What is a Chaplain?

An attempt to clarify, correct and to arrive at a consensus.

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Chaplaincy, whether in the healthcare facility or in the deathcare professions, is an essential and fundamental component of full-service, client-centered care but has been sidelined by the more secular pursuits of short-term care goals and, disgracefully, profit, even in the organizations whose market slogans might include phrases such as ‘caring for the human spirit’. Too many so-called chaplaincy and spiritual-care organizations are driven by secular corporate agendas. As I have mentioned above, they have ‘captured the bird but killed the song’ in the process.

The present challenge, that is, the mission of the professional chaplain and those institutions, including but not limited to lifecare, healthcare, and deathcare, of averting the catastrophic dehumanization that has accompanied materialism run amok, the desensitization and isolation effects of social media addiction, and the decline of family and human values in human society overall, that is, the total loss of self and connection with the Self (viz. soul). This is truly a titanic challenge but one that must be met if we are to salvage what is left of humanity, even if the moments we have to do so are those few at the end of a client’s life.

It’s never too late.

Without getting into a discussion of denominational concerns, I think the simplest way to explain the difference between chaplains and pastors is to think in terms of where the minister is practicing. ¹ *Pastors* are denominational, practice with and within a specific congregation, and have a geographical territory and a particular demographic or denominational community as their base. ² *Chaplains* are clergy or para-clergy and practice in or serve a specific community or group rather than a particular congregation or belief community, and frequently, but not always, are non-denominational, that is, they practice on an interfaith platform.

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¹ For the purposes of this article, I would like to define “pastor” as any member of an denomination, Christian or no-Christian, who has received divinity or seminary education, training, and formation, hence, clergy or para-clergy, and who is assigned to a specific congregation, in a specific area. A pastor is a “minister” but not necessarily a “chaplain;” similarly, a chaplain is a minister and may be, but not necessarily be, a pastor or clergy, in which case I prefer to use the term spiritual care provider or, if in an institution, spiritual care associate.

² I must dissent on the use of the term “pastor” since it is a predominantly Christian term for a faith or belief community leader, and may be offensive to a non-Christian client such as a Jew or a Muslim. A much preferred term that embraces a wider range of faith and belief traditions would be spiritual care provider or faith or belief community leader. In the case of the chaplain, which again has a Christian flavor to it, I would prefer psychospiritual care provider, a term whose appropriateness will or should become obvious later in this article, and one which would apply exclusively to a credentialed professional chaplain; all others would be called spiritual care volunteer or spiritual care associate but not chaplain.
Although a Chaplain may confess to a particular faith or belief system or may be assigned by his faith or belief community to serve as a spiritual care provider — and unless serving in a rigidly circumscribed ministry, which would then preclude being called a “chaplain” in a strict sense — a chaplain is trained to minister on an interfaith basis, and has or should have specific training in a range of spiritual traditions. Chaplains often serve mobility-limited populations or institutions where their clients cannot participate in regular rites and ceremonies, such populations may be the military, inmates in correctional facilities, and patients and residents in healthcare facilities. Specialist Chaplains also serve in highly specialized areas such as crisis or end-of-life care, deathcare and bereavement; these are the specialist thanatologist chaplains.

When discussing clergy and chaplains, we must always keep in mind that all clergy are not equivalent, there are divinity schools that are not accredited and not all chaplains are educated, trained or formed for chaplaincy. The gold standard and the professional degree for any pastoral, theological, spiritual-care vocation is the Master of Divinity degree earned at an accredited seminary or school of theology and ministry. When I say “accredited” I mean those that are accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, which is the principal organization for accreditation of colleges of theology and nothing less should be accepted. Note well that there are many so-called bible colleges, schools of theology, so-called online “universities,” etc. that claim to be accredited, but their accreditation claims are very questionable and are frequently from bogus or non-mainstream organizations.

Education, Training, Formation, Continuing Education

First of all, it is essential to understand that like all authentic spiritual and religious vocations, chaplaincy is a vocation not a job. The Scriptural verse-become-cliché, “Many are called but few are chosen,” (Matthew 22:14), may be extended quite appropriately in an analogous interpretation, to the vocation of chaplaincy. Many self-invented “chaplains” see themselves as “fixers” but are not true helpers or healers; they listen to give advice, to hear themselves talking, not to companion; in other words, they are serving themselves, not the client.
Like so many institutions today, wherever the capitalist and entrepreneur perceives a need, he perceives a niche, and in that niche an opportunity to profit. Chaplaincy is no exception. Today, almost anyone can apply to any of a large number of organizations or programs and receive some sort of training in some sort of chaplaincy. But that’s all. They receive the training but that does not make them a chaplain in any sense of the vocation.

Like many movements, clinical pastoral education (CPE), while a noble and visionary movement, became an institution and in that evolution lost the vision. To quote an Oriental parable, “they have captured the bird but killed the song.” It’s now literally a product, like so much of American education, that is, branded, and marketed by so-called “non-profit” organizations. But these organizations are, like all institutions, corporations, churches and universities included, in the business of power, control, and profit. They have lobbies, lobbyists, boards, CEOs, the inner cliques, the agendas. And they can get mean, very mean, despite their “compassionate” exteriors.

In my personal experience I have had many opportunities to cringe watching some CPE interns turned loose on a hospital ward, drooling eager to “help” or to “fix”, and the unfortunate patient and families who welcome them as “chaplains,” thinking they are really chaplains. It’s a disgusting fraud but it’s perpetrated on a daily basis over and again, and has been for decades. Why? Because there is no regulation, no control. Healthcare institutions like to cozy up to names, the bigger the better, because the American fascination with names is not remotely connected with competence but with image, celebrity, so the smoke and mirrors game is given real credibility.

The same basic statement could be applied to the “board certified,” scam, and to the organizations that now have diversified and spun off as “institutes” offering on-line credentials and training. If you don’t understand that these very institutions touting themselves as the champions of spiritual care for the human soul and the sources of compassion for the suffering, are self-serving “corporations” — even if they do call themselves “non-profit” or “not-for-profit” — with their highly-paid executive officers and their confederates enlisted from academia and the clergy who, to get their pictures and rants into print would sell their own souls, which they frequently do, to “get the numbers.”

