

# **Chaplaincy: From ‘cultural competency’ to ‘cultural humility’**

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Neighborhood chaplain Mary Flin envisions a world where there is no space where people can be without access to spiritual care.

In a recent webinar hosted by B.H. Carroll Theological Seminary’s Marsh Center for Chaplain Studies, “Essential Lessons from Chaplains Ministering in Unique Cultures,” Flin discussed her ministry in urban Topeka, Kan.

Flin is the dean and director of Soul Center for Urban Chaplaincy through the Urban Ministry Institute of Topeka. Soul is a seminary for the urban poor, she explained.

In collaboration with World Impact, its mission is “to train leaders from hard spaces to serve in those hard spaces.”

Whereas some might look at the poor, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated as “some of the world’s biggest challenges and problems, we see those individuals as individuals with the most potential,” Flin noted.

## **‘Subject matter experts’**

Pointing out that these people are “the subject matter experts” of all the things that are so difficult, Flin explained how neighborhood chaplaincy is providing opportunities to stabilize communities, where leaders can be developed from within.

Flin didn’t come to chaplaincy on purpose, she explained. With changing

administrations in the prisons and jails where their seminary was established, it seemed reasonable to get chaplaincy credentials in place to support their work in the jails.

But she “stepped into chaplaincy” and began to see the impact spiritual care has in promoting flourishing. So, the seminary began to look at developing a model for neighborhood chaplaincy—“to have pastoral care in a secular environment around the church in high poverty neighborhoods.”

Developing a model of neighborhood chaplaincy, the institute hopes to help “stabilize high-poverty neighborhoods, so that urban leaders can emerge and serve,” Flin said.

In studying “cultural competence,” which she felt she understood fairly well, Flin came across the notion of “cultural humility.” She latched onto it, not as an excuse to avoid becoming as competent in the cultures she serves as she can be, but as motivation to remain “a learner” in her ministry.

“We incarcerate about 25 percent of our high-poverty neighborhoods at any given time,” Flin stated. The center recognizes the incarcerated church as a fully functional church, and they provide seminary training for ministers to the incarcerated congregation.

But, when incarcerated persons reenter society, they are not supposed to return to the communities they came from—which have detrimental influences—even if they’ve encountered Christ and made faith commitments.

Likewise, a community church might have the heart to serve, “but the heart is only one part of the body.” The body needs hands and feet, she continued. The local churches avoid these neighborhoods, because they are afraid, she continued.

“The incarcerated church is afraid to go back, and the neighborhood

church is afraid to go in,” Flin stated.

So, these communities then become “abandoned spaces” that feel the “increasing pressure of spiritual and human oppression,” especially now with more and more displaced people.

The neighborhood where Flin serves and lives had the highest per capita homicide rate and highest infant mortality rate in Kansas in 2023.

“Our people in Central Park are tribal and nomadic. We are desperate, and we are without personhood,” she explained.

So, how can the spiritual needs of this population be met? The Soul Center’s answer: develop and train an “army of chaplains and partners to listen, to love and to serve.”

Flin said the center’s desire is “to see the impact of spiritual care documented in health care spaces demonstrated in our neighborhoods, making them a hub for service,” to hopefully “begin to move the needle on social determinants.”

Citing Isaiah 65:1 and Matthew 25:40-45 as the theological underpinning to their model, Flin pointed out the judgment in the last verse of the Matthew passage.

It’s vital to minister to “the least of these” to serve Jesus, she noted. And “chaplaincy gives us a way to go there.”

She was a neighbor in her environment for 12 years before she became a neighborhood chaplain. But she said, “everyone knows what a chaplain is.” So, when Flin came to be known as one, she said, it “upped my game” in reaching her neighbors.

“The challenge in an urban neighborhood is that people begin to be identified by the challenges,” Flin explained.

“We are primarily homeless. We are primarily in active addiction. We are mostly without mental health meds.

“There are 60 to 70 of us meeting for dinner every Sunday night. And we are in and out of incarceration,” she said, describing the group she serves.

Having chaplain credentials allows Flin to follow her people to the jail or hospital to continue their spiritual care, she explained.

Neighbor Night is the weekly meal Flin hosts on Sunday evenings. The idea of Neighbor Night was for people coming out of jail to have a place to come to dinner, she explained, but “it has become a great deal more,” said Flin.

## **Hold on to ‘cultural humility’**

Flin believes her neighbors will teach her all she needs to know about all these different cultures, as long as she holds onto “cultural humility”—openness to understanding incarceration, reentry or addiction—“to understand walking in, everything I know is going to have to come from my neighbors.”

The methods of accomplishing neighborhood chaplaincy include the table, stories and an ethic of incarnation and sacrifice.

“It is 24/7,” she said. Since her community is up at night, much of her ministry happens then.

“We garden together at 11:00 at night,” she continued, recounting stories shared as they worked and the opportunities to sit down and “unpack” the deep hurts those conversations opened.

She was raised in a Christian tradition that emphasized sacrifice, so she sees it as a natural and essential piece of Christian living.

People ask her about her work in urban ministry: “How are you going to be

safe?" She explains Christianity calls for sacrifice, she said.

This isn't a model only for her community, Flin explained. "You can do this in your neighborhood, and your missional community will look entirely different."

Her missional community includes 70 to 80 homeless or underhoused people. Yet, the ministry isn't a feeding ministry. Rather, the missional community share meals together as family, supporting one another and giving to one another.

Flin said others have taken note of the good things happening in her neighborhood. Donations of food for the meals come unsolicited. She has the kitchen and the table, but it is a community of people coming together to stabilize the neighborhood from within.

The church she attends nearby supports the work. In addition to the current ministry focus, Flin envisions growing a community health ministry, with mobile clinics coming to the neighborhood and her house as the hub.



(Left to right from top left) Webinar panelists Ron Fraser, president and CEO of trucker chaplaincy group TFC Global; Moderators Jim Spivey and Jim Browning, March Center for Chaplain Studies; Will Whitman, school minister of Mercersburg Academy; Mary Flin, Soul Center for Urban Chaplaincy; and Jeffrey Claes, "Sidecar," director of BikerChaplain.com. (Screenshot / Calli Keener)

Other conference presenters discussed chaplaincy ministries within the unique populations of truck drivers, bikers and a secular boarding school in Pennsylvania.