WHO SAFEGUARDS THE CHAPLAIN?

Rethinking the Structures Around Institutional Chaplaincy

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Dedication

Hey Jude…..

And to all the chaplains who have been harmed while bringing pastoral care and compassion to the lost, the lonely and the incarcerated.

To those who sat beside people others had stopped seeing. To those who carried stories that could not safely be told elsewhere. To those who brought warmth into cold places, dignity into systems, hope into despair and human presence into environments shaped by rules, roles, security, hierarchy and control.

To those who were told not to rock the boat. To those who saw what was happening and discovered that seeing clearly could make them inconvenient. To those who became exhausted trying to reconcile expectations that were never theirs to reconcile.

To those who eventually walked away wondering whether they had failed.

May you know that being harmed does not, by itself, mean you failed.

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A Note on Scope

Institutional chaplaincy is diverse. A chaplain working in a correctional centre does not occupy exactly the same structure as a school chaplain, healthcare chaplain, military chaplain or workplace chaplain. Employment arrangements, accreditation, law, professional standards, religious authorisation and organisational culture differ across settings and jurisdictions.

This book does not argue that every institution harms chaplains, that every provider overreaches, or that every experience of exhaustion is structurally caused. Nor does it offer legal conclusions about particular employment arrangements. It offers a structural lens: a way of examining what happens when a person whose work depends upon trust, conscience, relational accessibility and pastoral independence is placed between organisations with different powers and interests.

The examples drawn from my own experience are not offered as universal proof. They are the places from which the questions emerged. Research, contemporary work-health-and-safety thinking and the history of institutional chaplaincy then help us ask whether those questions have wider significance.

The purpose is reform, not accusation. Healthy institutions should be able to use these questions to strengthen chaplaincy. Providers should be able to use them to examine their own practices. Governing bodies should be able to ask whether responsibility is sitting at the right level. And chaplains who recognise their experience in these pages may finally have language for tensions that have too often been described only as personal burnout.

The question running through every chapter remains deliberately simple: if chaplaincy exists to protect and restore the human within institutional life, what structures are required to protect the human being who carries that work?

The Human Being in the Middle

There is something unusual about a chaplain. Place a chaplain in a school, hospital, correctional centre, military unit, workplace or other institution and they occupy a space few other people occupy. They are inside the institution, but they are not entirely of the institution. They may be employed by one organisation while working every day inside another. They may be commissioned by a religious body, funded through another arrangement, accountable to institutional rules and simultaneously entrusted with intensely personal information by people who may understand the chaplain as being somehow separate from all of them.

That unusual position is often described as a strength. It can be. The chaplain can move toward the human being in ways that people carrying formal authority sometimes cannot. The student is more than a student, the prisoner more than an inmate, the patient more than a diagnosis, the employee more than a function and the soldier more than a rank. For a moment, the institutional category loosens and the person can be encountered more fully.

Institutions need rules, hierarchies, procedures, budgets, measurements, security, accountability and outcomes. Those things are not inherently hostile to humanity; often they are necessary to protect it. But systems classify. They decide who is a patient and who is staff, who may enter and who may not, who has authority and who must comply, what counts as risk, what can be recorded, what can be funded and what outcome is expected. Chaplaincy insists that the category is never the whole person.

That is why I have come to understand chaplaincy as a humanising presence. Human beings continue to experience grief, fear, shame, loneliness, moral conflict, spiritual questions, loss and hope in places designed primarily for other purposes. A chaplain can sit inside that gap without immediately turning the human experience into a case, task, diagnosis, disciplinary issue or measurable outcome.

But there is a second human being in that room: the chaplain. We speak readily about what chaplaincy offers an institution and the people within it. I want to ask what the arrangement requires the chaplain to absorb.

What if some chaplains are exhausted because the structures surrounding institutional chaplaincy are exhausting? What if disillusionment is not always evidence that a chaplain has failed to manage the emotional demands of pastoral care? What if we have constructed a role in which compassionate people are routinely required to absorb contradictions belonging to organisations with far greater authority than they possess?

This book began in lived experience. I have worked in institutional chaplaincy and found myself repeatedly confronted by questions that did not fit neatly inside the usual language of calling, resilience, boundaries or self-care. In public-school chaplaincy, I experienced tension between the pastoral purpose of the school placement and expectations coming from the provider and supporting churches. In correctional chaplaincy, I encountered the extraordinary privilege and responsibility of institutional access, and also the assumption that access entrusted to the chaplain could somehow become access for others.

Those experiences left me wanting to examine the architecture around chaplains. Who decides the purpose of chaplaincy? Who controls access? Who resolves disagreement between provider and host? What happens when the institution itself contributes to the distress the chaplain repeatedly encounters? Where does a chaplain go when the provider is the source of pressure? What does independence mean if exercising it threatens the placement?

The central argument of this book is simple: the chaplain should not be the site at which organisational contradictions are resolved. If organisations create competing expectations, organisations must resolve them. If institutions benefit from the trust, humanity, independence and relational accessibility of chaplaincy, then institutions and providers assume responsibilities for protecting the human being carrying those qualities.

The structural answer cannot rest with the chaplain alone. Before asking why a chaplain could not cope, we must ask what the chaplain had to cope with. Before sending another compassionate person into the middle of competing systems, we must ask who will safeguard the person we send in.

Chapter One - There Is a Human Being Here

Chaplaincy makes little sense if we understand human beings only in terms of organisational function. A hospital already has clinicians. A correctional centre has correctional officers. A school has teachers and administrators. A military organisation has commanders. A workplace has managers and human-resource structures. So why introduce another person?

Some human experiences do not fit comfortably within institutional functions. Grief does not fit neatly into a timetable, fear does not follow procedure and a crisis of meaning cannot necessarily be solved by a management plan. Loneliness is not a performance indicator. Shame cannot be processed through a form. Sometimes a person needs someone who will sit beside them without first assessing, managing, diagnosing or disciplining them.

That sitting-beside is deceptively simple. It communicates something profound: You are more than what this institution requires you to be. You are more than the thing that happened, the diagnosis you carry, the offence for which you are incarcerated, the rank on your shoulder, the mark on your report or the function written into your position description. There is a human being here. This is not sentimental. Human dignity has practical consequences. A person who feels seen may disclose what they would not disclose to someone they experience as part of the machinery around them. They may speak about fear, regret, grief, spiritual confusion, family breakdown, moral injury or despair. They may say the thing they cannot safely say in the ordinary channels of the institution. That trust is one of chaplaincy's greatest gifts, but it is also one of its greatest structural vulnerabilities.

The chaplain works inside an organisation while needing enough distinction from it to earn a different kind of trust. If the chaplain is perceived simply as management, discipline, intelligence gathering, recruitment or institutional messaging,

the pastoral relationship changes. The institution benefits from an independence it must also be willing to protect.

Yet institutions and providers can be tempted to value the very trust created by independence and then use it for other purposes. The host may want the chaplain to improve morale or quietly stabilise people after harmful experiences. Management may begin to treat the chaplain as an informal source of organisational intelligence. A provider may see the chaplain's presence as a pathway for broader ministry. A sponsoring church may assume that financial support creates some claim upon the population the chaplain serves.

This is where purpose matters. The pastoral relationship is not a hidden corridor through which other organisational interests may travel. The person receiving care is not a stakeholder return. Their vulnerability is not an opportunity. Their trust is not a resource to be repurposed.

If an institution wants a chaplain only so long as the chaplain never makes the institution uncomfortable, independence becomes conditional. If a provider values institutional access so highly that the chaplain learns not to raise concerns, independence becomes conditional. If a funding body believes its contribution creates entitlement to the people receiving chaplaincy, independence becomes conditional.

When independence becomes conditional, chaplaincy can quietly change its purpose. The humanising presence begins to serve the system that was supposed to make room for it. The question is no longer simply whether a chaplain is kind, competent or faithful. The question becomes whether the structure around the chaplain protects the conditions that allow genuine pastoral presence to remain genuine.

The category and the person

Institutional categories have effects. A category tells a system what to do next: the patient belongs on this ward, the student in this class, the prisoner in this classification and the employee in this reporting line. Categories make large organisations possible, but they compress human complexity. The danger begins when the system forgets that a category is a tool and begins treating it as the whole identity.

Chaplaincy makes room for questions that may have no immediate operational value: What has this meant to you? What are you afraid of? What are you grieving? What has happened to your sense of yourself? Where is God in this for you? What do you need someone to understand before they try to fix anything?

That is why the apparently modest act of listening can carry such institutional significance. The chaplain does not have to overthrow the system to humanise it. Sometimes the humanising act is simply refusing to allow the system's description of a person to become the whole truth about them.

Chaplaincy cannot be reduced to a generic wellbeing programme. Its work reaches into meaning, conscience, dignity, grief, hope, belonging and spiritual identity. These are dimensions of personhood, not merely emotional states to be improved.

An institution may recognise the value of this presence because its ordinary structures do not make enough room for it. If the institution then absorbs the chaplain completely into its own objectives, it risks losing the distinction it invited in.

A ministry of presence, not possession

Presence is sometimes misunderstood as passivity. It is not. To remain present to a human being without immediately turning them into a problem to be solved requires discipline. It resists the institutional impulse to classify, manage and conclude. Presence makes room for complexity before deciding what action, if any, is required.

Presence also establishes an ethical limit. If the relationship exists for the person, that person cannot quietly become a

means to somebody else’s end. Expectations to recruit, gather intelligence, improve compliance, protect reputation or manufacture a preferred institutional outcome can compromise the pastoral encounter.

This is where the humanising function becomes a safeguarding question. The chaplain needs enough structural protection to remain genuinely available to the person rather than gradually becoming an instrument of the organisations surrounding them.

The statement “There is a human being here” therefore has two directions. It points toward the student, prisoner, patient, employee or service member whose humanity may be obscured by institutional function. It also points back toward the chaplain. The person doing the humanising is not inexhaustible. They too can disappear beneath a category: provider representative, wellbeing resource, ministry worker, contractor or volunteer.

A humane model of chaplaincy must resist both reductions at once. It must protect the person receiving care from becoming an organisational object, and protect the chaplain from becoming an organisational resource to be consumed.

Chaplaincy appears where systems become impersonal

There is a historical pattern worth noticing. Chaplaincy repeatedly becomes important in places where human beings are gathered inside large systems: armies, prisons, hospitals, psychiatric institutions and other settings where function, order and institutional necessity can easily dominate the individual.

The British Army formalised an Army Chaplains' Department in 1796. Its contemporary description still centres pastoral care, spiritual support and moral guidance, and makes an important distinction: chaplains provide leadership but do not command. The chaplain travels with the institution and is deeply embedded in its life, yet the role is not identical to institutional authority.

The same pattern appears in NSW civil chaplaincy. Churches had long visited hospitals, prisons and other institutions, but by the late 1950s concern about the pastoral needs of people in psychiatric hospitals helped drive a more organised model. Callan Park was under intense criticism for overcrowding, poor accommodation and custodial conditions. Church

representatives argued that ad hoc pastoral visiting was insufficient. In 1959 government funding was approved for four full-time chaplains at Callan Park and Broughton Hall.