This may sound like I’m navigating perilously close to advocating some sort of regulation or licensing in chaplaincy but that would be a gross misapprehension of what I am actually meaning. First of all, I do highly recommend that any person in chaplaincy have a minimum education that includes philosophy, psychology, theology, humanities, and some fundamental training in healthcare and deathcare. The chaplain candidate should have some time in pastoral formation or liturgical leadership and have participated in a period of regular spiritual guidance under the mentorship of a spiritual guide. Life experience is a foundation of the wisdom required of a chaplain so I really don’t feel anyone under say 35 has the requisite life experience to be providing spiritual support to anyone in a crisis situation. I also feel that the practicing chaplain should have an ongoing program of spiritual retreat, spiritual guidance by a mentor, and peer supervision on a regular basis. Healthcare humanities and literature of all genres are particularly enriching for anyone in chaplaincy, healthcare or deathcare; that means reading the pillars of literature, classical, fiction and non-fiction, technical (e.g., ethics and thanatology), and in some cases the holy scriptures of the major world religions. Competency, not necessarily fluency, in a second or third modern language is also very helpful.

What is a Chaplain?
Most human beings like shiny things and the more colorful and glossy, the more credibility, according to imbecilic logic of the masses. So why should institutionalized chaplaincy, like institutionalized religion and politics, be any different? It’s not. And just as we should regard institutionalized religion and politics with skepticism and suspicion, avoiding the glare of the glossy and the charm of the colorful, we all should regard institutionalized chaplaincy with skepticism and suspicion.

As in any corporate operation, healthcare, deathcare, church, university, it’s the little guy, the people at the bottom — the very persons we are called to relieve — who end up suffering needlessly. This situation is not only unethical, it is evil.

An aside on this point: I was recently sitting in the refectory at a monastery where I go regularly on retreat. It was after dinner and there was an opportunity to chat with the monks and the other retreatants when a woman approached me and informed me unabashedly, “I’m going to be a chaplain, too.” I was acquainted with this woman, a Greek woman late in middle-age, and a very opinionated, controlling type. Her entire demeanor signaled “baggage.” I couldn’t help listening to many of her statements to visitors and to monks, and I often just remained silent, hoping that she would someday hear herself and learn. But her approach to me and her statement to me was the ultimate in arrogance and signaled a profound lack of understanding of herself and chaplaincy; nevertheless, she had obviously survived the “selection interview” in some hospital CPE program and was going to be a CPE intern, visiting and “ministering” to a population of

**Confrontation with the Goal of Healing**

My Pastoral Recommendations:

- **Always** meet with staff prior to having the family meeting to discuss the transitions to be made between the death and comfort, aftercare, healing and beyond. Before the family meeting, always agree on and establish a case plan and goals of care. When discussing the case plan and goals, it is important to identify the needs of survivors and available resources.

- **Always** hold a debriefing session after the services.

- **Always** be aware of the possibility of conflicts within the care team, and address those conflicts early in the planning process. Have professional support resources available to address ethical or spiritual concerns.

- **Always** designate a principal contact person as spokesperson (usually the attending physician if in a hospital setting or the lead funeral director in a bereavement setting). This contact person will maintain continuity of communications with the family, and will be the primary person for coordinating care.

- **Always** show positive support for survivors regardless of their dynamics or the decisions they have made. Always avoid fixing or judging.

- **Always** ask permission to continue with aftercare.

\[\textit{What is a Chaplain?}\]
patients and their families. Yes, indeed, she thought she was just going to “take the course” and come out a chaplain. And so the story goes.

Unfortunately, most administrators and department heads are so spiritually deprived or depraved that they couldn’t tell a chaplain from a cabbage — in too many situations there is little difference between the two —, and they sheepishly or grudgingly allow the “chaplain” in the door because it’s the institutionally right thing to do (Translation: Providing a line on your website or in your brochure that the institution provides spiritual and religious care is great for marketing and sales whether you’re selling hospital beds, long-term care, end-of-life care, assisted living, or deathcare! No atheists in the fox holes.).

A note on my choice of image (soldier in foxhole reading Dawkins): In his choice of the title for this book, “The Blind Watchmaker” (1986), Richard Dawkins refers to the watchmaker analogy made famous by William Paley in his 1802 book Natural Theology.[1] Paley, writing long before Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species in 1859, held that the complexity of living organisms was evidence of the existence of a divine creator by drawing a parallel with the way in which the existence of a watch compels belief in an intelligent watchmaker. After arguing that evolution is capable of explaining the origin of complexity, near the end of the book Dawkins uses this to argue against the existence of God: “a deity capable of engineering all the organized complexity in the world, either instantaneously or by guiding evolution ... must already have been vastly complex in the first place ...” He calls this "postulating organized complexity without offering an explanation." (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Blind_Watchmaker, last accessed on July 11, 2018)

What is a Chaplain?
Of course, the fact that chaplains are supervised by the Volunteers Office at many institutions certainly doesn’t lend professional credibility to the vocation and, obviously, can severely damage the image of the professional chaplain and hobble him in his ministry and vocation. 5

Institutionalized religion is similar to the corporate chaplaincy programs. The institutionalized religions, mainstream and lesser denominations, have a vested and profitable interest in promoting their own ministers, competent or not, and disparaging the interfaith chaplain, despite his frequently superior education, special training, formation, and continuing education requirements. There’s a stipend to be had for most clergy and they have to make a showing if they are to have good word-of-mouth among their congregation and denominational hierarchy. After all, who in the congregation would say anything negative about the “pastor’s” ministry to the sick, the dying and the troubled. That simply wouldn’t be PC.

In addition to the salaries, stipends there are the gifts and bequests to the churches that single out the heavy-hitters among clergy, and become handsome incentives for institutional clergy but are not available to the professional chaplain.

Unfortunately, for all the respect for and good I have to say about the local family-operated funeral homes and funeral directors, truth be told, they are very dependent on local churches and faith communities for a large portion of their businesses, both deathcare and church business. 6

Consequently, funeral homes try to throw as much business as possible in terms of funerals and memorial services to the local priest or minister in the hopes of getting their congregation’s business. Only the most ethical and conscientious funeral director would have the courage and integrity to make the decision to have a chaplain on call or in residence if the local priest were to mention — just “by the way” of course — that he’s not getting the calls for wake or funeral services that he used to get? That’s one of the problems the chaplain has to face: opposition from institutional and denominational career clergy who supplement their rather comfortable salaries with “church work” like funerals and denominational hospital chaplaincies. 7

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5 We can discern a similar situation in many other vocations, such as clergy in the non-mainstream denominations or the fundamentalist movements, where a minority of poorly trained or radicals can have a toxic effect on the seeking public. We also are confronted and challenged by the myriad gurus and pundits of self-help pseudo-wisdom and the plethora of how-to books that disseminate such rubbish and create more problems and misconceptions than they could possibly hope to eliminate. It then becomes the task of the boots-on-the-ground spiritual care provider to debunk the charlatan palaver, and persuade the client that it’s all smoke and mirrors! Sometimes we can be helpfully persuading, other times we have to throw in the towel and admit that the Truth may not be as appealing as the dog-and-pony act.

