

“The Spiritual Infrastructure of the Future”

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Introduction

Religion is really different now.

Have you noticed the churches for sale in your city and neighborhoods?

Are growing numbers of your friends, family members, neighbors and co-workers not religiously affiliated?

Think about the last wedding or funeral you attended. Was it officiated by a clergy member or was it a friend of the couple's as a Universal Life minister or the funeral director himself?

Religion in the United States is in the midst of a massive tectonic shift in its delivery system. Religion isn't going away but the congregations, local clergy and other traditional institutions through which our parents and grandparents engaged with religion, spirituality, and many of life's eternal questions are on the decline. While it varies some by geography, this is the case across the country and across specific religious traditions.

Where and how then are we – and our children – getting support with life's eternal questions. Questions like:

- Why we were born
- Why we die
- What happens after we die
- How we can best spend our time/ energy / money between birth and death?
- What is our purpose?
- Where and how we can find and keep community?
- How do we live and love in a world suffering with racism, polarization, hate, climate change, mental health crises?
- Some days the eternal question is just how to make it from this moment or diagnosis or problem to what feels like the next. Or in the words of my late grandmother “life is

just one damn thing after another” – especially after she got over 80 and regularly reminded us that “this getting old is for the birds.”

American religion is changing and I will share with you today three ideas on these changes that directly impact faith, health and wellness:

1. Idea number 1: These changes have been happening for some time and we are in a transitional – what the sociologist Ann Swidler would call “unsettled” - time right now. I suspect we will remain here for some time. These changes are more to religious and spiritual **delivery systems** through which we engage life’s eternal questions than to the answers to these questions.
2. Idea number 2: New delivery systems – what I am going to call the “**spiritual infrastructure of the future**” exist and are being built in sacred and secular spaces right now. I want to help us identify them and look with new eyes and broader perspectives. Many of us are already engaging with life’s eternal questions apart from religious and spiritual institutions – through therapy, exercise and yoga classes, time in nature, engagement with seemingly non-religious communities. Are these the spiritual infrastructure of the future?
3. Idea number 3: I don’t know what our spiritual infrastructure will ultimately look like – and this is America, it will always be in flux. I am convinced that learning how **chaplains and spiritual care providers** have and continue to do their work offers a glimpse of this future.

Before we talk about each of these ideas, let’s talk about what a chaplain is. “Chaplains,” are clergy or other religious guides or spiritual caregivers who serve people outside of churches or other houses of worship. They work in hospitals, the military, prisons, colleges and universities, retirement facilities, sports teams, airports, ports, and social movements. Before it closed, a chaplain traveled with the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus

Chaplains are required in the military, federal prisons and the Veterans Administration due to the constitutional guarantee of free exercise of religion. Barry Black is the U.S. Senate Chaplain and Margaret Kibben chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives. Chaplains are also present in a growing number of other institutions – social movements, social service organizations, for profit workplaces. In the United States they date to the Revolutionary War and grew dramatically in healthcare in the early 20th century.

At the beginning chaplains were all white Protestant men. Today, chaplains today include people of all gender and racial backgrounds, all religious backgrounds, and a range of genders and sexualities. They are no longer M*A*S*H’s Father Mulcahy but all of those profiled in the Lab’s [THIS is What a Chaplain Looks Like](#).

I know here at Chautauqua you have a chaplain of the week – many of whom are clergy who lead congregations. Survey data shows that about 14% of congregational clergy also work as

chaplains mostly in hospitals, fire and police departments. Many more religious leaders work as chaplains without also working in local congregations – more on this shortly.

Chaplains spend most days working with people who are not like them - across religious traditions including nones; with other professionals who are not chaplains; and with people who are not required to spend any time with them and can send them away. Research shows that those who engage with chaplains feel emotionally supported, not-judged, and helped in some of their most difficult moments. A lot of what chaplains do does not look anything like traditional religion. Much of it is improvisational and supports people's spirits.