It is difficult to miss the symbolism. Chaplaincy was being strengthened in an environment where people could easily disappear into institutional custody. That history does not prove a single theory of chaplaincy. For me, it illustrates the central intuition of this book: institutional function is not enough. A system can treat, classify, confine, educate, deploy or manage a person and still fail to encounter the whole human being. The chaplain enters that remainder.

The outsider who is deliberately inside

The chaplain must be sufficiently inside the institution to reach people, understand the environment and function safely within it. At the same time, the chaplain must remain sufficiently distinct that the relationship can carry another kind of trust.

Standing between these worlds can create freedom, but it can also create exposure. The chaplain understands institutional realities that an external minister may never see, while hearing human experiences that senior institutional leaders may never hear. They can belong enough to be affected by the culture while remaining separate enough to notice what it normalises.

The official account may say the policy exists, while people say they do not feel safe using it. Support may be advertised, while asking for it carries a cost. Leadership may speak about wellbeing, while people describe being frightened of the leader.

The chaplain does not automatically know which account is complete. But they stand in a position from which the gap can become visible.

This gap between the system on paper and the system as lived is central to reflective safeguarding. Policies, codes and procedures matter. Safeguarding must also ask what happens to actual people when they encounter them.

Too far outside and the chaplain may lack access or understanding. Too far inside and the chaplain may become indistinguishable from the structures people need a safe place to discuss. The aim is to govern that tension: protect access and relationship while retaining accountability, independence and support.

Chapter Two - Two Organisations, One Chaplain

Institutional chaplaincy frequently places one person between two organisational systems: the host institution and the chaplaincy provider or religious organisation. Sometimes there are more - funders, churches, government departments, accrediting bodies and local management structures. Their desired outcomes may overlap. They may also diverge sharply.

I encountered this tension vividly while working in public-school chaplaincy. The school wanted pastoral care, the principal wanted support for students, and the students needed a trustworthy adult. Government requirements set boundaries around what I could and could not do. My provider, meanwhile, wanted stronger involvement from local churches.

I found myself being persistently pushed to facilitate greater church involvement within the school. From where I stood, this was inappropriate. It was not what the principal wanted, not what the school had engaged chaplaincy to provide, and not what the students had asked of me. The school had given me access for a particular purpose. My provider appeared to see that access as potentially extending to the religious organisations surrounding it.

Those were different understandings of the placement. The experience helped clarify a principle for me: access granted to a chaplain for pastoral purposes does not automatically confer access upon the organisation employing, funding, sponsoring or commissioning the chaplain.

I call this the Access-Purpose Boundary. Access is granted within a relationship and for a purpose. A school permits a chaplain to be present because a pastoral role has been agreed. A correctional centre grants access under controlled conditions for pastoral and spiritual care. A hospital permits access because patients may benefit from spiritual or pastoral support. The access belongs to the role as defined within that setting. It is not an asset that the provider can redistribute.

The structural problem becomes acute when the chaplain is left to negotiate these differences personally. The provider and host may give different instructions, while government requirements and the person receiving care place further limits on the relationship. The chaplain can be left trying to satisfy expectations they have no authority to reconcile.

This is not simply a boundary problem for the chaplain. It is a governance problem between organisations. If the host and provider have different understandings of the purpose of the role, those differences should be resolved before they are deposited into the practitioner. The chaplain should not have to defend the host institution's boundaries against their own employer, nor defend their employer's interests against the host.

The chaplain is embedded in the institution, authorised by another organisation and entrusted by the person receiving care. That three-way reality requires clear governance. Without it, the chaplain can become translator, negotiator, buffer and shock absorber between systems while still being expected to remain pastorally present.

The divided-accountability problem

The phrase 'two organisations, one chaplain' sounds administratively untidy. In practice it can become psychologically and ethically significant. Each organisation may assume its own expectations are obvious. The host thinks the chaplain is there to fulfil the agreed pastoral purpose. The provider thinks the chaplain also represents its values, relationships and mission. A sponsoring church may believe its financial contribution establishes a legitimate interest in what happens inside the placement. Government rules may place strict limits around all of them. This is divided accountability. Having several stakeholders is not itself the problem. The hazard arises when they understand the role differently and no one with sufficient authority has reconciled those expectations. The practitioner is left deciding, interaction by interaction, which instruction takes priority.

That decision-making carries consequences. Say no to the provider and the chaplain may appear uncooperative. Say yes and the host may regard the chaplain as breaching the purpose

of the placement. Accommodate a sponsoring church and the pastoral recipient may experience an agenda they never consented to. Refuse the request and the chaplain may be accused of being insufficiently missional.

These tensions do not originate with the student sitting in front of the chaplain. They arise from the organisational arrangement, and responsibility for resolving them needs to travel back upstream.

Funding without entitlement

Money complicates pastoral relationships because funding can create a felt sense of ownership even where no legal or ethical ownership exists. A church gives money to support a school chaplain. A provider depends upon donors. A government program funds a role. Each contribution may be essential. But the language of investment and return can become dangerous when applied to vulnerable people.

The pastoral return on funding chaplaincy is that care becomes possible. A student has access to support, a person in custody has someone who can sit with grief, a worker has a confidential place to speak, or a family is accompanied through crisis. The person is not the return.

This distinction needs to be taught explicitly because goodwill does not automatically produce good boundaries. A generous church may sincerely want to know how it can become more involved. A provider may sincerely want to strengthen community partnerships. Yet the chaplain's access cannot be the bridge unless the host, the purpose of the role and the rights of the people receiving care permit it.

The Access-Purpose Boundary gives the organisations a responsibility to state the limits in advance: your support enables the presence; it does not purchase the population. The chaplain should not have to negotiate those limits afresh with every stakeholder. This protects trust without treating churches or providers as enemies.

Chapter Three - This Is Not a Zoo

I encountered the same structural problem in a correctional centre, but in a form that made the principle impossible to miss. Access to correctional environments is necessarily controlled. Into that environment comes the chaplain, present within a highly controlled system without being primarily there to exercise control.

Almost immediately after I entered correctional chaplaincy, I experienced pressure from my provider to facilitate tours of the centre. A senior authority eventually expressed the problem very simply: “This is not a zoo for you to tour.” The sentence stayed with me because it named, in a few words, the entitlement I had been struggling to explain.

People in custody are not exhibits. Their environment is not an organisational experience offered to interested people because they happen to have a relationship with a chaplaincy provider. The fact that a chaplain has been entrusted with entry into a secure environment does not transform that privilege into a transferable benefit.

My access was not my provider's access. That sounds obvious when stated plainly. Yet the assumption beneath the request reveals something important about how chaplaincy can be understood by the organisations surrounding it. The provider may begin to think of the placement as something it possesses: our chaplain, our placement, our relationship, our access. But institutional access is usually granted for a tightly defined pastoral purpose. It is stewardship, not ownership.

Correctional environments make the ethical stakes especially visible because the people inside have limited freedom to remove themselves from unwanted attention. A person in custody cannot simply leave the environment. That asymmetry makes it even more important that pastoral access is not casually converted into organisational curiosity, ministry opportunity or stakeholder engagement.

The issue is larger than tours. The same principle applies whenever a sponsoring or employing body assumes that the chaplain can open doors for it. It applies to churches wanting contact with students, organisations wanting access to patient communities, management wanting information from employee conversations, and providers wanting institutional visibility through the chaplain's relationships.

The deeper question is who protects the purpose of the access entrusted to a chaplain. If the chaplain repeatedly has to resist their own provider to protect host boundaries and the dignity of the people inside, the organisations need to examine what their agreement has left unresolved.

Provider and host need to agree what access means, what it does not mean, who may use it and for what purpose. The chaplain should enter with those boundaries protected, rather than having to invent and defend them under pressure.

Governance should absorb the conflict

There is a practical lesson beneath this experience. If a provider wants something from a host institution and the host institution believes the request is inappropriate, the disagreement belongs between the provider and the host. The chaplain should not become the courier, negotiator or relational shock absorber. Practitioners can end up carrying this conversation because they are known to both sides. They are accessible, relational and want people to get along. Those qualities make it convenient to ask the chaplain to negotiate, but convenience is not governance.

A well-designed arrangement establishes who speaks to whom when interests diverge. It identifies the senior provider representative responsible for negotiating with the host. It makes clear that the chaplain's refusal to facilitate a disputed request will not be treated as disloyalty. It prevents the practitioner from being placed in the impossible position of choosing which organisation to disappoint.

The principle is simple: do not require a chaplain to resolve at practitioner level a conflict of purpose that belongs at governance level. Responsibility needs to reach the people who have the authority to resolve it.

Chapter Four - Safe Enough for Everyone Except the Chaplain

Accessibility helps chaplaincy work. A person may disclose something precisely because the chaplain does not feel like another arm of institutional authority. Security, surveillance and authority can change what people are willing to say. In some environments, pastoral trust therefore depends partly on how the chaplain is distinguished from those functions.

But another question follows: at whose cost? There is a dangerous leap between saying the chaplain needs relational independence from security structures and concluding that the chaplain can therefore be exposed to greater personal risk.

In correctional chaplaincy I became acutely aware of this tension. Other employees could have layers of security around them that were not experienced in the same way by the chaplain. There was a reason for that difference: the chaplain needed to be approachable. A conversation that feels watched or policed is a different conversation. Yet relational accessibility cannot become a justification for preventable vulnerability.

Relational accessibility must not be treated as permission for occupational exposure. A chaplain can communicate, “I am not here to police you.” The institution must not hear, “Therefore you require less protection.”

This principle extends beyond physical security. Psychological accessibility can also create exposure. Chaplains hear grief, trauma, anger, despair, moral conflict and stories of institutional harm. They may be deliberately positioned as the person who can receive what others cannot. That is a valuable role, but it creates psychosocial exposure that should be recognised structurally rather than treated as an inevitable cost of calling.

Faith does not extinguish workplace safety responsibilities, and compassion does not make a person indestructible. Calling does not cancel the protections that apply to the work. Organisations

still need to examine the physical and psychological conditions in which they ask a chaplain to practise.

The question is not how to eliminate all risk. No serious pastoral role can be made risk-free. The question is whether organisations have consciously identified the additional risks created by the way chaplaincy is designed, and whether they have taken reasonable responsibility for them instead of relying on the chaplain's goodwill, courage or spirituality to bridge the gap.

The vulnerability paradox

I call this the vulnerability paradox of chaplaincy. The chaplain may need to appear less institutionally defended to be pastorally approachable, while the same arrangement can leave them more exposed. The institution benefits from the trust and needs to take responsibility for the conditions that make it possible.

