

Rooted in Presence

Key learning points from the Police Chaplaincy UK Conference 2026

The theme of this year's Police Chaplaincy UK Conference was Rooted. Across three days of presentations, discussions and personal encounters, a consistent message emerged: effective chaplaincy is not rooted primarily in religion, structures or programmes. It is rooted in relationships, compassionate presence and the practical expression of love.

The points below are the ones that seem particularly important to emphasise.

1. Relationships Come Before Ministry

Relationships → Trust → Opportunity

Before officers share their concerns, discuss personal struggles or seek support, they need to know who we are and whether we can be trusted. Relationship-building is not preparation for chaplaincy - it is chaplaincy.

2. We Do Not Take God into Police Stations, We Take His Love

Fr Steve Walters offered what was, for some, the defining insight of the conference: we do not take God into police stations - we take His love. Chaplaincy is not primarily about promoting religion. It is about expressing the love at the heart of faith through kindness, patience, listening, compassion and presence.

Most officers will never ask about our theology. They will, however, always recognise whether they feel genuinely cared for.

3. Moral Injury May Be Policing's Hidden Wound

Several speakers addressed trauma, but an equally important theme was moral injury. Many officers cope remarkably well with difficult incidents. What is often harder is living with experiences that challenge deeply held values, or working within systems that feel unfair, unresponsive or broken. The result can be guilt, shame, anger and a loss of meaning.

Chaplains can help people make sense of these experiences and reconnect with what first called them into service.

4. Meaning is Protective

Again and again, speakers returned to the importance of meaning, purpose and belonging. People are sustained not only by physical and psychological wellbeing, but by a sense that their lives matter and have purpose. Helping officers reconnect with family, friendships, hobbies, nature, volunteering, faith and service can sometimes be more valuable than trying to solve the problem itself.

5. Every Encounter Leaves a Trace

Drawing on Locard's Exchange Principle, Hannah Bailey from Blue Light Wellbeing, reminded us that every contact leaves a trace. A brief conversation, remembering someone's name, or a simple expression of concern may have effects far beyond what we ever see. Chaplains rarely know the long-term consequences of their presence - but presence matters.

6. Curiosity is a Chaplaincy Skill

Rabbi Dovid Lewis emphasised that “you never know the person opposite you” which became one of the conference’s recurring themes. Curiosity protects us from reducing people to labels, ranks, roles or assumptions. It keeps us interested in the person behind the uniform and helps create genuine human connection.

7. Chaplains Are Not Therapists and That’s a Strength

Many officers already have access to psychologists, counsellors, occupational health services and wellbeing provision. The chaplain’s contribution is different: we offer a trusted, confidential, non-judgemental human presence without organisational agenda. Sometimes listening is more valuable than coaching or solution-focused advice.

8. Ethical Culture Matters

The College of Policing’s Code of Practice for Ethical Policing reminded us that policing ultimately depends on trust, fairness, openness and respect. Chaplains are not responsible for enforcing standards, but we can contribute to an organisation’s ethical culture simply by modelling those same values in every interaction.

9. Chaplaincy is Becoming Increasingly Valued

A strong message from senior leaders, including DCC Ben Suggs and National Police Chaplain Matt Hopley, was that chaplaincy is no longer viewed as a peripheral activity. It is increasingly recognised as a trusted, confidential and embedded source of support that contributes to wellbeing, resilience, professional conduct and organisational health.

10. We Need Stronger Links with the Police Federation

One of the most practical opportunities to come out of the conference concerns relationships with local Police Federation representatives. Federation reps often become involved when officers are going through some of the most difficult periods of their careers, so chaplaincy and Federation support are natural allies.

I was particularly encouraged by a conversation with Tiff Lynch, National Chair of the Police Federation, with whom I already had a connection through a relation who worked closely with her during her firearms career in Leicestershire. Tiff was extremely supportive of chaplaincy and enthusiastic about the contribution chaplains can make to officer wellbeing. Her encouragement left a strong sense that supporting Federation representatives, and the officers they serve, is an important area for future chaplaincy development.

The Bigger Picture

Looking across the whole conference, one overarching message emerged. Whether speakers were discussing wellbeing, trauma, moral injury, ethics, diversity, police reform, faith or leadership, they kept returning to the same fundamental truth: people flourish when they feel noticed, valued and understood.

Police chaplaincy is not primarily about providing answers, it is about providing presence. We are called to be rooted in relationships, grounded in compassion and motivated by love. In an increasingly complex and pressured policing environment, that simple ministry of presence may be one of the most valuable gifts we can offer.

“Chaplaincy is not about God - it’s about the expression of God’s love.”

Fr Steve Walters, Lead Chaplain to Avon and Somerset Police