

What is a Chaplain?

from The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Rodney J. Hunter, Ed.

The term *Chaplain* refers to a clergyperson or layperson who has been commissioned by a faith group or an organization to provide pastoral services in an institution, organization or government entity. Chaplaincy refers to the general activity performed by a chaplain, which may include crisis ministry, counseling, sacraments, worship, education, help in ethical decision-making, staff support, clergy contact and community or church coordination.

Chaplaincy may be provided by an institution such as a general or mental hospital, prison, school, or college, by a business organization, or the armed forces. Although many faith groups and institutions use “pastoral care” synonymously with “chaplaincy services,” some prefer to use “pastoral care” to refer to any services performed by either ordained or non-ordained persons, but reserve “chaplaincy services” for activities performed by ordained ministers, priests, or rabbis. In the US Armed Forces only the terms “chaplaincy” and “chaplaincy services” are used.

The term chaplain originated with the appointment for personal ministry of a non-parochial cleric to a monarch, ecclesiastical authority or nobleman who owned a chapel. Chaplains then began serving in military units, and later in institutions such as hospitals, prisons, schools, and diplomatic facilities.

Chaplaincy has developed a variety of specialized forms in its various settings. Military, prison, hospital, and business chaplaincies for instance are generally viewed as distinct forms of specialized ministry with corresponding career tracks, and within some of these forms, such as hospital chaplaincy, chaplains often specialize further, for example in pediatric, geriatric, oncology, hospice, mental health, or chemical dependency ministries. In these settings the chaplain is generally recognized as a member of the institutional team functioning with specialized skills. Many chaplains, however, also consider it important to keep non-specialized care and concern for all persons related to the organization as the principal feature of their identity and work even when they also provide more specialized counseling. Their ministries emphasize caring relationships with staff, institutional authorities, and family members as well as the organization’s primary or majority population.

Chaplains may be employed on a full- or part-time basis. They may be compensated by the institution, by a denomination, church or synagogue, by a separate funding organization, or may contract their services individually or through a contracting organization. Many clergy also volunteer their services as chaplains, as many parish ministers do for local hospitals. Since the 1920s, many chaplains have been clinically trained to function in their particular type of facility. Chaplaincy organizations have been certifying chaplains for competency to function in specialized ministries since the 1940s.

Basic requirements for functioning as a chaplain usually include an ecclesiastical endorsement from the chaplain’s denomination or faith group, ordination or commission to function in pastoral care ministry, and the theological training expected by the chaplain’s denomination. Exact requirements vary by denomination and by institution and have been changing in recent years. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has not required hospital chaplains to be ordained since 1980, which opened this ministry to women. Since the 1920s, many chaplains have been clinically trained to function in their particular type of facility or ministry.

More...

‘Chaplain’: The Origins of the Word

One Story:

For centuries, clergy who provide care in institutional settings have been called chaplains. The word *chaplain* dates back to the Middle Ages, when *capella* referred to the cloak of the priest. Then, a chaplain was a priest who was assigned to a particular chapel, rather than to a church. While in the Middle Ages, monasteries were places of hospitality that cared for the sick, this was replaced in later years with sanatoriums and then hospitals. In later years, chaplain began being used to refer to any clergy who was assigned to a special duty or place or service other than the parish. In our current century, the significant growth of chaplaincy has paralleled the growth of institutions as a result of the needs of our society for more hospitals, prisons and mental health facilities.

Adapted from *Chaplaincies in Wisconsin Institutions* by John Rea Thomas

Another Story:

The word *chaplain* is derived from the Latin *capellanus* (from *capella* or chapel), via the Old French *chapelain*. *Capella* first appears in the Seventh Century writings of Marculfas, and is thought to derive from the temporary structure that the Kings of France used to house the cape of St. Martin of Tours, patron saint of chaplains. St. Martin of Tours, as a young Roman soldier, came upon a beggar freezing in the snow. Martin drew his sword, cut his uniform cloak in two, and wrapped half around the beggar. That night he had a vision of Christ, who appeared to him wearing the half cape. This vision compelled him to leave the military and seek baptism and the religious life. His holiness of life obvious, he was named Bishop of Tours (France) against his will, and agreed to go only if he could continue to live as a monastic. He was the first ‘founder’ of the parochial system, creating geographic parishes and thus bringing the church from the cities to the countryside. His cape, the half he retained after his meeting with Christ, was brought on military campaigns and honored as a sacred relic. The priests who accompanied the relic (and armies) were the *capellanus*, or ‘keepers of the cape.’

Sources: *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* and *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*