The mistake is to treat that exposure as spiritually meaningful in itself. Courage is not the same as preventable vulnerability. Trust is not created by neglecting safety. A chaplain does not become more pastorally authentic because an organisation has failed to think carefully about duress, isolation, aggression, traumatic exposure or safe systems of work. The right question is not whether chaplaincy can be made perfectly safe. It cannot. The right question is whether the risks created by the design of the role have been recognised and controlled as far as reasonably practicable. This matters psychologically as well as physically. Chaplains may hear material that is traumatic, threatening or morally distressing. They may work alone, cross boundaries between secure and non-secure areas, or hold information that leaves them concerned for another person's safety. The fact that this is 'part of the ministry' does not make the organisational responsibility disappear.

Safety cannot be outsourced to calling

Faith-based work has a particular vulnerability to the language of calling. Calling can help people endure difficulty with courage and meaning. But it can also be used, sometimes unintentionally, to normalise conditions that would be questioned immediately in another profession. “They knew what they were signing up for.” “It is part of ministry.” “Chaplains have to be flexible.” “You need faith.” Each phrase can move attention away from work design and back toward the character of the worker.

The SafeWork NSW guidance cited in this book offers a useful lens. Role conflict, unclear expectations, poor support, traumatic exposure, low job control, poor procedural justice and hazardous environments require attention to the design and management of work. What features of this role create risk, and what can the organisations controlling those features change?

The hierarchy matters. Training a chaplain to cope is a lower-order response than redesigning the condition creating the hazard. Support is valuable, but support should not become the substitute for prevention.

Calling may explain why a chaplain chooses to enter a difficult place. It does not absolve the organisations around them from making that place as reasonably safe as the work permits.

Chapter Five - The Unprotected Interface

The chaplain stands where several systems meet. There is the institution, the provider, and sometimes churches, funders, government requirements and professional expectations. In front of the chaplain is the person receiving care. Within the chaplain is a conscience.

The institution may want stability, the provider continued access and the church ministry. Government requirements may impose strict boundaries, while the person wants confidentiality and professional ethics may require action. The chaplain may believe something is wrong. Those expectations can converge on one person.

That is the unprotected interface. It is not merely that the chaplain has many stakeholders. Many professions do. The distinctive problem is that chaplaincy derives much of its usefulness from standing between systems while not fully belonging to any of them. The chaplain is expected to be close enough to understand, separate enough to be trusted, compliant enough to remain inside, independent enough to be credible and compassionate enough to absorb what others cannot.

When governance is strong, these tensions can be held by clear agreements, defined roles, independent reporting pathways and organisations willing to carry their own responsibilities. When governance is weak, the chaplain becomes the mechanism through which the tensions are managed. They soften language, preserve relationships, explain one organisation to another, protect confidences, manage disappointment, anticipate offence and attempt to keep everybody in the relationship.

This is invisible work. It may never appear in a position description. It may not be recorded as workload. Yet it consumes attention, emotional energy and moral capacity. A chaplain can spend enormous amounts of energy preventing organisational friction from becoming visible. Ironically, their competence can hide the very dysfunction that is exhausting them.

Eventually the person may become exhausted, and the response may be to call it burnout. That description can leave the mechanism unexamined, making depletion look like the primary problem rather than the consequence of unresolved structural strain.

Sometimes “the human cost of unresolved governance” offers a more useful description. It directs attention toward the responsibilities the surrounding organisations have left unsettled.

When friction becomes a job description

The work can be mistaken for ordinary relational competence. The chaplain explains policy without sounding bureaucratic, tells the provider why a host boundary matters without inflaming the relationship, and reassures a supporter without promising access that cannot be given. None of it may appear in the position description, yet it can consume a substantial part of the day.

The danger is that the better the chaplain becomes at absorbing friction, the less visible the friction becomes. Organisations experience a smooth relationship and conclude that the arrangement is working. The chaplain experiences the cumulative effort required to keep it smooth.

Workload measures can miss this strain. A calendar may show six pastoral conversations while leaving out the repeated calculations around confidentiality, role boundaries, competing expectations and the consequences of saying no.

The human cost of unresolved governance

Once we see the chaplain as an interface, a different accountability question becomes possible. Instead of asking only whether the chaplain is managing the role well, we can ask how much organisational friction is being transferred into the role. Is the chaplain repeatedly mediating matters that should be resolved between executives? Are they being asked to maintain relationships they do not control? Are they carrying anxiety about funding or placements? Are they translating contradictory instructions? Are they expected to protect confidentiality while also satisfying management curiosity? Are they responsible for calming people affected by decisions over which they have no influence? Repeated yeses suggest that the structure may be relying on a person to absorb what it has not resolved.

That reliance can become unsustainable. A conscientious, relationally skilled person may hold it together for a time, but each new incident can reactivate the same unresolved burden.

This is the pathway I am asking organisations to examine: governance leaves responsibilities unsettled, tension travels downward, the chaplain absorbs it, the system continues and the chaplain depletes. Intervening only at the point of depletion leaves the earlier conditions intact.

The unprotected interface is not an argument for making chaplains powerful organisational actors. It is an argument for refusing to make them the container for organisational ambiguity. Their role is pastoral. Governance belongs to those with governance authority. Conflict between systems belongs to the systems. The chaplain should not have to absorb it simply because they are the only person standing where the systems meet.

Chapter Six - Don't Rock the Boat

I encountered a message within chaplaincy culture: do not rock the boat, do not make the institution dislike chaplains, do not become difficult and do not jeopardise the relationship. Sometimes it was explicit. Sometimes it came through tone, training, cautionary stories or praise for chaplains who were easy to place.

There is a legitimate idea buried inside that message. Chaplains should not enter institutions looking for fights. Professional humility matters. Role clarity matters. Confidentiality matters. Not every disagreement is systemic harm. Not every uncomfortable decision is abusive leadership. A chaplain should not mistake privileged pastoral access for a mandate to interfere in every organisational dispute.

But that is very different from teaching chaplains that preservation of institutional access should determine whether they speak. The first protects professional integrity. The second protects organisational access.

Providers have an interest in preserving access. Placements, contracts, funding, reputation and relationships matter; providers need institutions willing to host chaplains. The conflict arises when preserving those relationships makes it harder for a chaplain to raise a concern appropriately.

The chaplain may then understand, explicitly or implicitly, that raising concerns could make the host less enthusiastic about chaplaincy. A provider that depends upon continued placements may experience the chaplain's professional voice as a threat to something larger. The chaplain begins to carry not only the concern itself but anxiety about what speaking might cost everyone else.

This is how institutional capture can begin without anyone announcing it. The chaplain is welcomed because they are not quite the institution. People trust them because of that

distinction. But the continuation of the role may depend upon the chaplain not exercising too much of the independence that made the role valuable in the first place.

The contradiction is sharp: be independent, but avoid the independence that might threaten access. Advocate, but do not embarrass leadership. Listen deeply, but do not let what you repeatedly hear become organisationally inconvenient.

Continued institutional access cannot be purchased with the chaplain's silence. A provider should be able to say to a host institution: we value this relationship, and part of the value of chaplaincy is that our chaplains retain sufficient professional independence to identify concerns appropriately. If that sentence cannot be spoken, the independence of the chaplain is already compromised.

Professional humility or institutional silence?

A chaplain should not be reckless with influence. Access to intimate human experience creates obligations of humility. It is entirely appropriate to teach chaplains not to gossip, grandstand, diagnose organisations from one conversation or use pastoral trust as a platform for personal battles.

But 'don't rock the boat' often does more than teach humility. It can teach the chaplain to monitor the emotional comfort of the institution.

That is a different task. Now the chaplain must ask not merely, 'Is this concern well founded and appropriate to raise?' but 'Will they still want chaplains if I raise it?' The provider's organisational interest has entered the chaplain's professional judgement.

A mature provider should want professional restraint without professional silence. Restraint protects the integrity of chaplaincy. Silence imposed to preserve placements protects the arrangement at the expense of that integrity.

When usefulness becomes capture

Institutional capture does not require corruption. It can happen through dependence. A provider depends on placements. A host depends on the chaplain to settle people. A church depends on chaplaincy as an expression of mission. Everyone wants the arrangement to continue. The easiest way to preserve the arrangement can be to ask the least powerful participant to adapt. The chaplain becomes more careful. They stop naming certain patterns. They learn to frame concerns softly enough that no one feels accused. They become skilled at pastoralising what may actually be a governance issue. Eventually the role remains present but its capacity to challenge dehumanising conditions has been reduced.

This is why the preservation of chaplaincy cannot become the purpose of chaplaincy. A placement is not successful merely because it survives. A provider is not successful merely because the number of placements grows. The question is whether the chaplaincy being preserved still has the independence required to perform its humanising function.

A chaplain who is welcome everywhere because they never disturb anything may be wonderfully gifted. Or the structure may have taught them exactly how much truth it is prepared to tolerate. We need enough courage to ask which.

Chapter Seven - What the Chaplain Sees

Chaplains notice because people talk to them. A conversation about a leader’s behaviour is followed by another, and then another. Different people may describe similar experiences. The chaplain encounters the organisation through its impact upon people, a different vantage point from reports, metrics and management meetings.

This does not make the chaplain an investigator. Pastoral conversation is not evidence gathering, and confidentiality must not be casually converted into organisational intelligence. But neither should we pretend that repeated pastoral encounters leave the chaplain knowing nothing about the human climate of an institution.

A chaplain may hear accounts of bullying, neglect, harmful leadership or unhealthy uses of power while having little authority to examine or change the systems concerned. They listen, reassure and help the person make sense of the experience. The person becomes steadier and returns to the environment. Later, someone else arrives with a similar account.

Confidentiality is essential, but confidentiality must not be confused with structural silence. A mature chaplaincy model needs pathways through which de-identified systemic concerns can be raised without betraying individual trust. Those pathways need clear thresholds, careful language and appropriate oversight. They cannot depend entirely upon the goodwill of the leader or system that may itself be contributing to the concern.

I have come to think of mature chaplaincy through presence, discernment and witness. None cancels confidentiality or makes the chaplain a manager. Together, they offer a way to remain pastorally present without treating every concern as something that must stay silent.

We can place someone inside an institution to see the person, then make it difficult for them to raise concerns about what the institution may be doing to that person. That contradiction deserves attention.

Relational intelligence

Institutions count incidents, complaints, absences, outcomes, turnover and risk. Chaplains encounter another kind of information through sustained relationship. I call that relational intelligence. Relational intelligence is not a secret database of pastoral disclosures. It is the awareness that develops from sitting repeatedly with the human consequences of organisational life. One conversation may concern an individual experience; several independent accounts of the same dynamic raise a question worth examining.

The chaplain must remain cautious. Similar stories do not automatically prove misconduct. Human perception is fallible, and confidentiality places important limits on what can be shared. But caution should not require pretending that patterns do not exist. This is especially important in organisations where formal reporting is difficult. People may fear retaliation, believe nothing will change, lack evidence, or simply need time before deciding what to do. The chaplain may therefore become one of the first places where a pattern becomes visible. That knowledge carries responsibility, but it should not be carried alone. Providers and hosts need ethically designed pathways for de-identified systemic concerns so that the chaplain is neither forced to breach trust nor forced into silence.