We can learn something about the spiritual infrastructure of the future from chaplains because **chaplains have always done their work – caring for people's spirits – through a different kind of delivery system. It is that work and delivery system that can help us glimpse the future.** By introducing you to some chaplains, I think you will see how.

I'm going to use the words religion and spirituality interchangeably this afternoon. If we were in a classroom at Brandeis University where I teach, we would spend a week pulling apart these terms. For me, the terms religion and spirituality are ways to describe how we tend to our own and one another's' spirits. The word "spirits" makes me giggle. Are we talking about the spirits of departed loved ones? Ghosts? Fancy alcohol? For me, our spirits are like our fingerprints: unique, distinctive, what the Quakers call the "inner light" or divine spark in all people. This is all bundled up in religion/spirituality. Let's walk together through the three messages I want you to leave here with today and begin to unbundle.

Idea 1. Changing Delivery Systems for Religion

First, changes in religion and spirituality have been happening for some time in the United States – our **delivery systems are changing**. What do I mean by delivery system? It is the way or process through which we get content. Delivery systems for much of what we do have changed - we watch Netflix and don't go to Blockbuster anymore, we order groceries and have them delivered rather than going to the grocery store, we do therapy online rather than in person, we scroll through our phones rather than watching the evening news.

Jessica Grose's *New York Times* [series](#) this spring describes well the changes that have been happening in American religious life.

- Religious affiliation is on the decline (though many people still pray)
- Churches are closing (especially mainline Protestant and Catholic ones)
- The nones (n-o-n-e-es) are growing and looking for community in new ways / places.

"People are looking for answers to life's eternal questions," Grose says in her fourth piece, "I believe that there is potential for new kinds of meaningful, lasting communities to be created in the coming years that have nothing to do with organized religion as we know it. I'm eager to

see what comes next, because I believe that out of this evolution, Americans can create something nurturing that is also suited to modern life.”

I live outside of Boston where a great many congregations have closed. My colleagues and I have counted about 225 since 2000. Their buildings are being turned into high end condos or raised because the ground is more valuable than the structure. Large numbers of Catholic congregations were closed and sold in the early 2000s as a result of the clergy sexual abuse scandal. What is happening in greater Boston isn’t generalizable to any other locality but google “church for sale” and you will be amazed at what you find – especially post COVID.

The system of delivering religious and spiritual content through congregations where people gather once or several times a week in person is declining. People can listen to religious services from home if they want, especially post pandemic. The end of most blue laws means more kids have soccer or other activities on Sunday mornings. Social media makes it easier for people to build some kinds of communities without ever leaving their houses.

Idea 2. What is the spiritual infrastructure of the future?

New delivery systems – what I call the “**spiritual infrastructure of the future**” exist and are being built in sacred and secular spaces right now but we might not see or name them as such. What do I mean by infrastructure? The organizational building blocks of society.

This infrastructure is already being built. For example, the [How We Gather Report](#) released in 2015 by the people now leading the Sacred Design Lab reported on millennials building community in potluck groups, yoga classes, and other ways. These groups – like the Harry Potter Alliance which evolved into [Fandom Forward](#) and met chapters across the United States to talk about how the Harry Potters provide insights for how live. These groups don’t necessarily call themselves religious but fulfill some of the functions congregations did for our parents and grandparents.

Another example, the [People’s Supper](#), for example, an initiative aimed to strengthen America’s civic fabric through intentional conversations anchored in personal story-sharing across diverse American groups was created by Rev. Jen Bailey in Nashville. Since 2017 they have, “brought more than 10,000 people together around dinner tables in over 100 cities and towns nationwide, in partnership with dozens of local government & civic groups, faith-based organizations and communities, colleges & universities, and workplaces.”

In a final example, the [Glean Network](#), through a program with Columbia University in spiritual entrepreneurship, has trained 375 people who have launched 165 ventures and raised \$64 million.

Let's think more about this through the story of Rev. Ann Kansfield. Her life experiences help us see the opportunities in shifting delivery systems.

