.

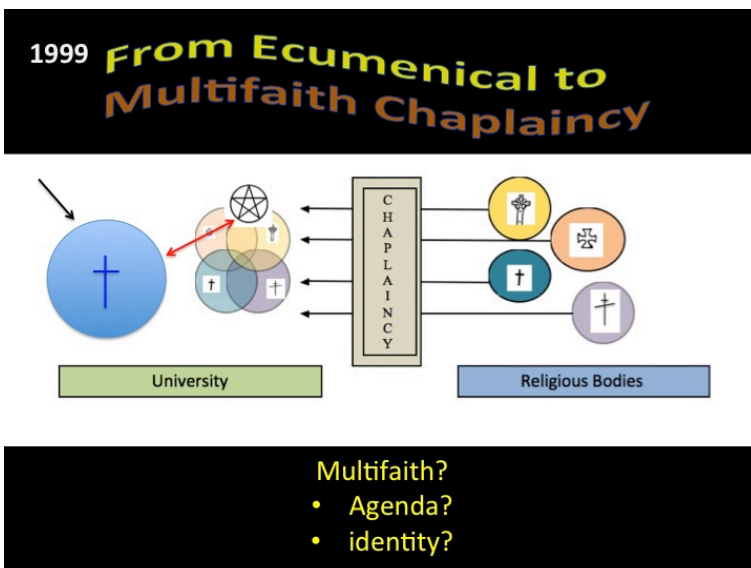


The Pagan leader didn’t offer chocolate! But her strong ethics, common sense and willingness to work together, brought a refreshing change!

The Pagans encouraged us to brighten up the centre – it hadn’t had a coat of paint in thirty years! So the university refurbished it.

The Pagan leader was also very arty, and developed a website for the Religious Centre.

And when it came to creating ceremonies, she brought a strong understanding of symbol and ritual.

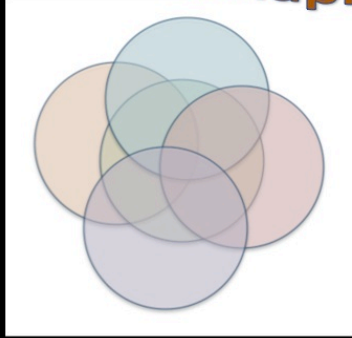


It wasn’t long before the Pagan leader became part of the chaplaincy team and eventually was appointed a chaplain by the Pagan Alliance of SA under the same terms as the Christian chaplains.

A new multifaith moderating committee took over from the former Christian one.

Antagonism by the leader of the Christian Fellowship continued and the university stepped in to set up a Religious Centre Committee to provide a forum for civil conversation. The task of refurbishment provided a more unifying focus.

From Ecumenical to Multifaith Chaplaincy



Size of Overlap: **Hospitality**
(making space for each other to be 'other')

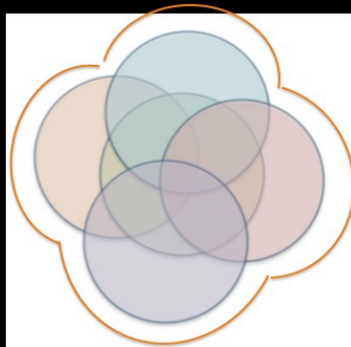
An Improbable Feast – the surprising Dynamic of Hospitality at the Heart of Multifaith Chaplaincy

The reformation of the former Christian moderating committee into a multifaith one allowed chaplains of other faiths to be invited into the chaplaincy. The weekly lunch provided a tangible meeting point.

We tended not to discuss religion but we shared our lives; we were not intent on changing each other, but in working out how we might work together. Soon friendships grew. The circles of our lives were coming closer together. We retained our religious identities while we discovered what we had in common and what we could and couldn't do together.

The Beginnings of Interfaith Chaplaincy

Agenda?
Identity?



Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy
'nurturing spirit, building community'
-serving the university community

We were discovering the dynamic of hospitality – that friendship was possible as we made space to listen to each other; and that the closer we got to each other, the more we found in common, without denying our integrity as persons.

On this basis we could trust each other to work together as one, to serve the university - as individuals or as a team, or sub-sets of the team.

Our individual religious identity seemed to become less significant when we saw service to the university as our primary objective. This opened the way for those without religious affiliation to join the team in its common cause.

It also meant that we seemed to become more interested in relationships between people of difference and on the human condition, than on the differences themselves, and certainly on the point-scoring associated with proving one-self 'right'. A multi-faith approach was not radical enough to avoid point-scoring. But an interfaith approach might!