6 And businesses they are! The Code of Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church describes the monies received by their clergy for such services as baptisms, marriages, and funerals as support for the “work of the church,” it’s still tantamount to church business no matter what you call it. While the chaplain frequently does not work for a “stipend,” and some are salaried or per diem and receive a set form of compensation, the institutional clergy person may receive a very generous stipend far beyond what the specialist chaplain might receive. In addition, as a chaplain, I have to bear much of the cost of my services which can significantly reduce my set fee. My props and liturgical items and my vestments all come out of my own pocket; I don’t receive gifts of vestments or sacred vessels from the family of the bereaved. Institutional clergy and their churches frequently receive quite generous consideration in the form of bequests from deceased members of their congregations. Bequests are another incentive that the chaplain never receives. While I may go to great lengths to personalize a funeral or memorial service, most institutionalized clergy are limited by the cookie-cutter liturgical and ritual rules set by their denomination.

7 The Catholic chaplain in a hospital may be assigned by the local bishop from a pool of local priests who rotate; Protestant denominations like the Reformed Church of America or the Baptists will usually assign one of their clergy as hospital chaplains despite the differences in dogma, doctrine, and the denominational infighting that

What is a Chaplain?
Chaplain: Individual and Small-Group Crisis Intervention

DEFINITION

• Crisis as A dramatic emotional or circumstantial upheaval in a personal life and a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or determined, a turning point.

Like “pastor”, another clarification would be to say that “chaplain” is a job title or office. It is applied to a qualified and credentialed professional, and identifies him as one practicing a very specific ministry. Accordingly, the title or office of “Chaplain” designates a minister serving a specific, usually non-religious or secular, organization, institution, or group but the chaplain may also be a minister serving in an institution as a denominational minister (such as a priest in a Catholic hospital).

I believe that the title “chaplain,” properly used is not synonymous with clergy as such but connotes a professional psychospiritual care provider practicing in a specific area of expertise, such as end-of-life care, deathcare, bereavement, or crisis intervention, rather than serving as a faith or belief community leader. While a Chaplain may be an ordained in a particular confession or denomination; the title “Reverend” is applied when he is ordained or licensed, or in recognition of the spiritual authority vested in him through education, formation, and training or ordination, not to his vocation or to his professional practice, that is, the ministry of chaplaincy and his title, “Chaplain.”

Another general difference between the Chaplain and the pastor is that the Chaplain, although commonly involved in medium to long-term care of clients, is more often called upon to provide support in acute, traumatic situations, that is, the chaplain is closely involved in what we call “crisis intervention.” The medium to long-term support may be in a hospital, ministering to the suffering and the dying; in palliative care, companioning the terminally ill, providing spiritual support to inmates; providing spiritual and religious service to those in the military; and spiritual occurs. Unless they wear clergy attire, there’s no way to tell the clergy from the intern, and few people, in my experience even ask—not that that would make an iota of difference.

8 The title “chaplain” can be traced to the early centuries of the Christian church. In the 4th century, chaplains (Latin cappellani) were so called because they kept St. Martin's famous half-cape (cappella, diminutive of cappa), in a tent and later a more permanent structure. The chaplain was in charge of the early “chapel” where relics were kept and, later, was a member of the clergy assigned to a royal chapel or sacred space in the royal household. The evolution of the title and role of the chaplain continued until we come to the early 20th century when it became the title it connotes today.

What is a Chaplain?
care to the dying and their survivors. As part of their education, formation, and training, chaplains have special training in crisis intervention and ministering to people in traumatic situations.

Although the Chaplain may perform ritual and ceremony, his main role is to provide presence. While the Chaplain may perform rites, rituals, ceremonies associated with religious practice or worship, institutionalized worship isn't really the focus of the Chaplain’s ministry. True, as an interfaith or transfaith professional, he will be expected to be able to perform rituals and ceremonies associated with a particular faith or belief tradition and its rites and customs, the Chaplain’s main role is intuitive rather than instrumental.9

The Chaplain is a trained listener rather than a liturgical preacher. A faith or belief community leader or minister preaches or sermonizes in the magisterial or teaching ministry. According to the Pew surveys, the faithful or belief community come to their church’s religious or worship services to hear their leader preach, teach. The leader addresses the entire assembly; the Chaplain is more likely to be deeply engaged in a one-on-one or small group conversation.

The Chaplain is extremely versatile and flexible. Part of the versatility and flexibility of the chaplain vocation is the necessary traits of authenticity and self-knowledge that allow the genuine vocational chaplain to meet the client in the client’s moment and space, to be totally in that moment, and to be impartially available and present. This means knowing how to be silent and comfortable in silence and how to be self-less; this is no place for ego or fixers.

The leader’s audience is generally not in a crisis or acute traumatic situation; the faith community comes together more on a regular plan to “worship” and to receive teaching from their minister, whether a priest, rabbi, imam, or denominational minister. In the event that a member of the faith or belief community is in a crisis situation such as the dying, those companioning the dying person, acute trauma, bereavement, personal or spiritual crisis, etc., the leader may be called upon to provide spiritual guidance or social support from the community; the pastor’s principal role is to be the congregation’s liturgical leader; his principal offering is not to the individual member, that’s not the main focus of the leader’s role, and if he is called upon to minister to an individual as an individual, it is generally a very instrumental, a very superficial moment.10

Chaplains do not — better said, should not — proselytize. Leaders may leave their denominational setting and reach out into the into the community to provide social or charitable services or to perform mission work, after all, the leader’s ministerial focus is, in the majority of traditions, that of propagating a faith or belief tradition, that is, their role is missiological in a specific denomination. The priest or minister wears his clerical status on his sleeve and lets the fact be known that he is a priest or a minister. The chaplain is simply “the Chaplain” plainly and

9 When I refer to “intuitive” I mean the Chaplain’s role in a ministry of intentional presence, listening, empathetic guiding, authenticity; the psychospiritual role of being present and deep listening; “instrumental” is meant to mean more of a doing, active role; that is, a ritual or ceremonial role, action and doing, rather than a psychospiritual “being present” role. The professional Chaplain’s support, while being more intuitive, is an expert in how to utilize rite, ritual, and ceremony in the service of psychospiritual care.