Where were you on the morning of September 11, 2001? That morning, Ann was at home preparing for a job interview at the World Trade Center. She had graduated from Columbia University, worked as a broker in the financial industry, and was looking for the next job on what she calls "the hamster wheel." Instead, events of the day led her to "an empty time of feeling un-useful" and then to seminary.

Today, Ann is the first woman and first openly gay person to serve as a New York City Fire Department Chaplain. Ironically or perhaps prophetically, she has the job that opened with the death of Father Mychal Judge, the Franciscan Friar who was the first casualty of 9/11. In Ann's words, "Father Mychal is my mentor in this work, even from beyond the grave. He had an incredibly joyful faith and a deep capacity to love people. That is what I want to bring to the FDNY in my work. The stories of his work are also helpful to me in filtering out what is unimportant and helping me to focus on what is most important in this ministry."

What does she do as a fire department chaplain? She told me, "We act like the chief empathy officer... [pause] Value proposition is that chaplains have amazing utility value if they are creative enough to use it and if they have the space..." She continued, "It is rare that a fire chief in the field will call on chaplain. There was a case when a kid fell into the river and, sadly, was swept away. The chief needed his people back in service – they were needed for other calls. The parents were on the river bank and the chief called Ann saying, 'my guys won't go and leave those grieving parents until they are ready to leave.'" Ann came and sat with the parents for hours.

In another example, "At the height of COVID, an EMS chief called chaplains from the Bronx. He asked for them to go out and pray with their people to help them keep doing their job. I went to one fire house and visited and prayed with some people – one person's uncle had just died. Many had family members who were sick while they were having to work. The day before Easter I went to one station and asked if they wanted communion – I set up a table and had communion..."

I stopped her at this point to ask if the mostly male fire fighters would take communion from her, a queer woman, "All the rules get thrown out the door on the battle field," she told me. "Any time they are at a point when they are really at a loss – when their back is against the wall is a great time to call a chaplain."

Ann is also one of the pastors at Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn.

How do Ann's experiences help us see changing delivery systems?

As religion shifts and changes, people have existential and spiritual needs. Some continue to attend congregations – legacy institutions – and others are met by chaplains in fire departments, hospitals, and other settings. Chaplains tend to their spirits in these moments – sitting with them, coming alongside, offering them water and tissues and sometimes for some people prayer. More and more religious leaders are bi-vocational like Ann serving a congregation and in another role. That work – quietly, intimately around the edges – nurtures well-being, health and our spirits.

Now let's move on to the final idea 3 – what we can learn from chaplains.

COVID.

The ways chaplains work was never clearer than during COVID. Newspapers described chaplains running towards the dying. I got a lot of calls from reporters during this time and I reminded them first that chaplains don't run – they walk, sometimes urgently, but they walk. More importantly, I told them, chaplains are not new – they have always been there working intimately, privately, relationally under the radar. COVID shined a light on this work especially as at many healthcare institutions their work shifted from patients to staff.

Rocky Walker, a staff-chaplain at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City during the pandemic described his work in the national media saying. "I spend a lot of time trying to make sense of things that just don't make sense" he told a reporter, "The fact that you can't be next to your loved one, the fact that so many of our patients that are dying — their family members are recovering from COVID, so they're actually mourning in isolation because no one can be around them."

He reported feeling closer to death in the midst of COVID-19, than he did thirty years ago when serving on the front lines of Operation Desert Storm in Iraq. "I feel like I'm much closer to death now than I was then. Back then I was a field artillery lieutenant," Walker explained, "With the COVID deaths today... These are all not just Americans, but these ... are innocent people."

A national survey conducted in the United States in March of 2019 found that 21% of the American public had contact with a chaplain in the past two-years, more than half in or through healthcare organizations. These findings were confirmed in 2022 in a survey we conducted with Gallup which showed that 18.6% of the public has interacted with a chaplain. The majority of those who interacted did so in a hospital or other healthcare setting (54.7%), in palliative care or hospice (13.8%) – that is two-thirds of the respondents.

