



An Orientation Brief for New Endorsers of Chaplains

Marsh Institute for Chaplains
www.marshinstitute.org

The Marsh Institute collaborates to equip, support, and advocate for chaplains in diverse and global settings, thereby empowering chaplains worldwide. The Marsh Institute strongly affirms the responsibility and value of faith-based endorsers and offers this brief in a collaborative spirit to work closely with them.

This orientation brief builds on Dr. Jim Spivey's January 2022 AREB presentation in Washington, D.C., and *The Heart of a Chaplain*, 2nd ed., with the assistance of AI. (See also The Marsh Institute White Paper on "The Role of Endorsers in Chaplaincy" <https://marshinstitute.org/the-role-of-endorsers-in-chaplaincy-stewardship-advocacy-and-future-challenges/>)

1. Why Endorsement Matters

As an endorser, you are a "hidden steward" of chaplaincy. Chaplains stand between faith communities and secular institutions; endorsers stand behind chaplains, safeguarding that bridge.

Endorsement is not just a form or a signature. It is a covenantal relationship in which the faith community:

- Affirms a chaplain's **calling and character**.
- Confirms their **fitness and preparation** for institutional ministry.
- Commits to **ongoing accountability and pastoral care**.

Done well, endorsement protects:

- The **institution** (by assuring high standards and ethical practice).
- The **faith community** (by ensuring chaplains remain rooted in their tradition).
- The **chaplain** (by providing advocacy, support, and "top cover" when pressures mount).

2. What Ecclesiastical Endorsement Is (and Is Not)

Ecclesiastical endorsement is the formal, ongoing affirmation by a recognized religious body that a chaplain:

- Is in **good standing** with that body.
- Is **qualified** and **formed** to serve as a chaplain in a specific kind of institution (military, VA, hospital, corrections, etc.).

- Remains **accountable** to the sending faith community while employed by a secular institution.

Endorsement is:

- **Not** the same as ordination or commissioning (those recognize a general call to ministry).
- **Not** certification (professional bodies assess competencies; you attest to spiritual/ecclesial fitness).
- **More than** a recommendation letter; it has ongoing authority and responsibility.

In *The Heart of a Chaplain*, endorsement is described as the chaplain's primary credential, alongside ordination and professional certification, forming a complete vocational profile.

3. Foundations: Calling, Constitution, and Dual Accountability

Your work as an endorser rests on three foundations:

1. **Sacred Calling**
 - Chaplaincy is a specialized vocation, taking ministry into “closed” or restricted settings.
 - Endorsers discern whether candidates show evidence of genuine calling, maturity, and aptitude for this demanding work.
2. **Constitutional Framework (U.S. context)**
 - Chaplaincy exists to protect **free exercise** of religion where access to clergy would otherwise be restricted (e.g., deployment, incarceration).
 - Chaplains also help institutions avoid the **establishment** of religion by preventing coercive or sectarian practices.
 - Endorsement clarifies that chaplains are clergy of a real faith community, not state-sponsored preachers or generic wellness staff.
3. **Dual Accountability**
 - Chaplains are accountable to the **institution** (policies, supervision, job performance).
 - They are equally accountable to the **faith community** (doctrine, ethics, spiritual integrity).
 - Endorsement formalizes and sustains that second line of accountability.

4. The Five Core Roles of an Endorser

You can think of your ministry in five interlocking roles.

4.1 Manager – Standards and Stewardship

You steward people and processes:

- Recruit and screen candidates for **doctrine, character, education, and emotional health**.
- Ensure they meet institutional requirements (degrees, CPE, experience).
- Maintain records, track status changes, and manage transitions between roles and institutions.

Key questions:

- Who do we endorse, and on what basis?
- Are our standards clear, transparent, and consistently applied?

4.2 Advocate – “Top Cover” for Chaplains and Chaplaincy

You speak up for chaplains and for chaplaincy itself:

- Intervene when chaplains face **unfair pressure** or constraints on faithful practice.
- Explain and defend chaplaincy’s value within your denomination and to external leaders.
- Engage with institutions on policies affecting **religious freedom** and **spiritual care**.

Key questions:

- If a chaplain is under fire for doing faithful ministry, what will I do?
- Can I clearly explain to leaders why endorsement and chaplaincy are indispensable?