Presence, discernment and witness

I understand mature chaplaincy as involving three movements. Presence is the first. The chaplain stays with the person and resists the urge to make the encounter serve another agenda. Discernment is the second. The chaplain reflects upon what they are encountering. What belongs to this individual? What appears repeatedly? What might be a feature of the environment? What is my own reaction? What do I know, and what am I merely suspecting?

Witness is the third. Sometimes what has been discerned needs to be named through an appropriate pathway. Witness does not mean public accusation. It may be a carefully de-identified observation, a request for review, a psychosocial-hazard report, a conversation in supervision, or a governance question. A structure that permits presence but punishes discernment or witness reduces chaplaincy to comfort.

An institution may invite chaplains to notice what ordinary systems miss, yet become uncomfortable when that noticing extends toward the environment. The challenge is to receive concerns without turning the chaplain into an investigator or requiring them to remain silent.

Chapter Eight - Pastoral Care Is Not Organisational Anaesthetic

Chaplaincy should never become the emotional anaesthetic applied to organisational harm. That sentence is deliberately uncomfortable because the alternative can look so compassionate. A distressed person is referred to the chaplain. The chaplain listens well. The person feels calmer. Everyone is grateful. The immediate crisis has been reduced. But what if the source of distress remains untouched?

There is an ethical difference between helping someone endure a difficulty that cannot presently be removed and using care to help them tolerate preventable organisational harm. Illness, bereavement, incarceration and deployment can involve suffering beyond a chaplain's power to change. Pastoral care belongs there. It must also remain available when leadership, governance or culture contribute to distress; it simply cannot be the organisation's entire response.

The chaplain may be praised for helping people manage difficult circumstances while the institution avoids examining whether those circumstances should continue. Pastoral success can conceal governance failure.

The danger is not that chaplains should stop caring for people until systems improve. That would abandon the person in front of them. The danger is that the care becomes the end of the organisational response. The chaplain treats the downstream human consequences while nobody with authority examines the upstream cause.

A healthy organisation should be capable of receiving two truths at once: this person needs compassionate support now, and we may also need to examine what within our environment contributed to their distress. Chaplaincy can accompany the first. Leadership and governance must own the second.

Pastoral care is not organisational anaesthetic. It should help people remain human in difficult places. It should never be used to make preventable harm sufficiently bearable that the system no longer has to change.

Downstream care, upstream cause

Pastoral care often happens after someone has been hurt, frightened, bereaved, humiliated, overwhelmed or morally distressed. The chaplain meets the consequence. That location can make the distressed person appear to be the whole site of the problem. We ask how to support them, restore hope or help them cope. Those may be exactly the right immediate responses. They should not prevent us from examining what happened upstream.

If several people arrive distressed by the same leadership behaviour, the organisation has more than a pastoral-care demand. It has a leadership question. If students repeatedly require support after the same cultural pattern, there is a safeguarding question. If staff continually seek chaplaincy because ordinary complaint processes feel unsafe, there is a governance question.

The pressure-release valve

The pressure-release-valve image describes how a beneficial service can inadvertently stabilise an unhealthy system. The person talks, feels heard, regains steadiness and returns to work, class, ward or unit. The institution continues. There is nothing wrong with helping that person. The ethical concern arises when the organisation relies on the cycle and treats successful pastoral care as evidence that no upstream action is needed.

Pain can then become sufficiently bearable for the system to continue operating without addressing its cause.

The response is to connect care with organisational curiosity: is this an isolated experience, are others reporting similar circumstances, and what might the organisation be able to change? The chaplain should not be responsible for conducting that investigation. But the organisation should be responsible for asking the question.

Chapter Nine - The Tension Is Relentless

Every caring profession involves difficult moments. Here I am concerned with something more persistent: the difference between encountering a hard situation and inhabiting a role whose contradictions remain unresolved.

The chaplain can be simultaneously required to protect the person's trust, comply with institutional requirements, satisfy provider expectations, respect religious identity, preserve organisational relationships, maintain confidentiality, respond appropriately to risk, remain pastorally available, understand what they are seeing, avoid becoming too involved and somehow remain personally unaffected by standing at the intersection of all of it.

Any one of those responsibilities can be reasonable. The strain emerges from their collision. What happens when protecting trust conflicts with what management wants to know? What happens when provider expectations conflict with the host's rules of engagement? What happens when a chaplain sees a pattern of organisational harm but fears that naming it will threaten the provider's relationship with the institution? What happens when personal safety and relational accessibility pull in opposite directions?

Without a governance mechanism to address those tensions, the chaplain may be left managing them internally. They decide what to say, what not to say, whom to disappoint and what risk or discomfort to carry. The organisational conflict becomes part of their daily experience.

That helps explain why strain can remain high even when the diary is not full. The burden includes the moral and relational calculation surrounding the pastoral conversations, not simply their number.

More supervision may help the chaplain understand what is happening. Better boundaries may prevent some overextension.

Rest may restore depleted capacity. None of those things can create a governance pathway that does not exist. None can reconcile two organisations that have never clarified their competing expectations. None can make unsafe conditions safe by changing the chaplain's attitude toward them.

The question is not whether chaplains need care. Of course they do. The question is whether care for chaplains is being offered instead of structural responsibility. If the tension is chronic, unresolved and structurally unsupported, the chaplain does not simply become tired. The work can begin to erode empathy, hope, faith, discernment and the sense of vocation that brought them to chaplaincy in the first place.

Chronic contradiction

The chaplain may successfully navigate today's conflict between confidentiality and management expectation, only to encounter the same conflict next week. They may negotiate one provider request that crosses a host boundary, but the provider's understanding of access remains unchanged. They may recover from one unsafe incident, but the system of work remains the same.

Anticipation becomes part of the load. The chaplain remembers which conversations trigger provider anxiety, which managers dislike challenge and which concerns have nowhere safe to go. They can begin preparing for the next conflict before it happens. This is why the strain can remain high even during apparently quiet periods. The person is carrying the map of unresolved tensions with them.

When the contradiction moves inside

The chaplain may silence one concern, soften another, accept a compromise, carry uncertainty, tell themselves to be gracious and continue. Repeatedly managing the conflict this way can change how they understand themselves. Eventually the external conflict can become an internal conflict: Am I being faithful or difficult? Am I discerning something real or becoming cynical? Am I protecting confidentiality or avoiding necessary action? Am I called to stay or afraid to leave?

This is one reason institutional chaplaincy can wound vocation. The conflict is no longer simply with an employer or host. It becomes entangled with conscience, faithfulness, service and identity.

A supervision session can help disentangle these questions, but supervision cannot carry the responsibility that belongs to governance. The chaplain should not need exceptional psychological skill merely to survive an arrangement that organisations could redesign.

Chapter Ten - Stop Calling It Burnout

We need to reconsider the language we use when chaplains struggle. Burnout, compassion fatigue, poor boundaries, lack of resilience, inadequate self-care and difficulty managing ministry may describe different aspects of experience. None should become an automatic explanation before the circumstances are examined.

Language locates responsibility. When we call a chaplain burnt out, our attention turns toward the chaplain. Are they resting? Are their boundaries adequate? Are they accessing supervision? Are they too emotionally invested? Are they resilient enough? Before anyone has examined the structure, a narrative has begun forming around the individual.

This can function as a form of invitational gaslighting. I use that phrase carefully. I am not suggesting that every person who uses burnout language is deliberately trying to manipulate a chaplain. Often the people offering wellbeing advice are genuinely caring. The problem is that the language itself can invite a particular interpretation: your distress is evidence of something happening within you, rather than potentially meaningful information about what has been happening around you.

That invitation can become narrative control because once the individualised explanation is accepted, other explanations become less visible. The chaplain begins to ask, What is wrong with me? Why am I not coping? Why can everyone else manage this? Do I need stronger boundaries? Am I too sensitive? The organisation can remain largely outside the frame.

Perhaps the chaplain is exhausted because they have spent years navigating incompatible expectations between provider and institution. We call it burnout. Perhaps they have repeatedly witnessed organisational behaviour harming people while being discouraged from identifying the pattern. We call it compassion fatigue. Perhaps they have been required to remain relationally accessible while working without adequate structural

protection. We tell them to improve their boundaries. Perhaps organisations have failed to resolve their own conflicts of purpose. We teach the chaplain resilience.

The problem is not that burnout never occurs. A description of the chaplain’s condition does not, by itself, establish what produced it. We still need to ask how the work, relationships and surrounding arrangements contributed.

I use the following terms as reflective descriptions to keep those circumstances visible. Structural chaplaincy strain names distress associated with prolonged, unresolved contradictions around the role. Divided-accountability strain names the burden of answering to organisations with incompatible expectations and no adequate way to reconcile them.

Pastoral-institutional conflict names the tension that occurs when what appears necessary for a person's pastoral wellbeing or dignity conflicts with institutional or provider interests. Silenced discernment names the cumulative impact of repeatedly recognising concerning patterns while perceiving that appropriately naming them may threaten employment, placement, relationships or access.

Access-preservation pressure describes explicit or implicit pressure upon the chaplain to protect the provider's relationship with the host institution, including pressure to avoid raising matters that may make chaplaincy less welcome. Institutional moral strain describes distress arising when conscience, pastoral ethics or an understanding of human dignity repeatedly conflicts with what the surrounding system expects the chaplain to tolerate, facilitate or remain silent about.

Pastoral overburdening occurs when organisational, governance or leadership responsibilities are displaced into pastoral care, leaving the chaplain carrying human consequences without corresponding authority to address their source. Chaplaincy role capture occurs when the role is gradually repurposed toward institutional, provider, funding, behavioural, reputational or religious objectives that displace its pastoral purpose.

Institutional betrayal of chaplaincy describes the experience of discovering that an organisation entrusted with supporting or hosting pastoral care has itself acted in ways that compromise

the dignity, safety, independence or wellbeing of the chaplain providing it.

These are reflective lenses, not diagnoses. Their purpose is to direct attention toward the environment, displaced responsibility, unresolved expectations and what happened when the chaplain tried to respond. Naming a lens does not establish that it fits every situation.

Before attributing chaplain distress to resilience, boundaries, coping or self-care, organisations should examine role clarity, divided accountability, provider and host expectations, psychosocial hazards, physical safety, professional independence, access-preservation pressure, moral tension, reporting pathways and organisational culture.

Examining the environment must not become another reason to leave the chaplain unsupported. Rest, supervision, counselling or help with boundaries may be needed while organisational conditions are being examined. The point is to provide care without using it to avoid the structural question.

The new question is not, 'Why couldn't this chaplain cope?' The new question is: What did this chaplain have to cope with? That single change in language changes the direction of accountability.

What the research already tells us

The critique of burnout language does not require us to deny burnout research. In fact, some of the research strengthens the structural argument.

A 2018 study of 534 chaplains found that organisational factors were among the predictors of burnout; feeling bogged down by 'the system' and overwhelming caseload were prominent factors. An Australian study published in 2021 found that lack of supportive structures predicted burnout among chaplains, while self-care practices did not predict professional quality of life in that sample.

