

Summary Report:

Spiritual Care Innovators Gathering at the Guest House



CHAPLAINCY
Innovation Lab

Overview

This gathering surfaced a shared conviction that spiritual care and chaplaincy are part of a larger emerging ecosystem of spiritual innovation, and that the group should not allow the event to become a one-time “mountaintop experience” without follow-through. Participants repeatedly framed the moment as one of emergence: enough energy, imagination, and alignment exist to continue building relationships, but not through a heavy centralized structure or a premature attempt to define a rigid new field.

The background paper reinforced this framing by describing spiritual innovation as an emerging sector rooted in historic wisdom traditions, growing in response to widespread loneliness, disconnection, declining religious affiliation, and unmet spiritual needs. It also named the central challenge that innovators are often isolated, under-resourced, and difficult for the public to find, even as spiritual longings remain strong.

Key Themes & Ideas

Theme 1

Participants emphasized that the real starting point is not promoting chaplaincy as a profession but naming the spiritual longings people already carry: longing for meaning, rootedness, belonging, resilience, care, and connection. Several participants argued that public understanding will improve only when spiritual care is linked to these lived needs rather than introduced first through institutional language that many people do not recognize or trust.

Theme 2

A second major theme was that chaplaincy has a persistent public relations and vocabulary problem. Participants noted that many people do not know what chaplains do, healthcare staff often misunderstand the role, funders do not have a clear lexicon for the work, and even chaplains themselves do not fully agree on how to describe their practice. This concern aligns with the ecosystem analysis, which warns that vocabulary remains contested across traditions and that storytelling and public connection are major gaps in the current landscape.

Theme 3

Participants also stressed that spiritual care must be understood as ecosystem work rather than isolated professional labor. Small-group discussions favored images such as ecosystems, honeycombs, pods, and local cohorts rather than a single national apparatus, highlighting the value of peer learning, regional collaboration, and cross-sector partnerships in higher education, healthcare, military settings, street chaplaincy, and community-based care. This resonates with the background document's description of seven interconnected domains in the spiritual innovation ecosystem, including field builders, innovators, schools, denominations, funders, researchers, and storytelling platforms.

Theme 4

Another strong thread was the need for sustainable economic models. Participants named funding scarcity, dependence on soft money, the absence of clear philanthropic pathways, and the challenge of building viable careers in spiritual care, especially for freelancers and younger innovators. Instead of assuming a single salaried pathway, discussion turned toward portfolio-based work, local fundraising strategies, skill-sharing, business-model training, and resource exchanges that could help innovators sustain themselves while advancing the work. The ecosystem paper echoes this concern, identifying financial sustainability, new funding models, organizational development, and leadership support as core sector needs.

Theme 5

The gathering also gave sustained attention to ethics, power, and inclusion. Participants named the harms caused by poor chaplaincy practice, the exclusion of Black, queer, and other marginalized communities, and the danger of tokenizing marginalized innovators rather than truly centering their knowledge and leadership. The background paper similarly identifies risks of appropriation, exclusion, and the need to build a broadly inclusive field with strong leadership from those historically pushed to the margins.

Next Steps Crafted by Participants

Participants proposed a practical next phase built around low intensity but intentional connection. Instead of launching a complex national infrastructure immediately, they suggested regular Zoom gatherings, selective subgroups or pods, possible use of existing platforms such as Chaplain Treehouse, and a simple communication rhythm that would keep people connected without overwhelming them.

They also identified several concrete near-term actions for the next three months. These included inviting each participant to submit one to two paragraphs of takeaways and commitments, forming a small steering committee to help coordinate what comes next, mapping what participants most need and what they can contribute, and encouraging small pilot projects that can be tested in each person's sphere of influence and then reported back to the group.

Participants named specific project ideas that could become early collaborative experiments. These included a webinar on the seven domains of spiritual innovation, shared templates for grants and op-eds, public-facing storytelling and media strategies, stronger training in how chaplains speak with journalists, locally rooted cohorts, alternative training pathways beyond traditional degree models, and student-led tools or platforms that could help aggregate resources and connect people across contexts.

Just as important, the group crafted a posture for moving forward. They called for beginning with small, achievable steps; grounding future action in real relationships; naming intention clearly at each gathering; centering accountability and anti-oppression; and building from the assets already in the room rather than waiting for a large external funding solution. In that sense, the clearest next step was not a finished blueprint but a shared commitment to continued experimentation, mutual support, and visible follow-through.