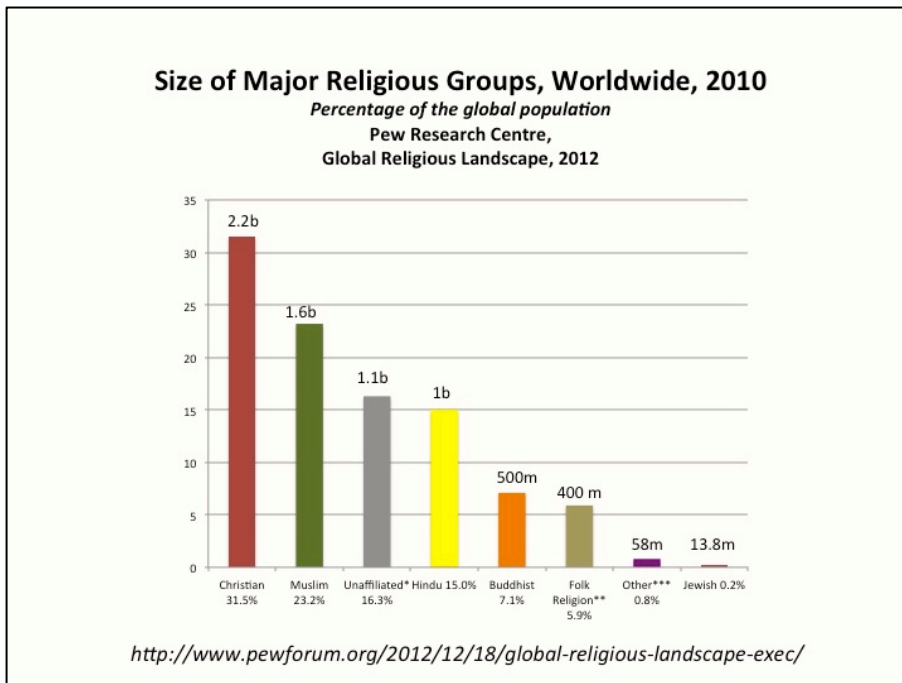
summary: The Oasis Story

Cultural Change from:

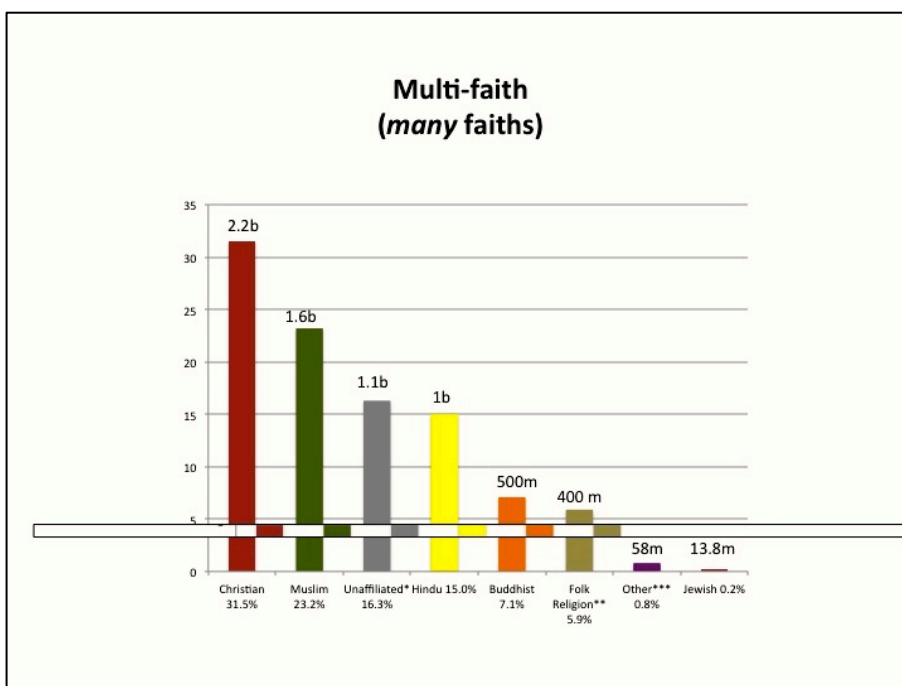
- Religious Centre to Oasis
- Mono – Multi – Inter
- From a space to be booked, to a team with a common mission

Internationalisation and Religion

We know that international students bring their religion with them. We know that recognition of their culture and the opportunity for them to practice their religion is important to them. We also know that many international students miss the cultural contexts of their religion, particularly the religiously based cultural festivals, such as Eid or Diwali, when whole communities, regardless of individual beliefs, celebrate together.