4.3 Trainer – Formation and Continuing Education

You help form and sharpen chaplains:

- Provide or sponsor training in your **denominational distinctives**, ethics, and spiritual formation.
- Reinforce professional standards in areas like trauma care, interfaith competence, and institutional navigation.
- Use resources such as The Heart of a Chaplain (and related workbooks, case studies, “Memorable Moments”) as core texts for chaplain development. The Heart of a Chaplain **Student Workbook** and **Instructor Guide** provide a coherent, chapter-by-chapter roadmap that supports the thoughtful, competent formation of chaplains in any setting. Additional resources for chaplains are coming soon. (See www.marshinstitute.org/book)

Key questions:

- What do we expect our chaplains to *know, be, and do*?
- How do we cultivate those capacities over time?
- How can we identify and strengthen chaplain-related competencies?

4.4 Supporter – Pastor to Chaplains

You serve as pastor to those who pastor others:

- Offer **spiritual care** to chaplains and their families, especially in deployment, crisis, or transition.
- Maintain regular contact (check-ins, visits, retreats).
- Normalize conversations about **burnout, moral injury, grief, and doubt**.

Key questions:

- Do our chaplains know they are not alone?
- What structures do we have for their ongoing spiritual and emotional care?

4.5 Coordinator – Connector and Bridge-Builder

You build and sustain networks:

- Connect chaplains with denominational leaders, peers, and resources.
- Liaise with institutions, training programs, and other endorsers.
- Participate in cooperative bodies and conversations that shape the future of chaplaincy.

Key questions:

- Who needs to be talking to whom, and how can I help that happen?
- Where can collaboration strengthen chaplaincy and endorsement?

5. The Chaplaincy Landscape Today: Why Your Role Is Strategic

Current realities make endorsement more—not less—important:

- **Changing religious demographics:** more “nones” and nontraditional affiliations, yet many still seek spiritual care.
- **Expanding chaplaincy settings:** healthcare, education, corporate, first responders, community, and more.
- **Emerging nonreligious spiritual care roles:** nonreligious chaplains and secular “wellbeing” providers raise new questions about what makes chaplaincy distinctly religious.
- **Cultural and institutional pressures:** conflict over controversial beliefs, “cancel culture,” and policy shifts can place chaplains in vulnerable positions.

In this environment, strong, thoughtful endorsement:

- Guards **spiritual identity** so chaplains do not drift into purely secular helper roles.

- Supports chaplains in navigating **pluralism** without losing their theological center.
- Maintains **standards and accountability** when regulations and expectations are in flux.

6. Priority Actions for Your First Years as an Endorser

1. **Articulate your theology of chaplaincy and endorsement.**
 - Write a brief statement: What is chaplaincy for? How does endorsement express your tradition's convictions about mission, pastoral care, and public witness?
2. **Codify clear endorsement standards.**
 - Define requirements (education, formation, experience, spiritual maturity).
 - Clarify processes for application, renewal, discipline, and withdrawal.
3. **Establish pastoral care rhythms.**
 - Schedule regular check-ins with chaplains.
 - Plan at least one annual gathering or retreat if possible.
 - Make your availability in crisis explicit and practical.
4. **Integrate formation resources.**
 - Use *The Heart of a Chaplain* and its ancillary training materials in orientation, mentoring, and continuing education.
 - Encourage chaplains to reflect on calling, character, institutional life, and self-care.
5. **Strengthen institutional and collaborative relationships.**
 - Meet key leaders where your chaplains serve (military, VA, hospitals, etc.).
 - Build ties with other endorsers and professional chaplaincy associations.
6. **Regularly review and adjust.**
 - Ask annually: Are we truly functioning as **manager, advocate, trainer, supporter, and coordinator?**
 - Adjust policies and practices considering emerging needs and feedback from chaplains.

7. Reflection Questions for New Endorsers

1. Identity and theology

How does my tradition's theology of church, mission, and pastoral care shape what I believe chaplains are *for* in secular institutions?

2. Standards and accountability

Are my endorsement standards clear, transparent, and appropriately rigorous? How do they relate to professional certification standards?

3. Pastoral care and advocacy

If a chaplain in my care faced unfair pressure to compromise their convictions, what concrete steps would I take to support and defend them?

4. Pluralism and prophetic voice

How can I help chaplains hold together faithful witness with genuine respect for religious and nonreligious others, without sliding into either coercion or silence?

5. Future-orientation

Given current trends (decline of denominational identity, rise of the “nones,” nonreligious chaplains), what strategic changes should I consider in my endorsement ministry over the next 5–10 years? What concrete steps can we take in the next 12–24 months to improve our work as managers, advocates, trainers, supporters, and coordinators?