The 2025 qualitative study by Fantus and colleagues examines potentially morally injurious events involving acts and omissions, witnessing moral transgressions and workplace

betrayal among healthcare chaplains. Its focus directs attention toward what chaplains encounter and how organisational relationships shape their experience.

Personal practices remain relevant. Supportive relationships, reflective practice, rest and supervision can matter alongside structural change. Offering an individual intervention does not establish that an organisational cause is absent.

From wellness response to hazard inquiry

NSW work health and safety guidance provides a useful contrast to purely individualised wellbeing language. Psychosocial hazards include role conflict or lack of role clarity, low job control, poor support, poor procedural justice, traumatic exposure, conflict, bullying and hazardous environments. These are features of work and work design.

Instead of immediately prescribing resilience, the organisation asks: Is there role conflict? Is the chaplain receiving incompatible instructions? Is there sufficient control over how the work is performed? Is support genuinely available? Is the reporting process fair? Is the chaplain exposed to trauma without adequate systems? Are there patterns of unreasonable behaviour? Is the physical environment creating additional risk?

Individual support needs to accompany an examination of those conditions, rather than replace it.

This is why I resist burnout language when it becomes a conclusion. It should open inquiry into the chaplain’s circumstances rather than close it.

What happened here? What conditions were present? What did the organisations know? What did they control? What could they have changed? Those are safeguarding questions.

Burnout language can conceal work design

The strongest reason to change the language is practical. The words used to describe a problem influence the intervention chosen. If burnout is treated only as a problem within the person, the response may stop at leave, counselling, resilience, boundaries, supervision or rest. Naming role conflict directs attention toward role design. Naming poor procedural justice directs attention toward decisions and complaints processes. Low job control raises questions about authority and autonomy; poor support raises questions about management and organisational systems.

Contemporary psychosocial-risk frameworks are useful here because they refuse to treat psychological harm solely as private weakness. Work can be designed in ways that expose people to chronic stress. Hazards can interact: high demands become more dangerous when combined with low control; traumatic exposure becomes harder when support is poor; role conflict becomes more damaging when procedural justice is weak.

Institutional chaplaincy can contain several of these conditions simultaneously. The chaplain may have high emotional demands, low authority over the source of those demands, ambiguous accountability, repeated exposure to trauma, dependence upon relationships they cannot control and uncertainty about whether speaking will be supported. A single label can leave too much of that arrangement unexplained. The better language holds both realities. A chaplain has personal strengths, vulnerabilities and responsibilities. An organisation can also create or intensify risk. The existence of one does not cancel the other.

Rather than beginning with “Why are you burnt out?”, ask about the work. Where does responsibility sit? What happens when you disagree? What do you repeatedly carry? What have you tried to raise? What changed before you began feeling this way? Those questions give the organisation somewhere useful to begin.

Chapter Eleven - When Empathy Becomes the Point of Vulnerability

Many people attracted to chaplaincy are deeply empathetic. They notice, listen, care, make room, understand complexity and extend grace. These are not incidental qualities. They are often the very qualities that make someone effective in pastoral presence.

They can also become the qualities upon which unhealthy systems quietly depend. 'They'll understand.' 'They'll make it work.' 'They won't want to damage the relationship.' 'They're a chaplain. They'll forgive.' None of those sentences needs to be spoken aloud for the expectation to take shape. An organisation can come to depend on what a chaplain repeatedly absorbs. Their willingness to understand, accommodate and keep serving becomes part of how the work gets done.

It can look like goodness: the chaplain stays late, accommodates another change, understands provider pressure, forgives poor communication or works around an unsafe process because they do not want people to suffer.

Virtue can become the mechanism through which a person is depleted. Kindness, conscientiousness, compassion, flexibility, loyalty, forgiveness and willingness to go the extra mile are beautiful qualities. But when a system begins relying on them instead of building sound structures, the qualities themselves become points of vulnerability.

Compassion cannot become an infinite organisational resource. Empathy cannot become an excuse for inadequate governance. Forgiveness cannot become freedom from accountability. Calling cannot become consent to exploitation. This is especially important in faith-based environments because spiritual language can intensify the pressure. Service, sacrifice, grace, obedience and calling can all be used beautifully. They can also make it harder for a chaplain to recognise when ordinary employment, safety or governance responsibilities are being displaced onto their willingness to serve.

A healthy organisation asks how to create conditions in which compassion can remain freely given, rather than testing how much generosity a person can supply before they break.

If an organisation specifically recruits people because of their empathy, pastoral sensitivity and relational capacity, it carries a responsibility not to exploit those qualities. The very gifts that make chaplaincy possible need safeguarding too.

The reliable person problem

Organisations learn who answers, accommodates, smooths things over and finds a way. In caring work, that reliability may include understanding why everyone else is under pressure, making the person especially useful.

The problem begins when exceptional generosity becomes the baseline expectation. What was once an act of grace becomes the system of work. The chaplain stays because nobody else can cover. The chaplain absorbs a provider mistake because raising it would create trouble. The chaplain makes another difficult arrangement work because the people receiving care should not suffer. Each decision may be understandable. Together, they can create a structure that depends on the chaplain continuing to compensate.

Compassion without self-erasure

Chaplaincy needs a theology and practice of compassion that does not require disappearance of the self. Compassion means moving toward suffering. It does not mean accepting responsibility for every system that produces suffering. Forgiveness can release bitterness; it does not eliminate accountability. Grace can shape how conflict is handled; it does not require pretending that a harmful pattern is harmless.

This distinction is particularly important for chaplains whose identity is strongly vocational. The desire to serve can make withdrawal feel like failure. Saying no can feel spiritually suspect. Reporting a problem can feel ungracious. Leaving can feel like abandonment.

A healthy structure does not exploit those moral sensitivities. It does not rely on the chaplain's conscience to obtain labour, silence or flexibility that should have been secured through proper governance.

Compassion remains beautiful when it is freely given. It becomes dangerous when an organisation builds its operating model around the assumption that the compassionate person will always carry one more thing.

Chapter Twelve - Broken Chaplains

Throughout my involvement with chaplaincy, I encountered chaplains who were tired, burnt out, disillusioned or deeply wounded by experiences connected to work that had once carried enormous meaning for them. I began asking a different question: What if something happened to them?

That question shifts the frame from deficiency to experience. Instead of beginning with the assumption that the chaplain failed to cope with inherently difficult work, it asks whether particular organisational conditions contributed to the person's deterioration.

There can be moral exhaustion: I know something isn't right, but I cannot change it. This is not simply tiredness. It is the depletion that comes from repeatedly recognising what should happen while lacking the authority or safe pathway to make it happen.

There can be relational exhaustion: Everybody needs something from me. The person receiving care needs presence. The institution needs cooperation. The provider needs the placement protected. The church wants connection. Leadership wants reassurance. The chaplain becomes the relational hinge on which multiple expectations swing.

There can be institutional disillusionment: The organisations speaking about care do not always practise it toward the people providing that care. This can be particularly destabilising when the organisation's public identity is explicitly compassionate, spiritual or values-based.

There can be vocational disillusionment: This isn't what I thought chaplaincy was. A person may enter because they believe they are called to pastoral presence and gradually discover that significant energy is being consumed by organisational politics, provider expectations, access management or the requirement to remain acceptable to powerful stakeholders.

There can be silenced discernment: I can see what is happening, but speaking about it may cost me. Over time, repeatedly overriding one's own perception can erode internal authority. The chaplain may begin to doubt not only the organisation but themselves.

For people who understand their work vocationally, the injury can reach beyond employment. A chaplain may leave a role and still carry the tension. They may question their judgement, calling, faith community, capacity to trust leadership and sometimes even their own goodness. The wound can attach itself to the sacred language through which the work was originally understood.

The word “broken” needs care. I am not defining chaplains by damage. I am asking organisations to recognise the consequences of repeated strain and to respond to exhaustion, guardedness, anger, numbness or disappointment with more than a resilience workshop.

Former chaplains matter to this inquiry. If we examine only the people who remain, we may miss what happened before others left and how their concerns were received. A thoughtful, experienced chaplain’s departure deserves curiosity. It may tell us something about the person and about the system; it should not be explained away before either has been considered.

What departure can tell us

Former chaplains can offer a perspective that organisations miss when they listen only to those still in the role. A person who leaves can disappear administratively into a simple category: resigned, relocated, personal reasons, career change, burnout. Those labels may be accurate and still incomplete. What happened in the six months before the resignation? Had the chaplain raised concerns? Were there unresolved host-provider conflicts? Did the person feel safe speaking? Was the role what they were originally told it would be? Did they leave chaplaincy altogether or only that organisation? Did their faith, confidence or sense of vocation change?

Exit conversations should contribute to safeguarding learning as well as administrative closure.

Patterns of departure matter. If thoughtful chaplains repeatedly leave the same environment, provider or leadership structure, the organisation should resist the temptation to explain each departure individually. The pattern itself deserves review.

When vocation is injured

Replacing employment does not necessarily restore a wounded sense of vocation. For many chaplains the work is connected to a deep story about who they are, what they believe and why they are willing to enter difficult places. When an institution wounds that work, the injury can travel into the spiritual meaning attached to it. A chaplain may not simply think, 'That was a bad job.' They may think, 'Did I misunderstand my calling? Was I foolish to trust these people? Was I wrong about what I saw? Why did a Christian organisation treat me this way? Where was God in this?' This is one reason organisational betrayal can be so destabilising in pastoral settings. The language of care and the experience of care diverge.

Recovery may therefore require more than rest. It may involve separating God from the institution, calling from the placement, compassion from self-abandonment and professional failure from organisational failure. The chaplain may need support with that healing. The organisations around the role remain responsible for addressing conditions within their control.

Chapter Thirteen - Stop Fixing the Chaplain

If a problem is structurally produced, the primary response cannot be individual correction. This sounds obvious, yet much of our wellbeing language begins with the person experiencing the consequences rather than the conditions producing them.

A chaplain cannot self-care their way out of divided governance. They cannot become resilient enough to reconcile incompatible organisational expectations. They cannot boundary-set their way into an independent reporting mechanism that does not exist. They cannot supervise themselves out of institutional capture. They cannot fix toxic leadership from a pastoral-care room.

This does not absolve chaplains of responsibility. Chaplains must practise ethically, maintain appropriate boundaries, respect confidentiality and safeguarding requirements, work within legitimate authority, seek appropriate support and remain accountable for their own conduct. Structural analysis is not an excuse for poor practice.

Responsibility needs to sit with the authority to act. Chaplains should work within their role, but should not have to preserve institutional relationships at any cost, make unhealthy systems appear healthy, create access for sponsors or reconcile competing expectations that senior organisations have left unresolved.

This is where the familiar advice can become frustrating. 'Have better boundaries' may be useful if the chaplain is taking on work outside their role. It is inadequate if the provider itself is repeatedly crossing the role boundary. 'Use supervision' may be excellent advice for processing complex pastoral work. It is inadequate if the supervision structure is controlled by the same organisation creating the conflict and there is nowhere independent to go.