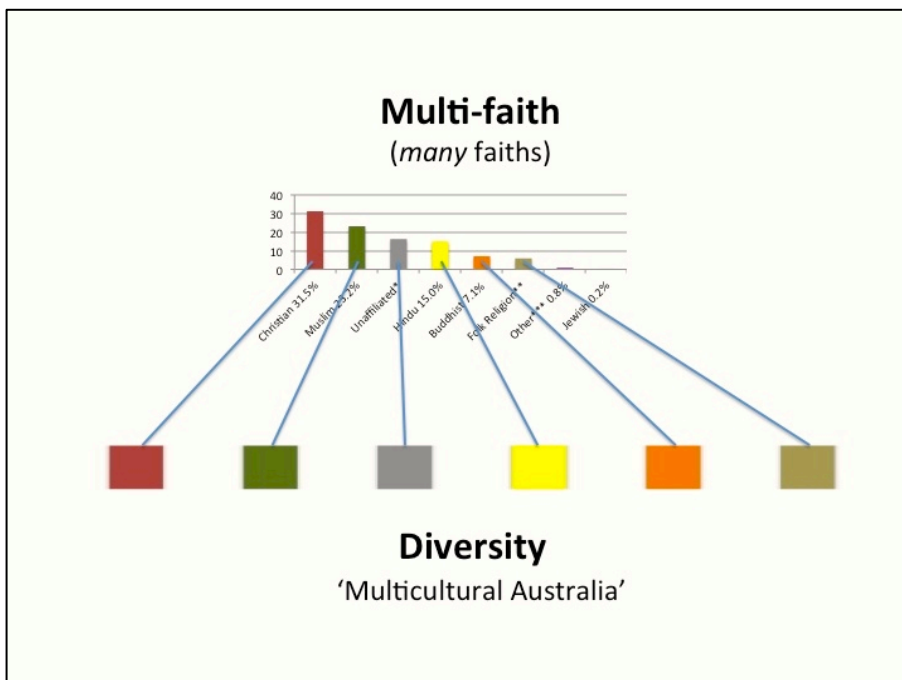


If we were to recruit globally, we might expect our students to bring with them all of these belief systems and more.



We would expect that a globally recruited intake of students would reflect a diversity of religious belief as if we had taken a slice through the graph – it would reflect the explosion of Christianity in Africa and Asia; the Muslim consensus of countries in the Middle East and Indonesia; the ‘unaffiliated’ masses of China; Hindu India; Buddhist Asia – these are massive populations – as well as indigenous, pagan and animist cultures.

What we end up with is a diversity of faiths. And each of these has its own diversity!



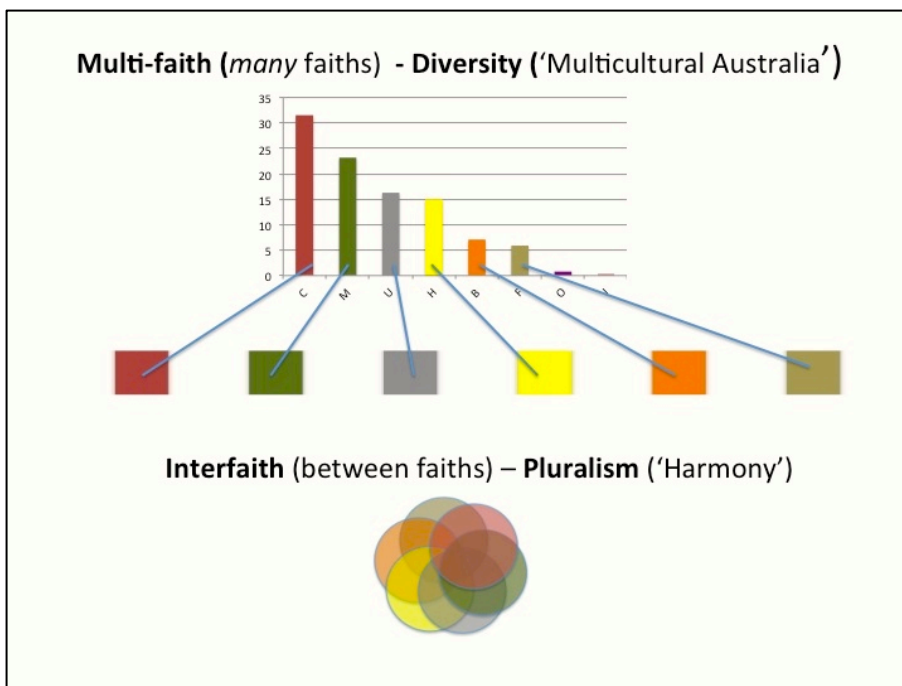
A picture of our globally recruited intake of students might look similar to a picture of immigration to Australia. The way we have included migrants of diverse cultures has been to see Australia as a multi-cultural (literally, *many cultures*) country and to encourage the celebration of that diversity and respect between the different ethnic groups.

