Meditations on Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care

A Conversation with Chaplains Across Settings

The convening and this report were prepared in collaboration with the Fetzer Institute.
May 22, 2020

The Impact of COVID-19 on This Report

This Memorial Day – in addition to those who have died serving our country - we remember too many who have died of COVID-19. Memorial Day takes on a newer, even more immediate meaning for chaplains everywhere.

In December of 2019, the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab brought together a diverse group of chaplains at the Fetzer Institute to share the reality of chaplaincy today and to envision its future. The resulting report reflects the hopes, fears, and wisdom of that gathering. During that planning session, we could not have imagined how the COVID-19 pandemic would bring chaplains and chaplaincy front and center in American life.

Ironically, the focus of this event was to address the challenges of chaplaincy and spiritual care and to honor the innovative chaplains who are now the ones running toward the dying rather than away. The stakes have never been higher and the challenges have never been greater for chaplains who are quickly adjusting their footing to face new challenges in this new world. While chaplains practice the new skills of social distancing, facilitating FaceTime with dying patients and supporting next of kin with difficult phone calls, the innovation we discussed in our gathering is critical to the wellbeing of chaplains and those they serve.

As the pandemic shines a light on the common issues of fear, grief, trauma and uncertainty that chaplains are skilled at helping each of us to face, it is leading more Americans to turn to chaplains and making the changes named in this report and the work we have to do more urgent. Whether in hospitals, prisons, colleges, universities, first-response units or other organizations, the work of chaplains has taken on new relevance.

In December of 2019, we undertook a conversation and envisioned a bold future for chaplaincy. Now more than ever, there is the need and the opportunity for that vision to be realized. Please take some time to review our findings and give us your input or feedback. By joining us in this conversation you will be helping to advance the understanding of chaplaincy and its role in our world and in our lives.

Thank you!

Wendy Cadge, PhD 
Michelle A. Scheidt, DMin
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Meditations on Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care

A Conversation with Chaplains Across Settings
Chaplaincy Innovation Lab
March 2020

In mid-December 2019, the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab partnered with the Fetzer Institute to bring thirty chaplains, chaplaincy educators, and social scientists working in the United States into a face-to-face conversation about the current and future state of chaplaincy and spiritual care. We gathered for two days at Fetzer’s retreat center in Kalamazoo, Michigan with chaplains and spiritual care providers who work in healthcare organizations, colleges and universities, law enforcement, the military, prisons, social movement organizations, and community organizations.

The group was intentionally diverse in terms of age, background, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, spirituality and religion, and the setting in which the chaplains work. While some of the participants working in the same kinds of settings knew one another, most were meeting for the first time.

One of the questions that guides the work of the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab is how the work of chaplains is changing and must change with broader shifts in American spiritual and religious demographics. We aim to spark practical innovations that improve the experiences people have with chaplains and the positive effects chaplains can have on the individuals and institutions they serve.

While much talk about chaplains focuses on supply — how chaplains are trained, educated, certified across settings, and find pathways to the work — the Lab is increasingly focused on demand.

We want to know where chaplains, or the skills and experiences they bring, are most needed in today’s contexts; what service delivery models are most effective; how to partner with others to most effectively address need; and how to train individuals for the work.
A survey we conducted in March 2019 indicated that 20% of the American public had contact with a chaplain in the last two years — two years in which affiliation and membership in traditional religious organizations continued to decline. Chaplains have a lot of potential to meet and support people where they are, as they are, outside of religiously-designated spaces.

In preparation for our meeting at the Fetzer Institute, participants reviewed the most recent report about religion in America from the Pew Forum, listened to a podcast about why people “hire religion,” and read the case statement for the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab and a recent piece about the disconnects between theological educators and clinical educators training healthcare chaplains.

We focused during our time together on what we — as a diverse group of chaplains, educators and social scientists — see as the current state of chaplaincy and spiritual care and what we would like the future state to be.

While much training, research, and public conversation about chaplaincy is siloed by the sector in which it takes place (i.e., healthcare, prisons, the military, etc.), we played with the idea of chaplaincy and spiritual care as a single field in which:

- Chaplains are regularly in conversation with chaplaincy colleagues who work in very different settings and learn from and with them over their careers.
- Innovators in spiritual care can learn from empirical studies in one setting and apply them in others.
- Individuals begin to identify as chaplains or spiritual care providers first and healthcare chaplains, military chaplains, or other sector-specific chaplains second.
- There is a unified and ongoing sense and conversation among chaplains and the broader public about who chaplains are and what they contribute to today’s rapidly changing world.