10 A number of studies have served to confirm the otherwise anecdotal reports of a group’s reaction to an officiant’s performance in the institutional church funeral scenario. Some of the more harsh evaluations of the officiant’s performance relate to the lack of intimacy, the presumption of familiarity, the lack of familiarity with the deceased, the routineness of the ceremony, a certain indifference of the officiant. Worse still is when a burned out priest or minister makes inappropriate remarks or injects tasteless attempts at humor into the service.
simply, and doesn’t need to be constantly carrying, waving, or quoting from a bible or other book; that’s considered “talking” but the Chaplain is there to listen, sometimes to talk, but mainly to listen and be present. The chaplain never makes the impression that he is there to convert or to correct.

Chaplains are trained in trauma and crisis management

If you’ve ever had the opportunity to be a fly on the wall during a family conference, that is, at a meeting between family members and the Chaplain, whether it’s to discuss end-of-life issues, ethical issues related to a particular case, or to discuss a funeral or memorial service, you’ll be amazed at the Chaplain’s skill in assuring trust and fostering conversation with just a few questions or statements to get the ball rolling. He’s the expert ice-breaker; the master sounding board.

Actually, being the “expert ice-breaker,” the “master sounding board” is less of a skill and more of a gift. Persons in crisis, facing a dilemma, having experienced a traumatic event are in a state of high-awareness and are hypersensitive in many ways, they instinctively are aware that survival of some sort is at stake and they are on high alert for any threat, physical, psychological, spiritual or whatever. They can sense but may not be able to interpret or to put a finger on a particular perception or emotion, but they are aware of it and it has their attention. The demeanor, the tone set, the aura of gentle authority of the chaplain creates a safe sacred space in which all threat is excluded and vulnerability is allowed; only the residual caution carried by the client or a family member(s) as baggage into the conversation is there and easily identified. The pastor represents a group, society, a denomination; his authority is based on the mores and expectations of the faith or belief community he represents; the chaplain, in contrast, enters the scene alone, a blank slate, the client or the family is the focus, and the intent is to hand control back to them at the appropriate time; the chaplain is there simply as a navigator: We are here, we’d like to get there.

Although pastors may at times be consulted to provide support in a crisis situation, they generally have not received the special training for such situations that the professional Chaplain receives as standard.
The Role of “Government” in Chaplaincy

This may seem at first blush to be a bizarre section title but, whether you are denominational clergy and a pastor or if you are a professional chaplain you have to be vigilant as regards many rules, regulations, laws, mandates, and ethical standards that govern your interactions with clients. Big Brother is watching whether he’s your institutional or denominational hierarchy, your congregations council, or state or federal government. He’s there — and he’s watching whether you are aware of being watched or not.

Whether in a major hospital or a local funeral home, there are procedures, policies, rules, and standards that demand compliance, and you as a team member must work with, sometimes around, but always in an awareness of them.

If you call yourself a chaplain or if you are a professional chaplain, you may also reasonably expect at one time or another to be challenged by some branch of government, whether it is the executive branch when you perform a marriage ceremony, the judicial branch when you are called to jury duty or are called to testify in a case, or even the legislative branch as a consultant. It’s also very important to be aware of what the government calls “clergy,” “minister,” etc., especially if you receive payment for your services as chaplain.

The obsession of separation of church and state, frequently referred to as the “Establishment Clause,” embodied in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, is uniquely American. This means that American government at all levels is hesitant to become involved in questions relating to religion or the operations of any faith or belief tradition, unless the specific practices or operations involve criminal activity or illegality or unlawful immorality is suspected, or, as in the case of marriage, involve primarily civil-secular commitments and only marginally spiritual-religious engagement. Accordingly, faith or belief, that is, “religious” institutions and communities generally operate without ostensive government involvement or intervention.

But the above statements do not mean that the government, in its own operation and understanding of the Establishment Clause, is hesitant to create rules, laws, procedures, etc. that define, regulate, decide, control relationships between “religion” and government, or who and what is “religious” in terms of those relationships. In reality, the Establishment Clause only keeps government from creating or directly benefitting any one religion or all religions.

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11 The term “government” as I am using here means to include both ecclesial as well as profane or secular government, whose purpose or intent is to conduct or to control the policy, actions, and affairs of a group or community.

12 Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. Two clauses of the First Amendment concern the relationship of government to religion: the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause.

13 For example, as an officiant empowered to solemnize a marriage, I must be aware of how I am authorized by the local authorities to solemnize what is fundamentally a civil-secular contract being made by two individuals in the presence of witnesses, one of which I am. If I am recognized by the authorities as “clergy,” which I am, I can both bless and solemnize a marriage, whether or not I include spiritual-religious language or ritual in that ceremony. If I am recognized only as a celebrant or “deputy” acting on behalf of and representing “government,” I am prohibited from using any religious language or signs during the ceremony; I am strictly secular performing a strictly civil function. It’s very important to be aware of your status in a particular locale, performing a particular function. This requires clarification with the client or family as to what they expect as well as with the local authorities as to what they require. It’s not as simple as most people may presume, and ignorance or indifference to role, function, and authority can cause significant problems and a lot of unnecessary suffering.
What is a Chaplain?

For the most part, government definitions of religion, clergy, minister are ambiguous and vague, and as in all legislation or rule-making in government, the finer definitions are left to the courts.

The very fact that the word religion is used in government contexts is unfortunate and lends itself to actually disadvantage the very thing that gives religion any sense or purpose, spirituality. The word “religion” itself implies a form of organization or institutionalization, a structured, legalizated, sometimes hierarchical entity, and thus may operate to limit the statutes to institutionalized “religion,” to the exclusion of more loosely organized spiritual movements or groups. Again, expensive court challenges are usually necessary to decide such questions.