'Practise self-care' can support recovery. It cannot make an unsafe environment safe. 'Build resilience' can strengthen a

person. It cannot transform contradictory governance into coherent governance. When individual interventions are offered in place of structural correction, wellbeing language becomes a way of adapting the chaplain to the problem.

The structural inquiry needs to ask about the environment: were expectations clear, reporting pathways independent and physical and psychosocial risks addressed? Could the chaplain disagree appropriately? Was access being protected at the expense of voice? Were responsibilities being displaced downward?

Alongside that inquiry, ask what support the chaplain needs: rest, counselling, supervision, time away, training or help with personal boundaries. These supports must not become a way of returning the person to an unchanged arrangement that continues to cause harm.

Place responsibility rightly. That is safeguarding. It protects the chaplain from being blamed for organisational contradictions and protects organisations from avoiding the work only they have the authority to do.

The hierarchy of responsibility

There is a simple way to test whether responsibility has been misplaced: ask who has the authority to change the condition. Can the chaplain rewrite the provider-host agreement? Usually not. Can the chaplain create an independent complaints pathway? Not alone. Can the chaplain change the staffing model, security arrangement, reporting line, funding expectation or organisational culture? Rarely.

Responsibility should follow the authority and control needed to address the problem.

The chaplain is responsible for ethical practice within their control. The provider is responsible for provider conduct and employment structures. The host is responsible for the environment and legitimate institutional systems it controls. Boards and senior leaders are responsible for governance. Funders and sponsors are responsible for respecting the limits of their involvement.

Support alongside structural change

Individual support is not the enemy of structural reform. It becomes problematic only when it is offered instead of structural reform. A chaplain exposed to traumatic material may benefit enormously from supervision. A chaplain who has been working excessive hours may need rest. A person whose boundaries have blurred may need help re-establishing them. These are legitimate forms of care. But if the same chaplain returns to unresolved role conflict, unsafe systems, poor support and pressure not to speak, the support may simply restore enough capacity for the cycle to continue.

Identify the hazard and address what the organisations control, while supporting the person affected. Care should not have to wait for redesign, and redesign should not disappear behind care. This is not radical. It is ordinary risk-management logic applied to a role that has too often been romanticised as ministry. We should care for chaplains deeply. We should also stop creating avoidable reasons for them to need so much repair.

Chapter Fourteen - The Organisations Must Move

Where chaplaincy arrangements expose people to unresolved conflict or preventable harm, the surrounding organisations need to change those arrangements. This is where responsibility moves upstream.

Providers must examine what they expect. Host institutions must examine how they understand chaplain independence. Funding bodies and sponsoring religious organisations must understand that financial support does not purchase access to vulnerable populations. Governance structures must establish pathways through which chaplains can safely identify patterns of concern.

The chaplain must never become the site at which organisational contradictions are resolved. If provider and institution have incompatible expectations, they must resolve them. If religious identity conflicts with institutional boundaries, organisations must negotiate it before expecting the chaplain to live inside the conflict. If the provider itself is creating pressure or distress, there must be somewhere outside the provider relationship for that concern to go.

This requires agreements, not goodwill alone. Purpose, role, access, confidentiality, reporting, safety responsibilities, dispute resolution and the limits of provider or sponsor involvement need to be explicit. Those structures allow pastoral care to retain its purpose.

Host institutions need to ask whether they genuinely want an independent pastoral presence or merely an agreeable one. How will leadership respond when the chaplain raises something uncomfortable? Is disagreement treated as professional contribution or disloyalty? Can the chaplain name a pattern without immediately being accused of overstepping?

Providers need to examine their own conflicts of interest. If organisational success depends upon maintaining placements, what protects a chaplain when protecting the chaplain may strain the provider's relationship with a host? Who makes that

decision? What evidence would demonstrate that the provider values the chaplain more than the placement?

Boards and governing bodies should receive information about chaplain wellbeing that goes beyond individual utilisation of supervision or leave. They should be asking about turnover, unresolved host-provider disputes, psychosocial hazards, complaints, safety incidents, reasons for departure and patterns in what chaplains are reporting.

The organisations must move because they possess the authority the chaplain does not. They can renegotiate agreements, redesign reporting pathways, change policy, address leadership, clarify funding expectations, establish independent review and alter unsafe working conditions. Asking the chaplain to become more resilient is often asking the person with the least structural power to compensate for the inaction of those with the most.

The structural answer is not simply a more resilient chaplain. It is more responsible organisations.

Structural safeguarding

I call the alternative structural safeguarding of chaplains. The phrase deliberately moves safeguarding beyond individual conduct. It asks whether the architecture around the chaplain protects purpose, independence, access, safety, voice and responsibility. Structural safeguarding begins before recruitment. The provider and host clarify why the role exists. They identify the boundaries of access. They establish who carries employment and safety responsibilities. They agree how disagreements will be resolved. They create pathways for concerns about either organisation. It continues during the placement. The organisations monitor workload, role drift, psychosocial hazards, safety incidents, pressure from stakeholders and patterns in what the chaplain is encountering. They consult the chaplain rather than merely evaluating them. At exit, departure becomes an opportunity for structural learning as well as an administrative process. A wellbeing statement matters only if the arrangements around the work support it.

Higher-order controls

The SafeWork NSW guidance cited here prioritises controlling risk through the design and management of work rather than relying primarily on a worker's coping. That principle speaks directly to the arrangements around chaplaincy. Applied to chaplaincy, that means resolving conflicting expectations rather than training the chaplain to tolerate ambiguity. It means creating an independent reporting pathway rather than telling the chaplain to be courageous. It means designing safe access rather than praising bravery. It means clarifying role boundaries rather than repeatedly coaching the chaplain to say no. Training and personal coping still have a place. They are simply not the first line of defence against a structural hazard.

Chaplaincy culture can admire endurance. The person who stays, carries and keeps serving may be celebrated. Structural safeguarding asks why the arrangement required so much endurance.

Chapter Fifteen - The Chaplain Is Not an Organisational Resource

The chaplain is not simply an organisational wellbeing resource, a religiously flavoured extension of human resources, an informal complaints department, behaviour management, morale maintenance, a conversion strategy, a stakeholder engagement mechanism or an inexpensive substitute for services the organisation should otherwise provide.

Each of those distortions begins by treating the chaplain primarily according to usefulness to an organisation. But the defining value of chaplaincy is not that it can be made useful to every institutional objective. Its value lies partly in resisting that reduction.

The chaplain is an independent human presence operating within an institutional system for the purpose of pastoral, spiritual and relational care. I use 'independent' here conceptually rather than as a claim about every legal employment arrangement. The point is that the pastoral function requires sufficient distinction from other institutional functions to retain integrity.

That independence is not absolute. Chaplains require accountability. They work within law, policy, professional ethics, safeguarding requirements and legitimate institutional boundaries. But accountability and institutional possession are different things.

A healthy institution should want a chaplain who can occasionally disagree with it. A healthy provider should want a chaplain capable of saying no to it. If the role is only valued while it confirms the assumptions of those around it, chaplaincy becomes decorative rather than independent.

This also changes the language of engagement. Organisations should not simply ask, 'What can our chaplain do for us?' They

should ask, 'What conditions must we steward so that chaplaincy can serve its proper purpose?' That moves the institution from consumer to steward.

The distinction matters because organisations can unconsciously consume human qualities. They want the chaplain's warmth, trustworthiness, patience, flexibility and capacity to calm distressed people. Those qualities become resources. Yet they belong to a person with limits, rights, relationships and a life beyond the institution.

If an organisation wishes to benefit from the humanity, trust, independence, compassion and relational accessibility a chaplain brings, then the organisation assumes responsibility for creating conditions in which those very qualities are not exploited.

Usefulness has limits

It is reasonable for an institution to expect benefit from chaplaincy. Public money, organisational time and physical access should serve legitimate purposes. The problem is not usefulness itself. The problem is allowing usefulness to define the chaplain completely. Once usefulness governs the role, trust may be treated as intelligence, calm as behaviour management, spiritual care as morale improvement and availability as limitless responsiveness. The role can still look pastoral while its purpose shifts.

A stronger model begins with purpose rather than utility. What is chaplaincy for? What makes the role ethically distinct? Which organisational outcomes may be welcome by-products but cannot become the governing purpose?

The person behind the role

Institutions can see the human being receiving care while overlooking the person providing it.

The chaplain has a family, body, spiritual life, financial needs, limits, fears, history and future. They can be injured, lose confidence, become angry or need support. The sacred meaning of their work does not remove their ordinary human needs or the protections applicable to the role. The organisation may benefit from the chaplain's willingness to enter vulnerable spaces. It does not acquire the chaplain's whole self in return.

Chapter Sixteen - Access Is Entrusted, Not Owned

I am arguing for the Access-Purpose Boundary to become an explicit principle of institutional chaplaincy. Access is entrusted for a purpose; it is not owned. A chaplain's presence within a school does not make the school a ministry territory belonging to the provider. A chaplain's access to a correctional centre does not create institutional access for provider representatives. A chaplain's relationship with patients does not create a pool of potential members for a sponsoring church. A chaplain's trust relationship with employees does not create an informal intelligence network for management.

When access is treated as owned, mission creep begins. The provider sees opportunity. The host sees an informal resource. The sponsor sees return. The chaplain is then placed in the position of protecting the pastoral relationship from the organisations that made it possible.

The organisations should protect the boundary before the chaplain enters. Providers need to explain to staff, churches, donors and supporters what chaplain access does not confer. Hosts need to clarify what access and information remain outside management entitlement. The chaplain should not have to negotiate those limits each time they are tested.

Access integrity also protects the provider. Clear boundaries prevent well-intentioned supporters from placing the chaplain in ethically compromised situations. They protect the host from inappropriate encroachment. Most importantly, they protect the person receiving care from becoming the object around which organisations negotiate their interests. You are funding the presence. You are not purchasing the person. That sentence should sit close to every funding arrangement involving institutional chaplaincy.

A doctrine of access integrity

Access integrity means keeping access connected to the purpose for which it was granted.

That principle is strong enough to guide many practical decisions. May a provider representative tour a secure facility? Ask whether that access serves the agreed pastoral purpose and whether the host has explicitly authorised it. May a church use the chaplain to invite students into church activity? Ask whether that falls within the role, government requirements and the consent framework of the setting. May management ask the chaplain what employees are saying? Ask whether the request is compatible with confidentiality and pastoral trust. Instead of beginning with “Could we?”, ask “What was this access entrusted for?”

The vulnerable person is not organisational territory

A church may see a mission field, a provider a placement, a government a funded population and a host its students, employees, patients or people in custody. The chaplain must keep seeing people. That is why the Access-Purpose Boundary is ultimately about dignity rather than administration. It prevents organisations from extending their claims through a relationship that exists because a person became vulnerable enough to trust. The more asymmetrical the setting, the more important this becomes. A child, patient or incarcerated person may have limited ability to understand which organisation employs whom or what interests sit behind the chaplain. They should not have to become sophisticated organisational analysts in order to receive safe pastoral care. Access is entrusted. It is not owned. And the person is never territory.