The objective of our time was not to come to consensus but rather to identify a number of common themes and questions and points of similarity, outlined here.

We hope these ideas spark conversation among chaplains, local religious leaders, chaplaincy educators and — perhaps most importantly — people doing this work who are not currently engaged in a common conversation.

One of the challenges for chaplains is that there is no single organization or annual meeting that brings chaplains across the settings together for this continued conversation — an issue the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab is starting to address. We briefly outline the next steps the Lab is taking to enable this conversation to
continue, to grow, and to support chaplains doing effective work with individuals and organizations in their local contexts.

**Challenges to Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care**

In our discussions the group identified the following challenges:

- Chaplains today are siloed by the sectors in which they work and which require very different kinds of knowledge and experience. The nature of the work varies from acute issues in emergency rooms and in disaster settings with first responders to longer-term relationship building and support in higher education, with police and firefighters, and with those working in retirement settings and nursing and palliative care. The group agreed that the people chaplains serve vary widely in these settings and that staff or members of the workforces that make these settings operate are constituents alongside patients, students, those who are victimized, and others.

- There is a lack of clear and consistent language for describing the work of chaplains. Historically, many people – including in some of the institutions where chaplains work – do not have a clear sense of what chaplains do or easy ways to explain it, particularly to growing numbers of people for whom traditional religious affiliations and identities are not relevant.

- The training people complete to become chaplains also varies and ranges from short, online courses to lengthy degree programs that include clinical education.

- There is a lack of diversity among chaplains in some settings. The chaplain demographic should more closely reflect the people it serves.

- There is a need for multiple pathways into the work for people from different backgrounds and at different life stages.

- There is a question about whether chaplains are, or should be considered, professionals and an awareness that in the open market of religious life in the United States there is no way to regulate who claims the title of chaplain. The people who use that title today range from full-time professionals in healthcare and the military to volunteers in a range of other settings with little to no formal training.

- There is little research about the effectiveness of chaplains, no agreement on what effectiveness means and no clear path for translating research into practice. While some research has been conducted about chaplains, we also spoke about how there are few studies that measure effectiveness and no agreed-upon sense of what “effective” means. There are also few mechanisms that translate the research that has been conducted into key parts of chaplaincy education programs.

- There are questions about the sustainability model that underlies the work of chaplains. These include questions about who pays (or should pay) chaplains and where in complex organizations, like prisons and universities, they should most focus their time and attention to make the greatest impact.
Participants also raised other big questions about who does and does not need a chaplain, where the demand is, and what this conversation looks and sounds like to younger people, especially those who are not religiously affiliated.

**Innovators in Action**

To encourage our thinking about how to turn these challenges into opportunities, we heard from five chaplaincy innovators about their work.

- **Claire Chuck Bohman** is the Program Director of Sojourn Chaplaincy, the multi-faith spiritual care department for San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center. Here they are the lead educator of Sojorn’s chaplain training program and spiritual care director.

- **Allison Kestenbaum** is the CPE Program Supervisor and Palliative Care Chaplain for the Howell Palliative Care Service at UC San Diego Health. She developed and supervises a palliative care specialty spiritual training program.

- **Micky ScottBey Jones** is a justice doula and accompanies people as they birth more love, justice, and shalom into our world. Her home base is Faith Matters Network, where she is the Director of Resilience & Healing Initiatives.

- **Asha Shipman** joined the Yale University Chaplain’s Office in 2013 in a part-time position and in 2016 became the second (and at the time only female) Hindu chaplain with a full-time university appointment in the United States.

- **Eric Skidmore** was hired in 1997 by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division to create a new program called [The South Carolina Law Enforcement Assistance Program](https://www.slaw.org/). Today that program serves 17,000 state and local police officers, staff, and family members as well as state employees of the South Carolina Office of the Adjutant General.

These pioneers showed us that the ground is fertile for this work and that the world needs it.