Similarly, multi-faith (literally, *many faiths*) refers to the recognition of the right of each faith to their religion and implies respect between them. The process of learning to celebrate that diversity of faiths as a nation is an ongoing one. (And the University might play an important role in assisting with it!)

Interfaith

Harmony *between* faiths is much more challenging!

Interfaith (literally *between faiths*) relates to the additional input, beyond multifaith, to foster a culture of peace and harmony in a pluralist social setting. Interfaith goes beyond recognition and respect for the rights of other faiths – it says that we are all in the same boat, so we have to learn how to row together for the sake of an agreed goal - a peaceful, civil society.



(For further explanation and explication of the differences between diversity and pluralism, see *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*: <http://pluralism.org/encounter/challenges>)

But isn't the university secular?

The history of South Australian settlement indicates that 'secular' cannot equate to 'a-religious'. Many of the early colonisers were 'religious' - 'dissenters' escaping oppression by the established Church of England (the church hand-in-glove with the state) or religious persecution elsewhere. They were insistent on a secular state to avoid a repeat of abusive religious power in the new utopian colony. Yet they built twenty-five churches in the square mile of Adelaide – the 'City of Churches'! The secular state guaranteed them religious freedom, not the abandonment of it.

Faced with the reality that everyone on campus has beliefs of some kind, and many of these religious, I think we have to re-examine what we mean by 'secular'. I think it is unrealistic to assume that everyone may be treated as if religiously neutral. We get some clues about this when we talk with Australian Aboriginal people. To reduce their human person to the material, as if there is no spiritual, is to deny their humanity. I don't see how I might understand my Aboriginal friends without engaging with their spirituality.

'Secular' does not mean 'a-religious'. But I think in our situation it could mean that ***no one religion be privileged over another*** by the institution.

From Responsibility of Religious Communities to Responsibility of the University

Following the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/8 and other financial demands on the major church denominations, a number of churches withdrew funding for university chaplaincy. In late 2012 it looked like Oasis might collapse. However, the re-introduction of student fees that year enabled the University to take the initiative to draw Oasis into its administrative structure and fund two full-time staff to continue to develop Oasis – an Oasis Coordinating Chaplain to hold together a team of volunteers, and an Oasis Administrative Officer to manage the centre.

The support of religious communities to appoint chaplains to Oasis was still sought, but under the condition that such chaplains commit to advancing the vision of Oasis and that they be equal members of the Oasis Team.

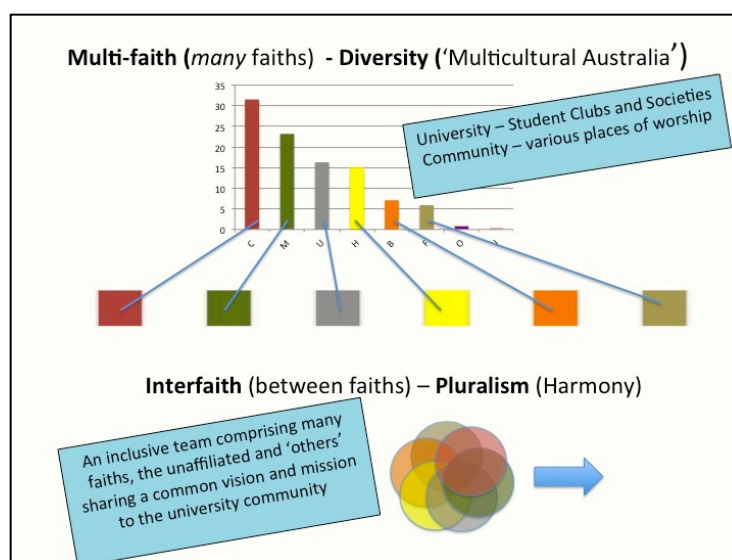
Administratively, Oasis was placed within Student Services under the line-management of the Head of Health, Counselling and Disability Services. However, Oasis continued to be connected with a number of inter-related constituencies – students, staff (university services, schools and departments) and the wider community.

Connection with staff was vital if Oasis was to have a university-wide mandate; connection with the wider community, if Oasis was to continue to draw on volunteers from the community and share its 'research' more widely.

Since its embrace by the university Oasis has continued to evolve.

