

It's the Church's Christian duty to support the health service, not leech off it

Posted: Mon, 13th May 2013 by [Terry Sanderson](#)

The Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, says that hospital chaplaincy services *"ought never to be seen as a luxury to be discarded when budgets are tight; or chapels as spaces to be sacrificed to other purposes when needs arise."*

Speaking at a service at St Bartholomew's hospital in London, the Archbishop made the case for retaining (at public expense) the religious input to hospitals because:

"God's presence as one who heals should be welcomed. So chaplaincy services ought never to be seen as a luxury to be discarded when budgets are tight; or chapels as spaces to be sacrificed to other purposes when needs arise. People need spaces where they can come to pray for their sick relatives and friends. Those who are sick need places to pray, to receive the consoling touch of the divine. Healthcare professionals need somewhere to pray as part of their care for their sick brothers and sisters, as well as to receive strength for their ministry."

The Archbishop made [no mention of the financial collapse of several hospitals](#) and the teetering state of many others, or the fact that [lives are being lost](#) because of lack of resources as he made the case for the NHS to pay the salaries of his priests.

Indeed, in the same edition of *The Tablet* magazine that reports his sermon, there is an advertisement from Sheffield Teaching Hospitals for a Catholic Chaplain on a salary of £25,783 to £34,530.

I cannot argue that removing the funding from chaplains would solve the gigantic problems of the NHS, but if the jobs of nurses are being sacrificed to keep priests and vicars and imams in hospitals, then serious questions need to be asked.

Wouldn't this money be better spent helping to solve some of the more [fundamental and pressing problems of the NHS](#)?

It is time for the churches, mosques and temples to fund their own input into hospitals.

In Wales, Alan Rogers is proposing that religious bodies set up charitable trusts for the very purpose of [funding hospital chaplains](#). This sounds like an excellent idea. If they are so important and popular with patients as the churches claim, there should be no problem gaining donations to support these services (which could become voluntary if push comes to shove).

Also, as the funding crisis deepens, religious bodies might want to have a contingency plan in place because there are only so many nurses and doctors that can be made redundant before a hospital simply can't function. The axe must surely find its way to the chapel before much longer.

The establishment of these charitable trusts would also release millions of pounds for spending on the thing that people really go to hospital for – medical treatment. Surely it is the religious duty of churches to take the burden off the NHS and assume it themselves?

Let's ignore the flim-flam about "holistic" treatments that the advocates for chaplaincy use to justify dipping into health service funds. If you arrive at the A&E department with a broken leg, there are unlikely to be any miracle cures on offer from the chaplains. It's the tender loving care of the emergency medics that are going to make you better.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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