**Looking to the Future**

We spent the rest of our time together beginning to develop a vision for the future of chaplaincy and spiritual care. **We focused on four, inter-related pieces of this vision, brainstorming them out and beginning to think about how to get from here to there.**
• The value proposition chaplains offer across the settings where they work needs to be more clearly and strategically communicated to key stakeholders in those institutions. Rather than looking primarily to theological schools and religious audiences, this proposition must be outward focused and easily understandable to people who have never thought about chaplains.

• We need a language of chaplaincy that explains who chaplains are, who they serve, and the help chaplains offer to individuals and institutions. While there was much discussion, one participant offered a simple working definition as a starting point: “Chaplaincy is the practical application of the spiritual dimensions of compassion.”

• Many in the conversation found the demand (rather than supply) approach to chaplaincy compelling. Rather than looking at where and how chaplains have traditionally done their work, this leads us to ask where there is demand for that work (if not always for the chaplains who do it) and to build efforts (and educational modules) from that firm base in demand. Thinking about systems may be useful here to determine where people are and how chaplains can best meet and develop relationships with them in those places.

• The group saw opportunities for leadership and training in chaplaincy and spiritual care that emerge from and are more closely connected to the value proposition, the language of chaplaincy and the demand for it, especially in new and unusual places.

Participants imagined ways theological schools can better partner with clinical chaplaincy training programs, for example; how the chaplains hired to work for the federal government — in the military, prisons and the Veterans Administration — can be better prepared and supported over their careers; and how other partnerships can be built between employers and educators so chaplains are as prepared as they can be to do the work needed.

Questions are live about the need for multiple pathways into chaplaincy, especially for those who, for reasons of historical marginalization, life-stage, and / or resources are not going to go to theological school. These issues require much more conversation.
Underlying this emerging vision was a sense in the group that chaplains need to look more like the people they serve demographically, that young people need to be involved in all of these strategic conversations and decisions, that research is key, and that thinking about spiritual care as a human right might open up the conversation.

The group also agreed that the people and institutions served by chaplains must be a central part of steps moving forward so these efforts continue to become more externally, rather than internally, focused.

In the spirit of continuing the conversation, we invited participants at the December meeting to add their personal comments and observations to this report.

Here are their thoughts:

**TAHARA AKMAL**

Reflection on the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab retreat at the Fetzer Institute begins with what is at the root of chaplaincy: connection. Upon arrival at the Institute, every detail from the beautiful quote cards and inspirational booklets in the guest rooms to the breathtaking grounds encouraged connection with nature, the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab group, and with self. There was a sense of awe for the diverse group of professionals present invested in the development of chaplaincy in the United States and the work we completed together.

A definition of chaplaincy I heard during the retreat was “the practical application of compassion.” As a Muslim, compassion is foundational in spiritual practice and understanding the Divine, “In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate.” As an educator of chaplains within a hospital Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) setting, my first task with students is to establish a connection, which parallels what chaplains do with patients. Chaplains reach out to patients with compassion to support them in discovering inner resources that help them navigate hospitalization, illness, decision making, and other aspects of life.

**Chaplains support people in voicing what is relevant in their lives and what they need.**
To learn what people find meaningful requires an openness to “the other” that is rooted in unconditional regard and respect for what comforts and sustains people. For some, traditional religious principles, values, and rituals are what is helpful in times of crisis or uncertainty. For others, this may not be the case. Chaplains support people in voicing what is relevant in their lives and what they need. A chaplain’s role is to connect people internally with their human agency, not to judge or proselytize, and to do no harm.

There is a need to educate executives at the various institutions where chaplains serve to better understand the unique role of the chaplain. The chaplain is often a religious leader within their institution. A chaplain can be a powerful reminder of the Sacred, the Divine, or other sources of spiritual or religious meaning. Historically, the image of a chaplain has been a white male priest or minister who shows up to offer a prayer when someone is on their death bed. Today’s chaplains are from diverse cultural, religious, and spiritual backgrounds.

The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab and its partners are working to re-educate communities about what chaplains do, who chaplains are, and where chaplains serve. Through partnerships and collaboration, the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab is a bridge for institutions where chaplains work or volunteer, theological schools, CPE programs, community organizations, and board certification entities to expand the circle of conversation about chaplaincy as a profession.

From these dynamic conversations within diverse communities, best practices around education and innovation can emerge to address the changing model of chaplaincy. The issue of demand versus supply will naturally be a component of discussion as more executives and leaders within the institutions where chaplains serve have an invested interest in further developing the support and care provided by the chaplain.