These considerations become all the more important as our population becomes more “secular” and takes a more critical look at how “religion” operates in a post-religion society. Such considerations also become more salient as entrepreneurs come to recognize the spiritual malnutrition of society and the interest of many to get involved in providing spiritual care to various groups-in-crisis; on the one hand this gave rise to the very noble movements inspired by hospice movement with Cicely Saunders but it also opens the door to entrepreneurial pseudo-religious movement like the megachurches and televangelists, as well as social media proselytizing — one disturbingly glaring example is that of Joel Olstein and his mutations, or even the Roman Catholic Church —, much of which appeals only to those suffering with one sociopathic disorder or another or those who are already addicted and vulnerable to these movements, most of which are of the bowel type.

There seems to be a distortion of liberty and freedom, right and responsibility when it comes to free speech. On the one hand, government steps in when it’s convenient to regulate religious or spiritual speech, while on the other hand claiming to be hesitant to get involved with religion or spirituality. There’s no secret about the hypocrisy and schizoid nature of both institutionalized religion and institutionalized control, that is, government. It’s precisely for that reason that we, as psychospiritual care providers, must be vigilant and aware of the sometimes non-self-revealing boundaries set by institutions of every type.

This situation of state being “prudently” separate from the work of the human spirit is being threatened by so called chaplaincy organizations and the so-called “certifying” organizations, some of which are cozying up to government and even lobbying to obtain government recognition and support of “chaplaincy.” While publicly appearing as the defenders and champions of the heretofore underrepresented professional chaplain, they are in reality taking scurrilous advantage of so-called chaplains who have a need for “recognition.” That “need” represents the very thing real Chaplains are taught to leave out of the care equation: ego. These organizations are not only navigating a perilous course by proactively inviting government participation of any sort in spiritual matters, much less in a profession that is even more “spiritual” than most mainstream or institutionalized “churches,” or “religious” institutions. Most of these organizations work under cover of “chaplaincy” and purport to have the sole interest of advancing and promoting chaplaincy as a recognized profession, but their real purpose is power and control over a very heterogeneous clerical and para-clerical professionals.

In fact, organizations like Healthcare Chaplaincy Network and their alter egos, The Spiritual Care Association (SCA), and “programs” are designed specifically to take control of the professional Chaplain, to “standardize” practices and training (!) (for example through their activities in so-called Professional Continuing Education (PCE) and an “evidence-based curriculum,” and to establish an “evidence-based” or quantitative form of chaplaincy, which will
be aligned with other professions, is the first step in perverting a vocation as old as deathcare. The fallacy underlying such agendas is that Chaplaincy, being a psychospiritual discipline, cannot be simply quantified and rationalized like physics or chemistry! The problem in the leadership of these organizations is that they are narcissistically oriented and misguided, mostly far-left liberal “clergy” of non-mainstream persuasions, and more secular than spiritual, they wear the patina of spirituality to cover a political skin hiding a power-hungry body. I am a professional chaplain and I do not want to have my status as clergy or anyone’s professional status as para-clergy jeopardized by any ostensibly secular-political organization cozying up to government for “support” (= money, influence and power) through active lobbying (!). That’s the very route to corruption these Reformist and post-Reformist denominations demonized in the so-called medieval universal (Catholic) Church that led to the movements leading to the establishment of the Protestant and Reformed, as well as of non-mainstream “Christian” denominations in the first place! This raises the obvious and natural question of clergy or para-clergy working in and being employed by government departments, agencies, operations, etc. Is this a paradox?15 Here we have to depart from the logical and enter the world of politics and legal reasoning. Many clergy are employed by civilian government, the armed forces, as well as by nonreligious organizations receiving government support to bring comfort and support to the suffering. Individuals and organizations have sued because they feel that by employing chaplains the secular organizations are recognizing and imposing religion in nonreligious environments; consequently, then, violating the First Amendment of the United States Constitution interpreted provisions relating to freedom of religion and freedom from religion. For example, in Carter vs. Broadlawns Medical Center. Carter argued that the hospital’s pastoral care program was promoting religion by hiring and paying a chaplain. The 8th Circuit Court of Appeals for the Southern District of Iowa ruled that it’s legitimate to provide a religious service as long as the primary effort and result of the service is secular, that is, patient well-being. The medical center’s rational to hire a vetted spiritual care provider was religiously neutral decision because the medical center did not impose a preference for a chaplain from a particular faith or belief tradition; furthermore, hiring a tax-paid chaplain didn’t represent an "excessive entanglement" of religion.

14 We find such greedy and gluttonous predators also in other sectors in which the chaplain operates. One such sector is the deathcare corporation like Service Corporation International (SCI) whose mission is to take over and “standardize” deathcare under their banner; in other words, to dehumanize and industrialize deathcare. SCI’s brand Dignity Memorial® whose intent and purpose is to take the sterile, dehumanized chill from the otherwise corporate-industrial moniker Service Corporation International or SCI. On the one hand Dignity Memorial is gobbling up once local family-operated funeral homes and then “decommissioning” those that are not productive enough. Another such operation would be Ryan Thogmartin’s Disrupt® Media, a work in arrogance where an immature shaved head, bling-laden 30-something attired in low-grunge attempts to tell the deathcare industry that they don’t know how to run their businesses and that they need his Facebook marketing schemes to run effective businesses. While the majority continue to have the wherewithal to see through these scam artists’ smoke-and-mirror presentations, there will always be a few who will worship their despicable efforts. The renowned scam artist P.T. Barnum stated the situation quite accurately and concisely with the now immortal saying, “There’s a fool born every minute.” While the saying is falsely attributed to Barnum, who would never have derided his patrons, it was likely uttered by one of his competitors, David Hannum, referring to Barnum’s fake exhibits.

15 “No man can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13; cf. Mark 12:17)—This statement can be viewed by skeptics from a legal, logical, situational, and psychological point of view. Eliminate all other options and stick to your heart, your psyche. For legally it is possible to serve two masters, but psychologically, if put in a situation where we have to choose, our devotion will exceed for one of them. This is what these pericopes imply through this statement.

What is a Chaplain?
Methods of Becoming a Chaplain

The title “Chaplain” is much misused in the denominational arena and in many government publications concerned with religious and spiritual care. In both instances, the term chaplain is used to connote an individual of a particular denomination or faith tradition, who has been “ordained,” that is on the one hand, according to Black’s Law Dictionary, an individual steeped in denominational doctrine and credentialed by that denomination. Seems that such an individual is hardly equipped to step into the interfaith world of hospital, hospice, long-term care facility, or the funeral home to provide the broad spectrum of chaplaincy support required in such milieus.