The latest iteration of its vision statement is :

Oasis at Flinders is a university centre aiming to inspire a culture of care:
providing hospitality, promoting well being, fostering inclusive spirituality,
responsive to the Flinders and wider community.



Strategic decisions of Oasis at Flinders, 2013 - 2015

- Building personal welcoming, networking and hospitality functions into the position description of the Oasis Administrative Officer, complementing the administrative functions of managing the Oasis centre. Personalising the centre cultivates a culture of care, distinguishing it from other non-personalised spaces.
- Establishing the Oasis Team as an inclusive team comprising those who are committed to the vision of Oasis and its values; the Team may include chaplains appointed by religious communities on the same basis as other team members. The team is a mix of 'professionals' and 'amateurs' – each drawing on the strengths, the skills and experience, of the other.
- Establishing that all activities within the Oasis centre are expected to be inclusive; religious clubs and societies to fall within the aegis of the Flinders University Students Association; and worship activities the province of places of worship in the local

community. i.e. Oasis focuses on the 'inter', building respectful and caring relationships *between* people of difference.

- Encouraging the emergence of Oasis as a drop-in, community centre, where interchange among students and their empowerment, in keeping with the ethos of Oasis, is encouraged.
- Staff initiatives in keeping with the ethos of Oasis are encouraged and supported.
- Retaining a small, agile, innovative, complementary role, collaborating with other university agencies to value-add to the university, rather than allowing Oasis to grow into another 'silo'.
- Insisting on informal, hospitable, non-commercial, voluntary parameters and resisting 'rescuing' or encroachment on the legitimate roles of other agencies or staff of the university.

The first annual report of Oasis at Flinders in 2014 outlines some of its early and continuing theoretical principles and activities during its first year within the administrative structures of the university. www.flinders.edu.au/oasis

What follows are the images from a short film produced in early 2015 for 'O-Week' illustrating life in Oasis. www.flinders.edu.au/oasis



Students come in to make themselves a tea or coffee, or heat up their lunch in a microwave...



... to meet or make new friends...



...or to meet as a club or society.



... to play or practise their music...



... others, to pray or meditate...



Oasis is a free, non-commercial, friendly space



Drop-in/Reception (medium)



The Quiet Space (medium)



The Common Room (large)

The Common Room is open for lunchtime socialising each weekday from 12 to 2 pm...



...and the outside area is a great place to meet!



Oasis is a Place of Hospitality



Hospitality

... means the creation
of a **free space** where the stranger can enter
and become a friend instead of an enemy.



Henri Nouwen. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements in the Spiritual Life*. (1975 Doubleday. New York)

*...where strangers can enter
and discover themselves as created free;
free to sing their own songs,
speak their own languages,
dance their own dances;
free also to leave and follow their own vocations.*



The Hosts – The Oasis Team

The University has appointed

an ***Oasis Coordinating Chaplain*** (Geoff Boyce)



and

an ***Oasis Administrative Officer*** (Lisa Chandler)



A ***team of volunteers*** promotes well being within Oasis and the University

Dr Shaowen Qin
(Tonsley)



Dr Abul Farooque
Muslim Chaplain

Dr Sheila James
(Sturt)



Kylie Davis
Pagan Chaplain



Maureen Howland



Dilip Chirmuley
Hindu Chaplain



Rev Dave Williamson
Uniting Chaplain

Alan Larkin



The Oasis Team give support to students and respond to their various needs...



English Conversation for spouses of international students in partnership International Students Services

Maureen giving knitting lessons!



... and share their experiences with the wider local, national and international community



Human Rights Symposium



Interfaith Program, Woodville High School



Sheffield Conference, "Multifaith Chaplaincy in the UK Public Sector", from left, **Geoff Boyce**, **Christopher Chester CA**, Chief Executive, South Yorkshire Workplace Chaplaincy and conference host, **Rev Debbie Hodge**, Chief Officer Multi Faith Group for Healthcare Chaplaincy in the National Health Service and **Andrew Cropley**, Executive Director for Strategic Planning and Business Development at The Sheffield College, which provided the conference venue.

Oasis aims to be a welcoming and enabling community, open to all, contributing to personal and communal spiritual enrichment, while promoting mutual respect and appreciative understanding of diverse religious paths and cultural traditions.



... a safe, friendly place to be!

References

An Improbable Feast – the surprising dynamic of hospitality at the heart of multifaith chaplaincy. Geoff Boyce, 2010

<http://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/index.php/books/406-an-improbable-feast>

<http://www.geoffboyce.com/my-papers/>

<http://www.geoffboyce.com/resources>

www.flinders.edu.au/oasis