In today’s culture, where people can become isolated due to technological advances that require less and less human engagement, chaplaincy, spiritual care, or a connection to what speaks compassion to one’s heart can improve lives. Chaplaincy is a vocation that has a clear pathway to connect with people from various cultural, faith, or spiritual backgrounds. What is meaningful for people is as diverse and beautiful as humanity itself.

**About Tahara Akmal**

Tahara Akmal is an ACPE Certified Educator and board-certified chaplain with APC. Tahara made history as the first Muslim woman since ACPE’s inception in 1967 certified by ACPE to teach chaplaincy. Tahara is an Adjunct Professor at Moravian Theological Seminary, a Visiting Faculty member at Bayan, and a PhD student at Alvernia University.

**KIRSTIN BOSWELL FORD**

As a chaplain and an anthropologist/sociologist of religion, I believe that moving to a demand-centered understanding of chaplaincy is a key shift that will have strong implications for the future of the field. Before investing time and resources in continuing the traditional conversations around how chaplains are recruited and trained, we must focus on understanding the demand for the skills that chaplains traditionally embody. We
must seek to understand the demographic landscape so that we can adequately and precisely meet a demonstrated need.

As major studies on the current religious landscape have outlined, more and more Americans are stepping away from traditional understandings of religion and are increasingly absent from the traditional spaces in which religion has been practiced. Despite this, the need for making meaning out of an increasingly chaotic world and one’s place in it is a need that will not go away.

Chaplains must look to humankind’s expressed needs and be nimble in our abilities to meet those needs in innovative ways and in nontraditional spaces. This question of how the work of chaplaincy must change with the changing demographic landscape of the United States is a crucial one. To be rigid in this regard will lead to the field’s obsolescence.

It may be necessary to move away from any and all previous understandings of chaplaincy.

What made the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab and Fetzer Institute sponsored gathering groundbreaking was that participants came from a variety of sub-fields, perspectives, and backgrounds and had varying types and levels of preparation for the work, yet we shared a common interest in the spiritual care of human beings.

The cross-pollination within conversations in similar settings will hopefully allow for groundbreaking ideas and best practices from one segment of the profession to make its way into other sub-fields. The conversations did not demean the work by ignoring the particularity necessary to make spiritual care meaningful and genuine in its varying contexts, but were able to investigate the commonality of the field as a whole.

The demand-centered focus is crucial, and all of these conversations about particularity and commonality across subfields are irrelevant without a thorough understanding of the needs the field of chaplaincy intends to meet.

In order to truly and honestly understand this, it may be necessary to move away from any and all previous understandings of chaplaincy and look comprehensively at current psychological and sociological understandings of the human condition and how we as human beings are coping with issues of loss, uncertainty, fear, illness, and mortality, to better understand how to build an innovative chaplaincy model.

We who are invested in this field must then be ready to respond to the demographically supported demands for spiritual care in an uncertain age.
**About Kirstin Boswell Ford**
Reverend Kirstin C. Boswell Ford is Associate Dean of Student Support Services at Brown University. Reverend Boswell Ford has served in congregational ministry for almost twenty years and is an American Baptist clergyperson holding a Master of Divinity from the University of Chicago Divinity School.

She is currently completing her PhD, also at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where her writing focuses on Womanist Theology and analyzing the call narratives of African American clergywomen.

**WENDY CADGE**

I am convinced, as a sociologist, that American religious life and many of the ways people find and create meaning are changing, and will continue to change, largely away from traditional churches, mosques, and synagogues and into more flexible forms. Many of the ideas coming from these institutions are powerful but their delivery systems are out of date in today’s spiritual and religious ecology. Chaplains have always had alternate delivery systems that may be particularly well-suited for today’s contexts as they meet people where they are, as they are, and journey with them at different points in their lives.

To strengthen the most effective work chaplains do with individuals and institutions, I am also convinced that we must start with demand. It is too easy to let old models of service delivery cloud the real and present places where the skills chaplains bring - deep listening, presence, bridging communities, improvisational ritual and others – are most needed in today’s world.