If these number are right that is 52 million people who had contact with a chaplain, 35 million through healthcare organizations including hospice and palliative care. These chaplains are

the ones who are there when the bad test results come back, staff have to withdraw care for the first time, a beloved staff member dies unexpectedly.

I was not able to interview patients when I did the research for *Paging God* but in subsequent research we have done so. In interviews, people who had interacted with chaplains told us how we chaplains offered social (listening), emotional (comfort), and functional (practical religious support) components of care.

Karla met a chaplain while her brother-in-law was dying, described how the chaplain was able to comfort her and her family.

His name was Pastor Paul....He was a wonderful man. He was very helpful and comforting. I found his presence to be amazing when it came time to speak with my mother-in-law about the situation....He was just there to help in any way that he could....He became part of the support system. He was there more than once. He came and he stayed with us from the time that the entire family arrived until the life support was disconnected and my brother-in-law's heart stopped.

Grayson described what he found comforting about chaplains: “Chaplains, they try not to give the big words [like a therapist]. They try to bring out the meanings and stuff.... They’ve tried to show you where you can find peace and comfort.”

Patty also found comfort in a chaplain’s words: “I guess it was about 11 years ago I almost died in a car accident and there was a chaplain that came to see me several times, and really brought me a lot of comfort...”

Listening to how Ann with the New York Fire Department, Rocky at Mount Sinai during COVID, and unnamed chaplains in words of care recipients speak about the value of chaplains points to come of the ways chaplains nurture spirits and well-being. [pause]

What do I see?

- Chaplains being central to health and wellness in our healthcare institutions (and others)
- Chaplains being present in a great many hospitals and having contact with millions of people supporting wholeness, healing and hope.
- Chaplains talk about being present by which they mean not just being physical present but making space for people where and as they are – accompanying them – what chaplains who work in ports call coming alongside
- Chaplains do this across religious and all aspects of difference as what Chris Seiple and his colleagues at the Templeton Religion Trust call “covenantal pluralism” – “engaging,

respecting, and protecting one another, without necessarily regarding one another's' beliefs or behaviors as equally true or right."

Conclusion

To conclude, religious and spiritual **delivery systems** are changing in the United States. Religion is always changing but these changes may be bigger than others as the traditional building block of local religious life – the congregation – declines in many ways and places.

A new **spiritual infrastructure** exists and is being built but it doesn't always have a label on it that says religion or spirituality. Sometimes the label says something else or there is no label at all but it is where people are going to engage around life's eternal questions.

Chaplains have something to teach us about alternative delivery systems that support whole person care and wellness and this spiritual infrastructure of the future - Ann Kansfield at the New York City Fire Department and Rocky Walker at Mount Sinai Hospital during the pandemic. They show us what it looks like to offer support on demand, in life's most delicate, vulnerable moments when the line between what is and will be is at its thinness.

I began to see much of what I shared today in the late 2010s while working on a book about the everyday work of chaplains. Interviewing national chaplaincy leaders. This work led me, with several colleagues, to launch the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab in 2018 to bring chaplains, theological educators, clinical educators and social scientists into a broader conversation about spiritual care in the United States. Pitch a big tent and invite everyone in – how can we best serve our suffering world – care for the caregivers – focused on chaplains.

We are stepping back now in our work to ask broader questions now just about chaplains but about the spiritual infrastructure of the future and we need your help. We are starting to map what is closing and what is opening to name what is happening more generally.

We made a decision when we started the Lab to offer everything we could for free. Look at our website, join our mailing list, if you are a chaplain or a religious leader join our private Facebook group which we think is the largest gathering of chaplains in the world with 4400 very thoughtful and respectful members. We are a small staff and raise every penny that supports our work. I am close to the limits of my skillset and we need the skills I think some of you have to take the next big steps.