Depending on the tradition, if one is a denominational “chaplain,” which would be a contradiction in our agreed terminology, the minister would have to be ordained, or at least officially recognized, that is, certified in “good standing” by a religious institution. But ordination on its own might allow the minister to officiate at weddings and funerals, and perform specific rites and rituals of the tradition; ordination does not necessarily automatically make the minister qualified to assume a leader’s role in a particular faith or belief community, much less to perform as an interfaith chaplain.

The large, mainstream churches, such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, some Methodist and Presbyterian, require those seeking to become pastor of a church to enter and complete a course of study leading to the professional qualification of the master's degree in divinity. In general and if undertaken at a reputable, accredited college of theology and ministry, takes about four years of full-time study — or a total of 75-125 graduate study credits — beyond the bachelor's degree; this is the equivalent, then, of a total of eight years of college or university study, then after graduation there are the clinical internships, the required supervised pastoral formation, and the continuing education and the specialization courses. A professional chaplain, therefore, has as much training in his vocation as a physician has in his!

A master’s degree in pastoral studies, theology, or the gold standard, the Master of Divinity degree, divinity is also a requirement for credentialing as a professional chaplain. Even with a degree in pastoral studies or theology — in most curricula the M.Div. degree includes the coursework of both the pastoral and theology degrees, plus additional practical formation — the individual is not objectively competent to jump into a chaplaincy position, despite the assumptions of volunteer coordinators and generalist human resources coordinators, most of whom have no clue what a chaplain is or what he does.

Here’s an example taken from a mainstream HR job description for “clergy:”

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16 Black’s Law Dictionary is the most widely used law dictionary in the United States. It was founded by Henry Campbell Black (1860–1927). It is the reference of choice for terms in legal briefs and court opinions and has been cited as a secondary legal authority in many U.S. Supreme Court cases.


18 For some general superficial insights on “becoming” a pastor, see the Houston Chronical article, What Is the Difference Between a Chaplain & a Pastor?” (http://work.chron.com/difference-between-chaplain, last accessed on July 16, 2018).
“Conduct religious worship and perform other spiritual functions associated with beliefs and practices of religious faith or denomination. Provide spiritual and moral guidance and assistance to members.”

That definition, while it is simple enough, has great potential to cause a great many misunderstandings and problems.

In another off-road site that purports to describe “Chaplains & Specialized Ministries”\(^{19}\) we have the opportunity to read a more extensive but equally misleading description (I’ve provided the emphasis):

“Chaplains minister in the name of our Lord and our church outside the church walls [= proselytizing]. They can be found in war zones, on military bases, at crime scenes, in a factory, in the homes of the dying, in surgery, the delivery room, and in the intensive care unit. Chaplains are pastors [Oh, really?] who are specially trained to minister to those who are in stressful or crisis situations. The training includes addressing spiritual issues that impact life and health, relationship counseling, building coping skills, issues on death and dying, grief, and many other areas of special needs [This is a bit vague, ambiguous, and overreaching, isn’t it?]. They are trained to use these skills [Which skills?] with individuals and groups, which make chaplains excellent resource people for congregations experiencing crisis or grief.”

First of all, most chaplains do not minister in the name of any “Lord.” Chaplains are not “pastors,” as I’ve mentioned above for the sake of clarity, they are ministers. The rest of the description isn’t even worth comment.

The description also makes the impression that every congregation should have chaplains on a convenient shelf or, read differently; it presupposes that there are “congregations” that chronically experience crisis or grief. Where I come from these types of congregations are called mental health facilities. That having been said, I do think that the chaplain has a very special role in such communities and there are even chaplains who specialize in providing psychospiritual support in mental health facilities.\(^{20}\)

Para-clergy is a term used by Hammond (1989) to describe people who are actively involved in their faith or belief community’s ministries and to whom the elevated status of “minister” is

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\(^{20}\) It’s an interesting historical note that I’d like to insert at this point that the Clinical Pastoral Education movement started in the early 1900s in mental institutions where the founders of what was to eventually become the Healthcare Chaplaincy Network actually believed that the mental institution was the place where medical (psychiatry) students could acquire important insights into spirituality and medicine (psychiatric disorders) and relate them theologically to their work. In fact, one of the founders of the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) movement, Anton Theophilus Boisen (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Boisen) was a lecturer at Chicago Theological Seminary, who had spent time in mental institutions as a patient and, based on his experiences believed that patients there would benefit from chaplaincy support. In fact, Boisen believed that some mental illnesses, schizophrenia, for example, could be interpreted as a response of the patient to resolve “problems of the soul.” Bison later explored the notion that mental disorders represent a crisis in development and the failure to evolve into higher social loyalties, including loyalty to God. Boison had a rather bizarre notion that mental illness was “purposive,” and he believed that it could be “cured” by the power of religion [sic].
authorized in their community. They are "like the clergy" and hence the term "para-clergy." This status is the result of a response to vocation and an answer with an affirmative to discipleship.21

"Today’s church is too dependent on hired staff in the roles of pastors, nuns, evangelists and missionaries. The latest Roman Catholic book on laity aptly describes us as it says, “The church bureaucracy has successfully convinced its pew-sitters that their role in the kingdom is to pray, pay and obey – mostly pay. This immobilization of 99% of the God’s people is both unbiblical and discriminating...”22

But all of that having been said, where does the chaplain stand in terms of his spiritual care role in secular institutions, and do secular institutions make a distinction between religion and spirituality in view of the First Amendment and the Establishment Clause?

At a much deeper level than any Amendment or Constitution, the chaplain is a representative of compassion and spirituality, and serves as a resource to the patient, family members, and to the institutional staff as well.

To paraphrase Gentile and Fello, I have found that many of the patients to whom chaplains minister have become estranged from institutionalized religious belief and practice and are seeking to re-establish some connection with their spiritual roots. The intuitive chaplain with a caring and compassionate approach may, with sensitivity and discretion, facilitate the suffering person's exploration of spiritual issues and conflicts and thus assist the sufferer to live or to die with greater dignity. Those persons, particularly those at the end of their lives, are not overly concerned with whether the person holding their hand or praying with them is complying with the Establishment Clause or not. Does the dying soldier on the battlefield request a reading from Carter v. Broadlawns Medical Center or Lemon v. Kurtzman? I’d wager not! More likely he’d be asking for the Eucharist, anointing, or a reading of Psalm 23.