*The language of chaplaincy is too old fashioned, not accessible, and shuts down possibilities for some.*

We have learned in recent months about Border Patrol agents and those being detained by ICE looking for chaplaincy support and being unable to receive it. Social isolation is becoming an epidemic among people of all ages and pilot efforts to provide chaplaincy support to home-bound elders show promise.

Traditionally college-aged students are suffering from mental health issues in record proportion, some of which, we believe, are existential questions chaplains are uniquely trained to support. And the needs of people and pets facing the end of their lives and those journeying with them remain pressing. In some of these places there is actual demand for chaplains. In many more there is a demand for the work that skilled chaplains bring.

I am very aware that the word “chaplain” is recognizable for some people and institutions and decidedly not for others. It may open up opportunities in places like the military, healthcare, and corrections that have long had chaplains and understand who and what they do – when and if those interactions have been positive.

In other settings like tech companies, among millennials, and in less traditionally religious geographies, the language of chaplaincy is too old fashioned, not accessible, and shuts down possibilities for some.
There are also important, unanswered questions about how the language of chaplaincy is heard by non-Christians, non-Protestants, and people who are not white, which must be understood intersectionally in order for this work to move forward.

About Wendy Cadge
Wendy Cadge is Professor of Sociology at Brandeis University. Wendy founded and co-directed the Transforming Chaplaincy Project from 2015 to 2019 and in 2018 launched the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab. An award-winning teacher, she has published more than seventy-five articles and raised more than $6.5 million in support of her own research and teaching and that of colleagues. On campus she is Senior Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives and the Social Science Division Head in the School of Arts & Sciences.

MARGARET GRUN KIBBEN
The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab has taken the initiative to explore formally questions that have surrounded chaplaincy for decades:

— Who are chaplains?
— Whom do they/should they serve?
— What are the qualifications and standards for chaplaincy?
— What difference do they make?

There are many elements that contribute to the answers to these questions. The conversation at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo served to tease out those elements in a way that was sensitive to the variety of contexts and missions that were represented. While both the discussion and this report highlight the need for a better understanding of demand, an intentional focus on supply should not be ignored. Even though today’s environment has revealed a decline in religious affiliation, it has not demonstrated a diminishing need for spiritual care.

Properly preparing and equipping chaplains is even more critical to enable them to discern the need, i.e., the demand. Ensuring that chaplains have an accredited background that has introduced them to historical contexts and current concerns ensures that chaplains can perceive in changing times the timeless questions and enduring need.

This kind of concerted cooperation would contribute to a profession committed to high-velocity learning and collegial support.
The idea of defining chaplaincy is worth exploring. Because the concept of chaplaincy is both varied and foreign to many, any attempt to explain both the work and the value of chaplains would certainly serve to enhance the effectiveness and the reputation of the profession.

This will require hard dialogue about requirements and standards – with voice given to those identified and emerging demand signals which may not necessitate a “fully qualified professional,” as we define it today, to meet them. Are there differing levels of care that can be met with varying levels of credentialing?

Likewise, any discussion of requirements and standards has to take into account the countless contexts in which chaplains are called to serve. These contexts are specific environments which demand (even require) different skills, preparation, and qualifications.

The value in acknowledging these different contexts is in the collaboration of each sector sharing best practices, lessons learned, and effective innovation. In an arena such as the one the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab is proposing, this kind of concerted cooperation would contribute to a profession committed to high-velocity learning and collegial support.

None of this is possible if the organizations that employ or utilize chaplains have no “skin in the game.” Stakeholders are crucial in contributing to defining the need for, and underscoring the value of, chaplains to their organization.

Any research that comes out of these initial conversations must include input from the “end-users”, i.e., employers, employees, clients, or patients. And when the results of this research reveal the indispensable value of chaplaincy to the organization, the financial investment in this resource should reflect the institution’s unconstrained commitment. The questions have been out there forever. Based on the enthusiasm and devotion of those already in the conversation, the answers are just over the horizon.

About Margaret Grun Kibben
Margaret Grun Kibben recently retired as the U.S. Navy’s 26th Chief of Chaplains, having served her call to chaplaincy for 35 years. Her career spans both Navy and Marine Corps assignments at Newport, Rhode Island; Quantico, Virginia; Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia; and San Diego, California.

Dr. Kibben served both ashore, at sea, and abroad, with several deployments to the Mediterranean as well as Norway, Turkey, and Afghanistan. Currently, she is the owner of Virtue In Practice, providing executive advisement regarding moral, ethical, and spiritual leadership.