There is so much to be done and big challenges we need your help to grapple with. Challenges like:

- How do we build business models to support spiritual care outside of traditional churches and other institutions?
- How do we redirect the resources of declining delivery systems (congregations) to new ones? I asked some mainline Protestant theological schools that were closing to consider giving us some of their endowment – especially in healthcare chaplains are the legacy of mainline Protestantism – their Board chairs and presidents did not think this was a good idea!
- How do we package and market care for the spirit for today's ear that maintains the wisdom of the world's religious traditions? Could a subscription model like for Netflix work? We get a call at the Lab at least once a month from someone who wants to build 1-800 dial a chaplain and, to date, they all fail. Does one of you have the startup expertise to know how to make this fly?
- How do we build a national marketing campaign around care for our spirits?

We recently completed a [gap analysis](#) to show the gap between the need for spiritual care and the places and ways it is currently available. We will release a strategic plan this fall that outlines a way forward – not for chaplains but for the work of spiritual care which has to be all of our work – of nurturing and supporting our own and one another's spirits. Please join us – with your talents, your advice, ideally your volunteer hours to help us build the spiritual infrastructure that will nurture our and our children's spirits in the future. We need to turn our almost five-year old little start up into a broad national coalition of leaders and organizations committed to advancing care for our spirits as a part of whole person care in healthcare and the military and facilities for the unhoused and vet clinics. We need to do this not for its sake but because efforts to address social loneliness, the mental health crisis generally, and other pressing social issues will fail without tending to our spirits.

Finally, my favorite story about the impact chaplains can have. This time from chaplain Meg who I write a lot about in my book *Paging God*. This is a story about miracle babies – to help us see once again, the shift in perspective chaplains offer and to encourage all of us to think about the kinds of miracles we want to be.

It was not unusual to hear nurses refer to some patients as “miracle babies” in the NICU at City Hospital. These babies survived despite poor medical prognoses. Their healings were miraculous, nurses told me, but they differed in what they saw as the source of the miracles. For some, these were miracles of medical science. In Nancy's words, “I don't think it's a miracle like they talk about with the saints and all that stuff. . . . It is a miracle that our doctors and nurses and staff can do. . . . We're a very good hospital with a good reputation, and we can do miraculous things. . . . It's not like somebody came down and put a magical sprinkle on to make the baby go, you know, a certain way.”

Other nurses were less sure of the source of miracles, and still others attributed these healings to divine sources. “I guess if anything, it always goes back to God,” Tamara said. Another nurse,

Hannah, spoke of a miracle that happened in another ICU. “I can’t even tell you the whole story because it was a while ago. But some of the nurses actually went to Rome because this person [who facilitated the miracle] was a [Catholic] nun, I guess, and sainted or something.”

While nurses in the NICU talked about the source of miracles, pediatric chaplain Elizabeth, like the chaplains at Overbrook, tended to ask broader questions about what a miracle is and what makes something a miracle. When I spoke with Chaplain Meg about the so-called miracle babies, she responded by thinking about what makes something a miracle. “I see miracles here every day,” she told me. “Whether others see them as miracles, I don’t know. I think it’s very subjective. I think a miracle is in the eye of the beholder.”

Meg went on to talk about a young woman she met at Overbrook years earlier who was born with a congenital heart defect. She was not expected to live, but she did for more than twenty years. She had several successful surgeries, Meg remembered, and married and lived a relatively normal life. Meg met her while she was waiting for a heart-lung transplant, which did not come in time. After she died, “her mother felt like . . . it had all been for naught. And you know, I said, well, I’m not so sure I agree with you.” When her mother asked why, Meg explained, “I think you had a twenty-five year miracle. This was a child that you didn’t expect to ever come home. You had her for twenty-five years. And not only did you have her for twenty-five years, but she was able to live and have a very functional life. She knew what love was about. She knew what kindness was about. That’s a miracle in my mind.”

Turning from her story back to me and the miracle babies, Meg said, “I think most people . . . are looking for the big miracle. And I think most miracles are not big, they’re small. They come in the minute facts of life. . . . Sometimes they all come together, . . . so that you get a big miracle, but it doesn’t happen very often. Usually they’re little things that happen. You know, a patient has a good day who has been absolutely miserable and non-communicative with the family, and the family doesn’t think they’re ever going to have a chance to say goodbye. . . . That’s what I think of as miracles.”