It is clear to me from reading and listening to media reports about chaplaincy that many involved in the chaplaincy debate are, at best, confused about the nature and parameters of school chaplaincy. So I would like to try at the outset to put some definitions in place and hopefully create a more accurate framework in which to understand what School chaplaincy is and why it rightly exists in our secular education system.

A Chaplain would historically be considered to be a man of the cloth (I choose my words advisedly). However, modern day chaplains come in all shapes, sizes and ages, represent a wide range of ideologies and even come in both sexes. They are experienced people people and as of 2012 the federal government requires them to be qualified to Cert IV level in pastoral care or youthwork. As it happens from 2011 SU Tasmania has required our chaplains to be qualified or in training for at least a diploma in a relevant study area.

Chaplains have been in Australian schools since the 1960's and in Tasmanian state schools since the mid 1990's. So they are not some new fangled idea. But they are now much more common due to the Federal government's funding assistance and the positive publicity that it has attracted.

The ideology or world view that a chaplain holds reflects the choice of the school community in which they work. So a school with a majority Muslim or Jewish community is likely to choose a Muslim or Jewish chaplain. So why are so many of them - a significant majority – Christian? Well, Australia remains a majority Christian country. Not that all follow the tenets of Christianity, far from it... but a vast majority of us default to Christianity as being our most representative world view.

And what happens to those in the minority within a school community? The few Muslims or Buddhists for instance? Well, the Chaplain will care for them too in a non judgemental way and will open the door for any specialist help they need. One of our chaplains reported this after breakfast club in a primary school.

"This morning I sat eating toast with a student before they went into class. At her instigation we had a great discussion about faith, prayer, God, scriptures and living a faith in our society that does not fully understand religion. I think that both of us appreciated being able to talk about these things which are so important to us and which most of the population does not understand. It is great that we can share like this, that we can learn from each other. It is interesting that I am a Christian and she is a Muslim."

Regarding Secular education. I am pleased to live in Australia and I value it’s version of a secular society. The definition of secular is anything but universal. Our founding fathers established a constitution which is secular in that it intended that no religion or branch of religion would have overruling power or be used to keep any other religion down. They did not intend that Religion would not have a part to play in society, indeed I am sure none of them could possibly have imagined such a thing.
In the recent high court case which challenged school chaplaincy at a constitutional level the 7 high court judges unanimously agreed that chaplaincy as it stands does not breach any separation of church and state as laid down in the constitution. Yes, that was unanimously agreed! (you could be forgiven for missing that in the subsequent press coverage!)

School chaplaincy is secular in the sense that it does not allow any one religion or branch of religion to hold sway.

We all have a particular world view and subscribe to ideologies, whether we publicly acknowledge them or not. One of the myths of... if I may call it... hard line secularism is that if you keep religion out of something then it is values neutral. To me this just does not make sense. Every member of a school community has values whether they be religious or atheistic or political, or whatever. We all carry those around with us and of course they influence our decisions, our commentary, our way of being. It seems to me that we all must necessarily be careful about how we apply our views. But simply to say that we can keep them out of schools is utterly unrealistic. What we should be doing is exploring one another’s values and coming to a considered understanding of the values we all share or aspire to.

And as it happens research indicates that school chaplains have been effective at doing just that. And One Tasmanian school Principal told me “The ethos and atmosphere of the school are simply better since we have had a chaplain”

So what is the “Spiritual support” which chaplains provide which is not necessarily part of being a youth worker or student welfare worker?

Did you know...The Tasmanian Education curriculum names spiritual health as being one of the five dimensions of health. Physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual health make for a holistically healthy individual. The 2008 Melbourne declaration of educational goals for young Australians. Signed by all the state and territory Education ministers and forming the basis for the new national curriculum, also specifically names spiritual health as important for our youngsters’ development.

Spiritual health has been agreed by many researchers to relate to four areas of connectedness. Connected to self, connected to others, connected to the environment and connected to “the beyond”. The beyond being something outside of or bigger than oneself as defined by the individual.

As respected Psychologist and parenting expert Dr Michael Carr Greg says “Research shows that spirituality is a major protective factor in the lives of young people and I think the role school chaplains play is incredibly important”

Teachers sometimes tend to steer clear of the spiritual... feeling justifiably ill-equipped for the task of tackling it.

Chaplains are not in schools to provide religious instruction of any kind but they are a potential resource for teachers to use when dealing with spirituality and spiritual health. In addition Scripture Union
Tasmania has produced the “Spirituality Toolbox” an education department endorsed resource for teachers which can be used to teach about these matters and which is often strengthened by teachers enlisting the help of the school chaplain.

A truly secular education system should recognise our nature as spiritual beings, and second our shared religious/spiritual heritage. These two fundamental aspects of being human should influence the development of the curriculum in any educational system. These aspects are not necessarily intensely influenced by school chaplaincy but they can be usefully served by it.

So what is school Chaplaincy?