ALLISON KESTENBAUM
The challenges facing chaplaincy are well-stated and compellingly summarized in this document. It is a call to action to professionals and anyone who cares about holistic, meaningful care of humans.
As the profession and its advocates and allies move forward, some important additional considerations include:

1) Constantly reevaluating diversity and who is at the planning and decision-making "tables" and how care recipients are being represented. For example, while the Fetzer gathering was quite diverse, it would serve our community to ensure representation from an even greater variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Latinx leaders.

2) The encouragement to work more strategically with stakeholders is critical to the future of chaplaincy. At the same time, it is important for chaplaincy to clearly articulate and recommit to its core values, as well as what we are not willing to compromise for the sake of integrity of the care we provide.

About Allison Kestenbaum
Allison Kestenbaum is the CPE Program Supervisor and Palliative Care Chaplain for the Howell Palliative Care Service at UC San Diego Health. She conducts research about spiritual and palliative care and education. Allison was the first chaplain to receive a Cambia Health Foundation Sojourns Scholars Leadership Program Award (2018).

She earned her MA in Judaic Studies and MPA in Non-Profit Management and Public Policy from New York University. Allison is a Board Certified Chaplain (NAJC and APC) and a Certified Pastoral Educator (ACPE).

SUE PHILLIPS
In our work at Sacred Design Lab, we are constantly scanning the horizon for examples of places where ancient spiritual and religious practices address emerging needs with relevant delivery strategies. I don’t think there is any existing field better positioned to stride into this sweet spot than chaplaincy. Chaplains are already widely dispersed throughout multiple distribution systems (prisons, hospitals, higher ed, etc.), and tend to be better integrated into those multidisciplinary systems than many clergy and other religious professionals.

Many practitioners are well-versed in multi-religious engagement and language. There’s already a diverse array of training pathways into chaplaincy. The field of spiritual innovation has a great deal to learn from chaplains and chaplaincy.

At the same time, most chaplains are under-supported in their current contexts, and chaplaincy as a field is underdeveloped and lacking resourced convening entities from which to read the future and retool strategies. That’s why I think chaplaincy is extremely promising as we anticipate the religious jobs of the future, but that retrofitting existing delivery pathways is highly unlikely.

The field of spiritual innovation has a great deal to learn from chaplains and chaplaincy.
What I think chaplaincy as a discipline could do really well is anticipate those future spiritual/religious “jobs” and build experimental tracks between what exists now and what is emerging. My hunch is that future spiritual/religious jobs will be paraprofessional, authorized by communities instead of institutions, widely distributed, and increasingly virtual.

Without diminishing in any way the need for current chaplains to be supported in their current contexts, I think chaplaincy as a field would be best served by picking one or more of those likely elements of future leadership and getting really smart and creative about new strategies to move into those spaces and delivery pathways.

**About Sue Phillips**

Sue Phillips is the Co-Founder of Sacred Design Lab, a research and design consultancy working to create a culture of belonging and becoming. Sacred translates ancient wisdom and practices to help organizations create products, programs, and experiences that uplift social and spiritual lives. Sue is relentlessly delighted by liberating ancient wisdom to help solve gnarly problems.

An ordained minister and former denominational executive in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, Sue is passionate about inspiring spiritual flourishing, equipping people for meaning-making, and witnessing the transformation that happens when we get all up in life’s biggest questions.

**MICHELLE SCHEIDT**

Amidst the changing religious landscape in the United States, the demand for spiritual care is greater than it has ever been. People are increasingly disconnected from faith communities and religion, often not knowing where to turn with their spiritual needs. The idea of seeking out a traditional spiritual care provider falls outside of many people’s everyday experience.

Chaplains working across different sectors are well-equipped to meet the burgeoning need, but the traditional pathways for accessing a chaplain no longer work for many. Chaplains bring an important and much-needed gift; however, we need new ways of conceptualizing spiritual care and new delivery mechanisms that meet people where they are. That might be in non-traditional places such as downtown storefronts, arts venues, conferences, festivals, or other places where people gather for reflection, renewal, or learning. How about a chaplain at the gym or a local tavern?