But those with lives yet to be lived and who hope to live them outside of a correctional facility do have to bear in mind the applicable secular laws. Yes, it’s a professional speed bump but also sometimes a necessary evil.

The Supreme Court (SCOTUS) has frequently been the go-to to make such decisions, as we can see in an important case, Carter v. Broadlawns Medical Center, 672 F. Supp. 1149, 1150 (Sept. 29, 1987).

In Carter the court found in favor of Broadlawns and stated in their decision:

“Permitting chaplains to wear name tags and to call on patients to ask whether the patient desires a chaplain’s services; providing parking spaces for clergy, blanks on admissions forms for indicating religious preference on an optional basis, and optional religious services; and storing religious supplies in the hospital for use at the optional services are all practices that are reasonably necessary accoutrements of the chaplaincy and that are covered by our analysis of the chaplain question.”

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The Lemon Test

In Lemon, the high court began its analysis by setting out a three-part test for determining when a law violates the Establishment Clause. Looking to its own precedents, the court concluded that for a law to comply with the Establishment Clause, it must (1) have a secular purpose; (2) have a predominantly secular effect; and (3) not foster “excessive entanglement” between government and religion.

The position of chaplain is covered in the US federal job category 0060 – Chaplain Series, and is described in the following terms:

“This series covers all positions the duties of which are to advise on, administer, supervise, or perform professional work involved in a program of spiritual welfare and religious guidance for patients of Government hospitals and homes, for inmates of Government correctional and penal or other institutions, or for persons in other Government activities where civilian chaplain service is needed. Positions are classifiable to this series when the nature of duties and responsibilities is such that ordination by a recognized ecclesiastical body is a basic requirement.”

Chaplain covers all positions the duties of which are to advise on, administer, supervise, or perform professional work involved in a program of spiritual welfare and religious guidance for patients of Government hospitals and homes, for inmates of Government correctional and penal or other institutions, or for persons in other Government activities where civilian chaplain service is needed. Positions are classifiable to this series when the nature of duties and responsibilities is such that ordination by a recognized ecclesiastical body is a basic requirement.

Classification & Qualifications

In the federal General Schedule Qualification Standards, Chaplain Series, 0060, there is no OPM qualification standard for this series. These positions are in the excepted service, and agencies establish their own qualification requirements for them.

For example, in the publication “U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Program Statement, OPI HRD/PDB, Number 3300.03, Date: May 8, 2017, Employment, Section 5. Examining of Chaplains, we read:

23 In the landmark case of Lemon v. Kurtzman, 411 U.S. 192 (U.S. 1973), the SCOTUS determined that Government action violates the Establishment Clause unless it:
   1. Has a significant secular (i.e., non-religious) purpose,
   2. Does not have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion, and
   3. Does not foster excessive entanglement between government and religion.

Those three elements of the analysis constitute what we know as the Lemon Test. Typical of the SCOTUS there is the majority opinion and the dissenting opinion(s), that is, not all justices believe that the Lemon Test is the appropriate test to use in reviewing Establishment Clause cases. Justice Kennedy, for example, focuses on whether the government compelled, directly or indirectly, affirmation of a religion. Other justices, such as Scalia and Thomas, are of the view that any practice of government that has a long history is virtually immune from Establishment Clause challenge.


The Bureau’s ministry will be enhanced and made more effective by support from faith communities that represent the diverse religious needs of the inmate population. The following information outlines hiring procedures and defines responsibilities and duties of the Regional Human Resources Department, Consolidated Staffing Unit, and Central Office Chaplaincy Services (COCS).  

The best that can be said for the federal position on chaplaincy is that it remains vague, ambiguous and very cautious, leaving enormous discretion and flexibility in determining the suitable candidate while avoiding any statement of specificity. Such an attitude borders on the irresponsible and the indifferent, and opens the floodgates for abuse and misapprehension.

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26 Program Statement Chaplains’ Employment, Responsibilities, and Endorsements. BOP Qualifications Standards Chaplain GS-0060-11 and 12; Process to Announce and Select a Chaplain (BOP Developed Procedures) DOJ Order 1200.1, Part 1, Maximum Entry Age for Law Enforcement Positions. And further:

1. RECRUITMENT

Identifying and recruiting Chaplains is a shared responsibility among administrators, human resource staff, and COCS.

2. QUALIFICATIONS

For initial appointment, applicants for Staff Chaplain will be assessed according to the following basic qualifications.

- Bachelor's Degree (any discipline).
- Ordained clergy.
- Ecclesiastical endorsement.
- 2 years of Ministry leadership experience.

A minimum two-year association with the endorsing body of the faith tradition must be recognized for an Ecclesiastical Endorsement.

Religious Credentials. Applicants will be ordained clergy or members of ecclesiastically recognized religious institutes of vowed men or women. In lieu of professional ordination credentials, adequate documentation of the applicants’ recognized religious and ministerial roles in their respective faith communities is required.

What is a Chaplain?
When I embarked on this journey I had no idea of the depth and scope that was possible, and it became a challenge to rein in the subject matter to a mercifully manageable content. If this essay appears somewhat prolix, it is because of the depth of the subject matter and the necessity to provide pointers and, in some instances, some history, to facilitate an understanding of the vocation of chaplaincy.

That having been said, I must also acknowledge the paucity of literature on chaplaincy as a unique and separate vocation, apart from the clerical or consecrated vocations, and much apart from the secular notions of chaplaincy and many of the misconceptions that have been perpetuated by government job descriptions and guidelines in the vainglorious and misplaced effort to remove “religion” from government in respect of the still ambiguous “Establishment Clause,” and the popular notions of separation of church and state. This is less an intentional ambiguity in the Constitution and subsequent law-making or judicial interpretation than it is a

What is a Chaplain?
failure of the education system generally. There are many reasons for this situation but these go far beyond the scope of this essay.

Chaplaincy, whether in the healthcare facility or in the deathcare professions, is an essential and fundamental component of full-service, client-centered care but has been sidelined by the more secular pursuits of short-term care goals and, disgracefully, profit, even in the organizations whose market slogans might include phrases such as ‘caring for the human spirit’. Too many so-called chaplaincy and spiritual-care organizations are driven by secular corporate agendas. As I have mentioned above, they have ‘captured the bird but killed the song’ in the process.