Chapter Seventeen - Independence Must Be Real

Independence that disappears when exercised is not independence. If a chaplain is independent only while agreeing with management, they are not independent. If advocacy is permitted only where it does not inconvenience powerful people, independence becomes theatre.

Real independence requires structure. It cannot rest solely on assurances that 'our door is always open.' The chaplain needs to know where concerns go, who receives them, what happens if the concern is about the provider, what happens if it is about the host, and what protection exists if raising it affects relationships.

Clear reporting pathways matter because ordinary lines of management can become conflicted. A chaplain employed by a provider may need to raise concerns about the host upon which the provider depends for access. A chaplain embedded in a host may need to raise concerns about provider pressure. In either case, the immediate relationship may not be an adequate safeguard.

Real independence also requires protection against retaliation - not only formal retaliation, but the softer consequences that can make speaking costly: reduced hours, loss of placement, exclusion from communication, being labelled difficult, being told one is not a good fit, or having professional concern reframed as an emotional problem.

This is where narrative control intersects with independence. If the chaplain raises a concern and the response quickly becomes a discussion about their resilience, personality, emotionality or capacity, the content of the concern can disappear. A safe system is able to examine both the message and the messenger without using one to invalidate the other.

Independence requires clarity around confidentiality and systemic patterns. Chaplains should not breach the trust of individuals in order to prove an organisational concern. Equally, confidentiality should not be interpreted so broadly that the

chaplain is prohibited from ever identifying de-identified patterns or psychosocial hazards.

There also need to be mechanisms for resolving disputes without using the chaplain as messenger, negotiator or scapegoat. If the provider and host disagree, senior people from those organisations should carry the negotiation. The chaplain should not spend months trying to maintain both relationships while the organisations avoid speaking directly to one another.

Independence without a safe mechanism for exercising it is merely an aspiration. The test is not whether an organisation says the chaplain is independent. The test is what happens when the chaplain acts independently in a responsible, professional way.

The retaliation test

Policy is only part of the test. Watch what happens after disagreement. Does the chaplain retain access to information and meetings? Are changes to hours or placement explained fairly? Is their concern examined, or does attention move immediately to their tone, personality or suitability? These questions help examine what happens after speaking. Formal retaliation is only one possibility. Relational systems can punish dissent through exclusion, withdrawal and narrative. This is why psychological safety matters to professional independence. The chaplain needs reasonable confidence that appropriately raising a concern will not trigger a campaign to redefine them as the problem.

Accountability without possession

Independence does not mean the chaplain answers to nobody. That would be unsafe in a different direction. The challenge is accountable independence: clear professional standards, legitimate host requirements, ethical boundaries, supervision and review, combined with enough freedom to say no, raise concern and exercise pastoral judgement.

This is particularly important because institutional chaplaincy often spans multiple authorities. Accountability should be mapped, not assumed. Who supervises pastoral practice? Who

manages employment? Who controls site safety? Who hears a complaint about the host? Who hears a complaint about the provider? Who arbitrates a dispute between them? When those answers are vague, the chaplain's independence depends on personalities. Good governance makes it structural.

Independence is not a modern inconvenience

The insistence on chaplain independence is not a new invention designed to make institutions uncomfortable. In NSW civil chaplaincy it has deep historical roots.

The history of the Civil Chaplaincies Advisory Committee records that its founding church representatives resisted proposals that chaplains become public servants. In the 1960s the committee expressed the view that the independence of clergy needed to be guarded. Later, the 1978 Nagle Royal Commission into NSW prisons stressed the importance of correctional chaplaincy remaining independent of government departments. That principle continues to echo in contemporary descriptions of NSW correctional chaplaincy.

Corrective Services NSW describes chaplains as independent rather than public-service employees while working inside correctional centres and alongside other professionals. The correctional regulation cited in this book also addresses accreditation, institutional approval, pastoral responsibilities, confidential access within security parameters and welfare-related functions.

Historical independence must, however, be translated into contemporary governance. Formal separation and functional independence are not identical. A chaplain can be employed externally and still feel unable to challenge the host. A provider can champion independence in principle while depending heavily on continued institutional access. The real test is whether the chaplain has enough protected room to exercise conscience, professional judgement and pastoral integrity when those things become inconvenient. If the answer is yes only while everyone agrees, independence exists on paper rather than in practice.

Chapter Eighteen - Safeguarding the Humanising Function

Chaplaincy’s humanising purpose can be displaced by other interests: managing organisational wellbeing, expanding a provider, extending religious access or compensating for harmful leadership.

Small requests can gradually alter what the chaplain is expected to do: more reporting, pressure to support organisational messaging, a request to facilitate access or an expectation that some concerns remain unspoken.

Over time the chaplain may still be called a chaplain while the role has become something else. This is why purpose integrity must be revisited continually. Why is the chaplain here? Who is the pastoral relationship for? What interests must remain outside it?

A chronically frightened, depleted or morally compromised person cannot be expected to provide unlimited pastoral presence. Protecting the function requires protecting the chaplain’s capacity and humanity.

A safeguarded chaplaincy asks who carries risk, who carries responsibility when expectations conflict, who monitors the impact of the structure upon the chaplain and who has authority to intervene when the structure itself becomes harmful.

This is not about making chaplaincy adversarial. It is about making it trustworthy. People should be able to approach a chaplain without wondering whose agenda sits behind the relationship. Chaplains should be able to serve without wondering whether appropriate professional voice will cost them their place. Institutions should know what they are receiving and what they are not entitled to receive.

Safeguarding chaplaincy means protecting its purpose, access, independence and practitioners from being consumed by unresolved organisational interests.

Purpose drift

Purpose drift rarely announces itself. Nobody holds a meeting and votes to turn chaplaincy into organisational anaesthetic or stakeholder access. The drift occurs through reasonable-sounding requests. Could you help settle this employee? Could you encourage students to engage with this program? Could you show our supporters around? Could you avoid raising that just now because the relationship is delicate? Could you give us a sense of what people are saying?

Safeguarding therefore requires periodic purpose review. Not simply, 'Is the chaplain performing?' but 'What has chaplaincy become here?' This is why safeguarding chaplaincy is more than protecting chaplains from misconduct. It is protecting the ecology in which good chaplaincy can exist.

Safeguarding the conditions of presence

The humanising function depends on practical conditions: confidentiality, time, reflective space, psychological and physical safety, usable reporting pathways and limits around stakeholder interests. These conditions make presence, discernment and responsible voice possible.

The institution does not need to agree with every chaplain judgement. The provider does not need to surrender oversight. The chaplain does not need unlimited autonomy. What is needed is a structure robust enough to tolerate the very qualities it says it values: trust, conscience, dignity, compassion and independent pastoral presence.

Chapter Nineteen - Questions Institutions Must Answer

We train chaplains to enter institutions. We also need to teach institutions how to receive a chaplain.

Before engaging a chaplain, an organisation should be able to answer why it wants one. Is the purpose pastoral and spiritual care, or are there unspoken expectations around morale, behaviour, retention, reputation, complaint management or organisational stability? Unspoken expectations are particularly dangerous because they emerge later as pressure on the chaplain.

Who is the chaplain ultimately here to serve? The answer cannot simply be 'the organisation.' The chaplain works within the organisation and must respect its legitimate requirements, but the pastoral relationship is directed toward the human being receiving care.

What outcomes are expected? Some outcomes may be reasonable: availability, professional conduct, appropriate referral, safe practice, reporting on non-confidential service activity. Other desired outcomes may distort the role if they turn the chaplain into an instrument for behaviour change, intelligence gathering or organisational reputation.

What does the chaplain’s access authorise, and what does it leave outside the role? Specify what providers, sponsors, churches, managers and other stakeholders cannot infer from that access.

What happens when provider and institution disagree? If the answer is that the chaplain works it out, the structure is not ready. There should be a defined senior-to-senior pathway for resolving conflicts of purpose, role or policy.

Can the chaplain tell us something we do not want to hear? This may be the most revealing question. Many institutions value independent pastoral presence in theory. The real test arrives when independence produces discomfort.

Where does the chaplain report concerns about us or their provider? Who protects them from retaliation? How are de-identified patterns handled? What psychosocial and physical risks have we considered? Are we using pastoral care where governance action is actually required?

And when a chaplain begins to struggle, will our first question be, 'What is wrong with this chaplain?' or 'What is happening around this chaplain?' The answer to that question reveals whether the organisation sees chaplain wellbeing as an individual matter or a shared governance responsibility.

Before employing another chaplain, institutions should be able to demonstrate not only that they know what they want from chaplaincy, but that they understand what they owe to the person who will provide it.

Can you receive what you are inviting in?

If the answer is no, the institution may want pastoral aesthetics more than pastoral independence.

Receiving a chaplain requires organisational maturity. The chaplain should not be invited in merely to soften the institution's edges while being prohibited from noticing how those edges affect people.

A pre-engagement safeguarding review

Before a placement begins, the institution should conduct a simple safeguarding review of the role. Define the purpose and reporting lines, identify physical and psychosocial hazards, clarify confidentiality and establish escalation routes. Agree who resolves disputes, how systemic concerns are received and where a concern about senior leadership goes. Then ask the chaplain whether the arrangement makes sense from where they stand. This last step matters. Work as imagined by executives can differ markedly from work as experienced by practitioners. Consultation should continue after commencement because the role will reveal tensions that no agreement predicted.

The institution is not merely employing or hosting a chaplain. It is creating the conditions under which a humanising relationship will either flourish or become compromised.

Chapter Twenty - Questions Providers Must Answer

Providers may employ, commission, supervise, train or accredit chaplains while depending on hosts for continued access. Those interests can conflict. The possibility needs to be acknowledged and governed; it does not, by itself, establish wrongdoing.

Providers should ask: Are we more afraid of losing institutional access than of losing a good chaplain? That question goes directly to priorities. A provider can sincerely care about both, but situations may arise in which the interests diverge.

Do our chaplains know we will support appropriate professional disagreement? It is not enough for leaders to believe the answer is yes. What have chaplains actually experienced? What happens to the person who raises an uncomfortable issue? What stories circulate in training and supervision about people who challenged a host?

Have we communicated, directly or indirectly, that they should not rock the boat? Providers should examine formal training, informal culture, supervision language and placement management. A culture of access preservation can be transmitted without ever appearing in policy.

Have we clearly told donors and churches what their support does not entitle them to? This is an organisational responsibility, not something the chaplain should have to negotiate with enthusiastic supporters.

What happens when the provider itself is the problem? Is there an independent pathway? Can a chaplain question provider expectations without threatening their employment or accreditation? Who reviews a dispute in which the provider has a direct organisational interest?

Do we monitor patterns of chaplain departure and ask former chaplains why they left? Exit data should not be reduced to categories such as personal reasons, burnout or change of direction without genuine curiosity about structural causes.

Do we know whether our supervision primarily strengthens discernment or enforces compliance? Supervision should help a chaplain think ethically and clearly. It should not become a mechanism for persuading the chaplain to tolerate what the organisation has already decided not to change.