*Many spiritual care providers struggle to find the right language to connect with people.*

In addition to place-based concerns, language can also be a challenge. Conventional religious vocabulary no longer works for everyone. Ways of speaking about meaningful experiences and practices have changed, and many spiritual care providers struggle to find the right language to connect with people. The sector needs space to explore and test new ways of describing inner work and deep personal experiences such as the search for
meaning, appreciating wonder, personal growth, ethics and values, life purpose, healing, and other core spiritual experiences.

The Fetzer Institute is proud to collaborate with the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab to host this important conversation, foster connections, and inspire new ways of thinking about the work of spiritual care. We look forward to continued dialogue about future research and piloting new ways of addressing the spiritual care needs of diverse constituencies.

**About Michelle Scheidt**  
Michelle Scheidt serves as Senior Program Officer for the Spiritual Formation team at the Fetzer Institute. Her research interests include spiritual formation, LGBTQ spirituality, and spirituality among people who identify as spiritual-but-not-religious.

Michelle’s current portfolio includes projects related to development of non-traditional spiritual communities; new forms of chaplaincy supporting people who are not connected to religion; network building among retreat centers, nationally and internationally; creating diverse opportunities for spiritual practice and individual spiritual growth; and connecting spiritual seekers with wisdom from the religious traditions.

**ASHA SHIPMAN**  
In my mind the work of chaplaincy is the work of souls walking alongside and caring for other souls. It requires a forward-facing, world-embracing, and courageous stance (courageous partly because chaplaincy is equated with religion and religion suffers from bad PR right now). But it also includes more personal forms of courage.

These include the ability to accept and deconstruct our own responses to human experience and the willingness to reflect on the motivations behind our worldviews. Often people come to us in their deepest vulnerability. They come to us in good faith and we must earn their trust by tending to ourselves properly so we may offer a pillar they can lean against.

Traditional religious concepts like the Center Pole, Yggdrasil, the Axis Mundi, Mount Meru, the Shiva Lingam and the Tree of Life are all examples of spiritual axes around which the world(s) turn. Chaplains function in a smaller but still essential sense as the more readily available oaks offering open branches full of safe perches with the invitation to view the world from a slightly different angle.

*Surrounded by rock, wood, glass, and wintry Michigan light we sat with ears fully perked and open to each other’s hearts, souls and minds.*

We met together surrounded by the woods of the Midwest: thirty chaplains from many different faiths, vocations, life herstories and histories and geographic realms to discuss the state of chaplaincy. Surrounded by
rock, wood, glass, and wintry Michigan light we sat with ears fully perked and open to each other’s hearts, souls and minds. We talked of our work, our hopes, our obstacles, the people we hold close in our hearts. We held sacred silences so that we could consider significant questions: what is a chaplain? What do chaplains offer and what do they need? What best practices exist in the field?

All these questions are important as the field of chaplaincy expands and adapts to suit the changing cultural landscape of America. But what struck me most from this experience is that what chaplains need are other chaplains. We need each other because the work of supporting other souls takes a toll, because the dark corners of human experience can be too much to bear alone, because it is too easy to imagine our situations are the norm and we need the opportunity to perch on a different tree.

We need the nourishment and insights from shop talk with those whose shop is different but relatable. Sometimes we need a different flame by which to meditate or to spark our creativity. When we are able to connect, as we did at this convening, we gain a larger sense of not only what is happening but what is possible.

Om Shanti

**About Asha Shipman**
Asha Shipman is an experienced educator, having taught for almost 20 years at the high school, college, and university levels. Asha joined the Yale University Chaplain’s Office in 2013 in a part-time position and in 2016 she became the second (and only female) Hindu chaplain with a full-time university appointment in the US. She speaks on panels and at events on and off campus and arranges programming that highlights Hinduism and Indian culture. She also creates blogs and podcasts on Hinduism and chaplaincy.

**ERIC SKIDMORE**

**Chaplains on Multi-Disciplinary Teams**
The question of context strikes me as highly relevant to the conversation we had at the Fetzer Institute. As a public safety chaplain, I find that many of my law enforcement chaplaincy colleagues are very interested in the work of other chaplains who do what they do, perhaps in another institution or another agency. This often leads to conversations about supply, focusing on training, education, and certification.

I find it far more fascinating as a public safety chaplain to collaborate with clinical counselors, trained peer team members, state and local police agencies, international agencies, and donors. This collaboration has led to the most profound outcomes for the 17,000 police officers we serve.

