

Chaplaincy Innovation Lab explores demand-focused spiritual care

By WENDY CADGE

The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, with support from Templeton Religion Trust, has been engaged for several years in research about both supply and demand in spiritual care. Most recently, the Lab has been analyzing what it would mean and require to build an approach to spiritual care based on demand.



The Lab has done a lot to support chaplains since it launched in 2018, and it has focused almost entirely on chaplains themselves (i.e., supply), not on care recipients (i.e., demand). If we want everyone in the United States to have access to spiritual care, we need to think hard about revolutionizing our approaches so they are built based on demand and on sustainable business models.

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Who receives spiritual care?

First, this rethinking means considering spiritual care from the *perspective of care recipients*. Who are care recipients? Where are they? Where do they access spiritual care and/or chaplaincy? How do they experience interactions with chaplains? The information we gathered about these questions—through a national survey with Gallup in March 2022, and 50 follow-up interviews—is sobering.

- People in the United States do not have a consistent understanding of the term “chaplain.” Interviews suggest that people see the explicitly religious dimension of chaplains’ work (not the more general sense of presence that chaplains often mention) as what distinguishes them from other care providers.
- Between 18 percent and 44 percent of the public report interacting with a chaplain based on their understanding of the term. Some people understand the term to include local religious leaders and/or people who supported them through transformational experiences.
- The largest percentage of people interact with chaplains through healthcare organizations, and

there are few patterns by gender, race, religious affiliation, or other individual factors in who interacts with chaplains.

- Many of those who interact with chaplains are not sure when or if they would do so again.

Who employs chaplains and how do they structure them?

Second, this rethinking means considering spiritual care from the perspectives of organizations like the military, healthcare organizations, higher education, prisons, and so on that *employ chaplains*. Our research finds that employers want chaplains to receive more and better training in crisis intervention, moral injury, and religious diversity.

Third, it means thinking about *delivery systems*. Most people meet chaplains through organizations—mostly healthcare organizations—they are encountering for other reasons. The Lab receives many inquiries from people looking to start direct-to-consumer spiritual care or chaplaincy (mostly apps), but there are few cost-effective proofs of concept. Direct-to-consumer approaches require people to pay for spiritual care, another revenue engine, or philanthropic investments. We know the delivery systems through which people receive religious and spiritual content are obviously changing, and the business models needed to sustain these new approaches have not been well developed.

What we think

We engaged some of the country's leading chaplains, scholars, and educators in a conversation about demand-focused spiritual care last month (as part of a broader project that connects chaplains to the work of covenantal pluralism). *It was a hard conversation*. The experts are much more used to talking about how chaplains are trained—what we call “supply-side questions.” Our research names many challenges in training, however:

- It is organizationally complicated.
- There are no clear guideposts or delineated paths focused on specific skills in training.

- There are few agreements between educators and employers about what chaplains need to know (or space for consistent conversation about these questions).
- There is little standardization of chaplaincy coursework or training in theological schools.
- Training is lengthy, expensive, and, therefore, not accessible to some people and groups.

Supply, demand, and the gap in between

Last month, we released a gap analysis that names what we see as the gap between the demand for spiritual care and how chaplains are trained and deployed. Our analysis identified six gaps:

1. The public has *limited and inconsistent knowledge* of who chaplains are and what they offer: their value proposition is unclear to potential care recipients, some existing care recipients, and some of the organizations that employ them.
2. The *business model* is based on service provision through organizations whose primary missions are not spiritual care.
3. Opportunities to *serve people who are ill/suffering and their caregivers* (as two distinct groups with different needs and experiences) may not be fully realized.
4. Chaplaincy training/certification *does not operate as a well-coordinated network*. We estimate that half of the competencies for the MDiv are not relevant to chaplains. Training is costly and time consuming.
5. Educators and employers are *not regularly in conversation* and there are not mechanisms to address existing gaps in training around crisis intervention, moral injury, and religious diversity.
6. Endorsers are *gatekeepers* with little to no transparency and mechanisms for change.

We hope our research will help inform both educators and employers about the strengths of the field as well as where closer collaboration could help prepare students even better for careers in spiritual care. We invite you to join us in this conversation about how to build strategies

to close these gaps. Read the working papers on supply and demand, invite one of us to speak to your class or group, or share your feedback. The future of this work may depend on it.



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