And perhaps the hardest question: If preserving a placement and protecting a chaplain came into genuine conflict, which would we choose? A provider's answer should be visible not only in values statements, but in what happens when the choice becomes costly.

The provider's conflict of interest

Providers often occupy a difficult position. They need host relationships in order for chaplaincy to exist. They may need funding, denominational support and public confidence. They also owe responsibilities to chaplains. The ethical failure is to deny the conflict and leave the chaplain carrying it. A provider should therefore establish in advance how it will respond when supporting a chaplain risks a placement. Who decides? What principles govern the decision? Is there independent review? Can the chaplain see the process?

What do your former chaplains say?

A useful review begins with former chaplains, including those whose departures were difficult. Speak to people who resigned disappointed, changed careers or withdrew from provider contact, as well as those who retired warmly. Ask what happened and listen without immediately defending the organisation. Those accounts offer another perspective alongside feedback from people still working with the provider. They need to be heard and examined, especially where similar concerns recur. If the same themes recur - pressure to preserve placements, poor support, unclear roles, provider overreach, unsafe environments, silenced concerns - the provider has received structural information. The question is what it will do with it.

Chapter Twenty-One – A Different Way of Commissioning Chaplaincy

Provider and host can understand themselves as stewards of a chaplaincy. Stewardship recognises a purpose larger than either organisation’s interests and places limits on what each can claim.

To steward chaplaincy is to protect the conditions under which genuine pastoral presence can occur. The host institution does not own the chaplain. The provider does not own the chaplain's access. The funder does not own the pastoral relationship. And the chaplain does not own the vulnerable person.

Each party is entrusted with something: the host with the environment and access; the provider with employment, formation and support where those are its functions; the funder with resources; and the chaplain with the pastoral relationship. Governance needs to resolve conflicts between their responsibilities.

This suggests a different commissioning process. Before a chaplain begins, provider and host should explicitly agree on purpose, access, boundaries, confidentiality, safety, reporting, professional independence, dispute resolution and how concerns about either organisation will be handled. Sponsoring bodies should understand their relationship to the work and the limits of that relationship.

The chaplain should enter an arrangement whose purpose and boundaries have been agreed, rather than discover each organisation’s assumptions one conflict at a time.

Commissioning should also include an explicit commitment that pastoral care will not be used as a substitute for governance action. If repeated patterns of organisational distress emerge, the institution will examine the environment rather than simply increasing referrals to the chaplain.

There should be a commitment to voice without retaliation. A chaplain acting within professional and ethical boundaries

should be able to raise concerns about role integrity, safety, provider pressure or institutional patterns without the automatic threat of being characterised as difficult or unsuitable.

There should be a commitment to access integrity. The provider, host, funders and sponsoring communities acknowledge that access entrusted for pastoral care cannot be repurposed for organisational benefit without explicit, appropriate authority.

There should be a commitment to structural responsibility. When tensions arise between organisations, those with authority will resolve them rather than transferring them downward to the chaplain.

This replaces ownership with stewardship. Instead of expecting one compassionate person to hold competing interests together, it asks organisations to protect the conditions that make pastoral presence possible.

A chaplaincy covenant

A different commissioning model could be expressed through a covenant among the parties.

To the person receiving care: we will not use your vulnerability to achieve an organisational or religious outcome.

To the chaplain: we will not use your compassion to absorb organisational dysfunction.

To the host institution: chaplaincy will not substitute for healthy leadership, governance, safeguarding or psychosocial safety.

To the provider: access entrusted to the chaplain is not organisational access, and the chaplain will not be pressured to advance provider interests through the pastoral relationship.

To funders and faith communities: your support makes the presence possible; it does not purchase access to the people served.

To governance: conflicts between organisations will be resolved by people with authority to resolve them, not displaced onto the practitioner.

To safety: relational accessibility will never be used to justify avoidable vulnerability.

To independence: the chaplain will be accountable and sufficiently independent to see, discern, advocate and speak through appropriate channels.

Stewardship rather than ownership

Stewardship recognises limits. The host, provider, funder and chaplain each carry responsibilities; none possesses the whole relationship. Commissioning can therefore establish a protected relational space, rather than merely place a worker inside an institution. The chaplain enters knowing the purpose, boundaries, reporting pathways and limits of stakeholder access. The host knows that genuine independence may sometimes be uncomfortable. The provider knows that protecting the chaplain can take priority over protecting the placement. The funder knows that support does not confer entitlement. That is the different social contract I am arguing for.

Before the first day

Safeguarding needs to begin before the first day. Imagine a commissioning process in which provider and host answer structural questions together. Why does this chaplaincy exist? Who is the primary beneficiary? What is the chaplain authorised to do? What are they explicitly not engaged to do? Which organisation employs them? Which organisation controls the workplace? Who is responsible for physical safety? Who identifies psychosocial hazards? Who provides pastoral supervision? Who manages performance? Who receives a concern about the host? Who receives a concern about the provider? What happens if those organisations disagree?

Then access. What access is entrusted to the chaplain? Can it be extended to provider representatives? Can sponsors visit? Under what authority? What rules govern consent? What information can management legitimately request about chaplaincy use? What remains confidential? Then voice. Can the chaplain raise a concern about organisational culture? Through which pathway?

Can they identify de-identified patterns? What protection exists if the concern involves senior leadership? What happens if the provider fears the concern will jeopardise the placement? Then exit. How will the organisations learn if the chaplain leaves? Will there be an independent exit conversation? Will patterns across placements be reviewed?

No document can prevent every conflict. But clarity changes where conflict lands. The chaplain should begin with a map rather than discover the terrain through injury.

A proposed Institutional Chaplaincy Safeguarding Standard

The argument can be brought together through domains an organisation can use to examine its arrangements. Purpose integrity asks whether chaplaincy is still being used for the purpose for which access was granted. Independence asks whether appropriate professional judgement survives disagreement. Divided accountability asks whether provider, host, funder and religious expectations have been identified and resolved at the right level. Access integrity protects pastoral access from organisational appropriation. Organisational harm asks whether the chaplain is repeatedly caring for the consequences of preventable leadership, cultural or governance failures. Voice without retaliation asks whether concerns can be raised without the chaplain being reframed as the problem. Physical and psychological safety asks whether hazards are identified and controlled rather than romanticised as part of calling. Provider conduct asks what happens when provider interests and chaplain wellbeing diverge. Institutional capture asks whether the role has drifted toward wellbeing management, reputation, behaviour control, ministry expansion or stakeholder benefit. Structural responsibility asks whether organisations carry the responsibilities attached to their authority. Together these domains could form an Institutional Chaplaincy Safeguarding Standard.

Its guiding question would be simple: what structural conditions surround the chaplain, and have they been examined before distress is attributed to personal coping, boundaries or self-care?

That is the reform I am arguing for: structures capable of carrying their own weight, rather than chaplains expected to absorb contradictions indefinitely.

Who Safeguards the Chaplain?

I still believe deeply in chaplaincy. There is something extraordinary about a person willing to enter the places others avoid - hospitals, prisons, schools, military environments, workplaces in crisis, places of grief and loneliness - and say through presence: There is still a human being here.

That is why this critique matters. I am not interested in dismantling chaplaincy. I am interested in protecting what is most valuable within it from the structures that can unintentionally consume it.

The chaplain is a person with a nervous system, conscience, family, body, limits, spiritual life and need for safety. They can become frightened, exhausted, confused or hurt while doing work they value.

The compassion of the chaplain cannot become a resource organisations simply consume. The independence of the chaplain cannot be celebrated until it becomes inconvenient. The silence of the chaplain cannot become the price of institutional access. Their empathy cannot become a substitute for governance. Their pastoral care cannot become compensation for toxic culture. Their calling cannot be used to justify preventable vulnerability.

We also need care with the explanations offered when chaplains struggle. Burnout does not establish its own cause. Resilience does not reconcile divided governance, and personal boundaries do not excuse organisations that repeatedly cross them.

Examine what happened around the chaplain while offering the care they need. Before expecting a return to the same arrangement, ask whether that arrangement needs to change.

The question is no longer simply, 'How do we care for chaplains?' There is an earlier question: Who is accountable for the conditions under which the chaplain is required to care? That question belongs to providers, host institutions, boards, funders, sponsoring churches, government bodies and every organisation that benefits from chaplaincy. The chaplain should not be the person asked to reconcile their competing interests.

For too long, perhaps, we have taught chaplains how to survive institutions. It is time we taught institutions how to receive them. Chaplaincy exists because institutions need someone who will remember the human being. Now the institutions surrounding chaplaincy must remember the human being they sent in.

Research and Context Notes

This book is a structural and reflective argument grounded in lived chaplaincy experience. It is not legal advice and does not claim that every chaplaincy setting operates in the ways described.

The studies already cited here give reason to examine chaplain wellbeing in relation to work and organisational context. Hotchkiss and Lesher's 2018 study of 534 chaplains identified organisational predictors of burnout, including feeling bogged down by the system and overwhelming caseload. Stanford and Timms' 2021 Australian study reported that lack of supportive structures predicted burnout in their sample, while self-care practices did not predict professional quality of life.

Fantus and colleagues' 2025 qualitative study of healthcare chaplains in Texas examined potentially morally injurious events, including acts and omissions, witnessing moral transgressions and workplace betrayal. These findings concern the settings studied; they are not proof of every structural interpretation offered in this book.

SafeWork NSW guidance identifies psychosocial hazards including role conflict or unclear roles, low job control, poor support, poor procedural justice, traumatic exposure, conflict and hazardous environments. It prioritises eliminating or minimising risk through work design and higher-order controls over relying on coping strategies alone.

Corrective Services NSW describes correctional chaplains as independent rather than public-service employees and emphasises trust, pastoral care and attention to the whole person. The correctional regulation cited below addresses accredited chaplaincy, confidential religious ministrations within security parameters and welfare-related functions.

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About Sharon Mackenzie

Sharon Mackenzie is a counsellor, chaplain, reflective safeguarding practitioner, author and educator whose work explores the places where pastoral care, dignity, governance, power and human vulnerability meet.

Her work grew from lived experience across counselling, chaplaincy, churches, schools, governance and institutional settings, and from a persistent question: what happens when the structures designed to support people begin placing the weight of those structures onto the people within them?

Through Spirit Led Counselling, Sharon works with people to untangle complex relational and institutional experiences, restore internal authority and place responsibility rightly. Her wider body of work includes the Reflective Safeguarding Framework™, The Sanctuary Within™, structural discernment resources, books, teaching and professional formation.

Spirit Led Institute extends that work into self-paced education and training for faith communities, leaders, practitioners and organisations. Alongside the Institute sits Sharon's author and publishing work, including The Arcanum: a growing library of books, frameworks and reflective resources. Together these form an integrated body of work concerned with safeguarding, restoration, spiritual formation, dignity and the recovery of human agency.

Explore the wider work

Spirit Led Counselling - https://www.spiritledcounselling.com

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