It is much less chaplain-centric and much more focused on chaplains as one discipline on a multi-disciplinary team. This team approach has led to the development of a system of care which did not exist in the law enforcement context 20 years ago.
Chaplaincy Training
As a traditionally trained clergy person serving a mainline Protestant church prior to becoming a full-time public safety chaplain, I always assumed that if we developed a public safety chaplaincy training program, it would be full of candidates who had a similar educational background as my own. This is not at all true.

It is more accurate to say that trainees reflect the polity and educational standards of the population we serve. Indeed, some candidates come to the chaplaincy training program with an MDiv (or other graduate degree) in hand. However, many come to chaplaincy training with no formal training, with an associate’s degree, with a bachelor’s degree, decades of service in public safety or some combinations of these degrees and experiences.

I think we do well to rethink our assumptions about the pathways into chaplaincy. For example, the cop with 30 years of service, an undergraduate degree, a public safety chaplaincy certification (18 months), and an extended unit of CPE is very well-prepared for service with our organization.

We will provide additional advanced training as such chaplains moves through their careers.

About Eric Skidmore
Eric Skidmore was hired by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division in 1997 to create a new program called The South Carolina Law Enforcement Assistance Program. He now serves as Program Manager for SCLEAP, which serves over 17,000 state and local police officers, staff, and family members, as well as state employees of the Office of the Attorney General.

Join the Conversation!
The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab seeks to continue bringing chaplains, educators and social scientists into a common conversation about the state of chaplaincy as a field, how it is changing with broader demographic shifts, and how we can spark the kind of innovation that will strengthen the work chaplains do. We are decidedly about action, not just talk, and are laser-focused on the human demand we seek to support chaplains in meeting on the ground.

We aim to continue the conversation started at the Fetzer Institute and — more importantly — to operationalize the vision. We will seek funding to enable us to hire the additional full-time staff we need to incubate creative ideas about chaplaincy, experiment with those that have promise, and accelerate and scale those that make chaplains more effective in their daily work.

This is collective work that cannot succeed without collaborations among chaplains, theological educators, clinical educators, social scientists, members of the public, and the organizations to which we all belong.

If you would like to join this conversation, here are some ways to participate:
• If you have not done so already, please join the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab mailing list, connect with us on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter and write to us and tell us what you need.
• Consider organizing a monthly gathering — maybe a lunch or a coffee hour — for chaplains in your city or region. Check with local theological schools and CPE programs to see who is teaching about chaplaincy and invite them. Include chaplains working in sectors different from your own. Contact us and we will try to help you meet others in your city/region.

• Have coffee with a chaplain in a setting you know little about.

• Initiate a conversation with an educator about the skills and continuing education that would most help in your work.

Above all, keep your eyes open for opportunities where chaplains are needed to make a positive difference. This is “demand” and when you see it, name it, and think creatively with us about how to fund pilot projects like those for isolated elders, college students, the staff of community health clinics, and other settings of which you might be aware.

In the words of one participant at this meeting …

“We are making the road while walking it.”

Will you join us in paving the way?

The following individuals for joining us at this milestone gathering. We thank them for their time, generosity, and passion for spiritual care:

**Tahara Akmal**
Adjunct Professor, Moravian Theological Seminary
Visiting Faculty, Bayan
PhD Student, Alvernia University

**Kate Braestrup**
Chaplain, Maine Warden Service

**Claire Chuck Bohman**
Program Director, Sojourn Chaplaincy

**Wendy Cadge**
Professor of Sociology and Senior Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives, Brandeis University
Founder, Chaplaincy Innovation Lab

**Kirstin Boswell Ford**
Associate Dean of Student Support Services, Brown University

**George Fitchett**
Professor and Director of Research, Rush University
Department of Religion, Health, and Human Values
Cheryl Giles
Francis Greenwood Peabody Senior Lecturer on Pastoral Care and Counseling, Harvard Divinity School

Margaret Grun Kibben
Rear Admiral, US Navy (Ret.)
President, Virtue in Practice

Elizabeth Hakken Candido
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Co-Founder, Chaplaincy Innovation Lab

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CPE Program Supervisor and Palliative Care Chaplain, Howell Palliative Care Service, UC San Diego Health

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Sue Phillips
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Please visit us on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

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