The present challenge, that is, the mission of the professional chaplain and those institutions, including but not limited to lifecare, healthcare, and deathcare, that of averting the catastrophic dehumanization that has accompanied materialism run amok, the desensitization and isolation effects of social media addiction, and the decline of family and human values in human society overall, that is, the total loss of self and connection with the Self (viz. soul). This is truly a titanic challenge but one that must be met if we are to salvage what is left of humanity, even if the moments we have to do so are those few at the end of a client’s life.

It’s never too late.

Rev. Ch. Harold W. Vadney
INDEX

A
Abuse and misapprehension, 34
Accreditation, 3
Administrators, 7, 34
Anointing, 30
Area of expertise, 11
Associate
spiritual care, 1
Association of Theological Schools in the United States and
Canada, 3, See ATS
ATS. See Association of Theological Schools in the United
States
Authenticity, 13
Authority
gentle, 16
Available and present, 13

B
Barnum, P...T., 22
Beliefs and practices, 26
Bereavement, 2, 11, 14
Bible colleges, 3
Black, Henry Campbell, 24
Black’s Law Dictionary, 24
Blank slate, 16
Blind Watchmaker, 7
Boisen, Anton Theophilus, 28
Boundaries
non-self-revealing, 20

C
Care
end-of-life, 2, 7, 11
long-term, 7, 12, 24
palliative, 12
psychospiritual, 1, 11, 13, 20
Care provider
psychospiritual, 11
Carter, See Carter vs. Broadlawns
Carter vs. Broadlawns Medical Center, 23, 30
Catholic chaplain, 10
Catholic hospital, 11
Celebrant, 18
Ceremonies, 2, 12
Certified in “good standing”, 25
Chaplain, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 21,
23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33
candidate, 5
interfaith, 8, 25
on-call or in-residence, 10
professional, credentialed, 1, 8, 9, 16, 17, 21, 22, 25, 26
title and role of, 11

What is a Chaplain?
What is a Chaplain?

Matthew 22:14, 3
Matthew 6:24, 23
Megachurches, 20
Memorial service, 9
Mental health facilities, 28
Mentorship, 5
Methodist, 25
Military, 2, 12, 27
Minister, 1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 25, 27, 28, 30
Ministerial focus, 15
Ministry
  magisterial or teaching, 13
to the sick, 9
Mission work, 14
Moral guidance, 26
Movement
  fundamentalist, 8
Muslim, 1

Nonreligious organizations, 23

Officiant’s performance, 14
On-line credentials, 5
Ordination, 11, 25, 32, 33, 34
Organizations
  certifying, 20
Origin of Species, 7

Paley, William, 7
Para-clergy, 2
pastor, 1, 16, 27, 29
Pastor, 1, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 25, 26
Pastoral studies, 26
Patients, 2, 7, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33
Payment for services, 17
Peer supervision, 5
Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 24
Pew surveys, 13
Philosophy, 5
Policies, 17
Policy. See Policies
post-Reformist, 22
Post-religion, 19
Practice
  professional, 11
  religious, 12
Preacher
  liturgical, 13
Presbyterian, 25
Presence, 12, 13, 18
Presumption of familiarity, 14
Procedures, 17, 18, 33

Protestant, 10, 22
Protestant denominations, 10
Provider
  psychospiritual care, 1, 11
  spiritual care, 1
Psalm 23, 30
Psychology, 5
Psychospiritual support, 28

R

Reading, 5, 7, 30
Recognized ecclesiastical body, 32, 33
Reformed, 10, 22
Reformed Church of America, 10
Reformist, 22
Regulation, 4, 5
Regulations, 16
Relationship counseling, 27
Relationships
  between religion and government, 18
Religion, 6, 8, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 28, 29, 31, 32
  institutionalized, 20
Religion and the Courts, 24
Religions
  institutionalized, 8
Religious faith, 26
Religious guidance, 32, 33
Religious institution, 25
Religiously neutral, 23
Requirements
  continuing education, 8
Reverend, 11
Right and responsibility, 20
Rites, 2, 12, 13, 25
Ritual and ceremony, 12
Rituals, 12, 25
Roman Catholic, 9, 20, 25, 29
Roman Catholic Church, 9, 20
Routineness of the ceremony, 14
Rules, 9, 16, 17, 18
Ryan Thogmartin, 22

Salaries, 9, 10

SCA. See Spiritual Care Association
School of theology and ministry, 3
Secular, 11, 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, 29, 30, 31, 32
Secular effect, 32
Secular purpose, 32
Self-knowledge, 13
Service Corporation International, 21
Social media, 20
Sociopathic disorder, 20
Sounding board, 15
Space
  safe sacred, 16
Spiritual authority, 11
What is a Chaplain?

Spiritual care, 1, 2, 5, 8, 12, 19, 23, 24, 29, See Care, spiritual

Spiritual Care Association, 21
Spiritual care provider, 1, 2, 8, 23
Spiritual functions, 26
Spiritual guidance, 5, 14
Spiritual guide, 5
Spiritual issues, 27, 30
Spiritual malnutrition of society, 19
Spiritual speech, 20
Spiritual welfare, 32
Spirituality, 19, 20, 22, 28, 29
Standards, 17
State of high-awareness, 15
Statutes, 19
Stipends, 9
Suffering, 5, 6, 12, 18, 20, 23, 30
Support
   medium to long-term, 12
   social, 14
   spiritual, to inmates, 12
Supreme Court, 24, 30
Survivors, 12
System
   faith or belief, 2

T

Televangelists, 20
Terminology, 25
Thanatologist, 2
Theology, 3, 5, 25, 26
Tradition
   faith or belief, 12, 15, 18, 24
Training, 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 16, 21, 25, 27
   special, 12
Transfaith. See Interfaith
Trauma
   acute, 14
Traumatic event, 15
Traumatic situation, 14
Traumatic situations, 12

U

U.S. Department of Justice, 33
United States Constitution, 17, 23
University, 6, 25

V

Vocation, 3, 4, 8, 11, 13, 21, 25, 29
   religious, 3
Volunteer
   spiritual care, 1
Volunteer coordinators, 26
Volunteers Office, 8
Vulnerability, 16