School chaplaincy is a service provided in over 135 schools in this state. So over half of all our schools have a chaplain and well over half of our State schools have a chaplain. They are in primary, high, district and ... let’s call them post 16 educational facilities ;-)  

Before the introduction of Federal government funding through the National Schools Chaplaincy Program (or NSCP). 19 state schools here had a chaplain. The number rose to 95 with the introduction of the NSCP in 2007 and the latest expansion The National Schools Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program (or NSCSWP) saw a further 25 schools apply for funding. The NSCSWP allows schools to opt for either a chaplain or a Student Welfare Worker. 95% of Tasmanian schools stayed with or applied for funds for a chaplain.

While both Student Welfare workers and chaplains can be expected to provide skilled, school based pastoral care services delivered from a perspective consistent with the school’s agreed values.

Chaplains can additionally be resource people for religious and spiritual matters in the school community. Whether by invitation from staff to interact in curriculum content or with individuals within the school community who wish to explore their own spirituality.

The decision by the Howard government to fund the program (a decision subsequently endorsed and expanded by both the Rudd and Gillard Governments) was based on research undertaken throughout Australia which indicated that students in schools which had a chaplaincy program in place were better able to deal with problems of bullying, peer pressure and feelings of low self-esteem. In addition, the school chaplain was an indispensable resource for the whole school community in the event of fatal accidents or other critical incidents which affected students, family members or teachers.

For a number of chaplaincy sceptics it has been seeing chaplains supporting students and communities following natural disasters like bushfire and flood which has convinced them of the value of the program.

Please let me be clear about what a chaplain is not they are not teachers, counsellors, psychologists, Social Workers or youth workers,... (although they may well have training in one or more of these areas). The fact that they have an informal role is part of their strength. Again research (such as undertaken in 2009 by Hughes et al) shows that accessing a chaplain is preferred by students to accessing other members of the pastoral care team such as social workers and Psychologists who are perceived as having
a much more formal role. This allows chaplains to intervene early, when a lot of good can be done and to refer those who need more specialist help.

As well as being clear about what a chaplain is not. Let me be clear about what they cannot do. Both federal and state guidelines set out clearly what a chaplain can’t do in a public school which is teach denominationally-based religion, preach, or proselytise. Queensland Education Department helpfully go on to unpack these terms to show that chaplains are not permitted to use any form of coercion or to use their position to unduly influence young people to change their religious views.

Now I realise that those who oppose chaplaincy often scoff at the idea that chaplains can abide by these guidelines. I find that rather insulting to chaplains whom, I can assure you, in common with teachers, social workers and other professionals in schools - do work within an appropriate framework. And any complaint about a chaplain is taken very seriously indeed.

Christian chaplains believe that the love of God is a free and gracious gift which does not come with strings or coercion attached.

One of the great things about school chaplaincy is it’s flexibility. A chaplain at a city high school may have opportunity to bring people from the community in to contribute to the school community. A chaplain in a rural school may be doing craft activities and chatting with kids over a wet lunchtime.

Some chaplains do practical projects such as gardening or mechanics with groups of kids. Giving an opportunity for building relationships and sometimes creating a haven which makes the rest of school time tolerable for that kid.

Many chaplains don’t feel they are really making a difference because it is slow and painstaking relational work. But parents and school principals know that they are. One chaplain wrote:

“Primary age kids can be extravagant in their affection. From hugs and handmade gifts right through to the ‘Great Idea Award’ I received today - when a kid likes you they can be totally without artifice in letting you know.

Not that every kid likes me. Some of them are pretty tough nuts to crack, particularly around here, and no wonder really. They have to be tough to survive - they live out the behind-the-scenes stories of the reports the newspapers sensationally splash across the headlines.

So today I was working with a tough boy. Well, a kind of tough boy as it turns out. Life has been pretty traumatic of late and he’s struggling to hold things together at school. He struts around the corridors all bravado, but inside he's scared, and sad and maybe even lonely.

As we chatted this morning he asked to do some beading. He strung together a boy necklace and a wrist band. Using alphabet beads, on each he spelled his name and mine. On the necklace he added the name of the only male teacher he's had. He's wearing the necklace, I have the wrist band, momentos of the many times we have caught up over the years.
I feel rather emotional at this gift. The tough boy showed me his heart, and it’s soft and tender, and I wish I could shelter and protect him from the harshness of his life. But I can’t. So I offer him up to God and ask that he be held - a bruised reed, a smouldering wick* (which Isaiah 42 v 3 says God will not break or snuff out), a soft heart beneath the hard exterior. May the innocent child hidden inside be nurtured (not crushed) somewhere, somehow, through myself and through others he meets along the way. “

The role of the chaplain is to walk alongside students in a non-threatening, supportive way through developing personal relationships throughout the student’s school years and to enable students to connect with positive adult role models whose main focus is their emotional and spiritual well-being rather than their academic results.

I would assert that this is thoroughly consistent with a secular education system – and so, I repeat, did 7 high court judges.

Ruth Pinkerton
CEO SU Tasmania