



Becoming a Chaplain

Training, Certification and Employment

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Serious standards. More than one legitimate path.

There Is More Than One Path into Professional Chaplaincy

Many capable people rule themselves out before they begin.

They have heard that every professional chaplain must hold a Master of Divinity degree, be ordained, complete four units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in an ACPE-accredited program and become board certified before being employable.

It's simply not true.

Those qualifications describe some chaplaincy positions—especially ones in major academic medical centers and large healthcare systems. They do not describe every paid chaplaincy position, every certification pathway, or every person who can benefit from Clinical Pastoral Education and turn it into a professional calling.

Professional preparation matters. So does understanding that chaplaincy is not governed by one universal pathway.

Training, Certification and Employment Are Three Different Questions

These questions are often confused:

1. Are you prepared to enter CPE and learn to provide clinical pastoral/spiritual care?
2. Which professional certifications might eventually be available to you?
3. What qualifications does a particular employer require?

A person may be ready for CPE before meeting the requirements for professional certification. A person may also be qualified for meaningful chaplaincy employment without yet qualifying for—or needing—the particular certification required by a major medical center.

You do not need to have your entire professional future settled before beginning CPE.

Our CPSP Units and Multiple Certification Pathways

The Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc. (BCCI), the certification affiliate of the Association of Professional Chaplains, recognizes the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy (CPSP), our parent organization, as an approved provider of Clinical Pastoral Education.

ClinicalChaplaincy.org operates under the authority of CPSP's Nautilus Pacific Chapter and under CPSP's standards. The National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) also recognizes eligible CPSP units.

Eligible CPSP CPE units granted after January 1, 2024, are accepted toward BCCI's clinical-training requirements. Units completed through ClinicalChaplaincy.org may therefore support certification through BCCI, NACC or CPSP itself, provided that applicants meet each organization's separate requirements.

BCCI currently requires:

- Four CPE units for Board Certified Chaplain eligibility.
- Two CPE units for Associate Certified Chaplain eligibility.
- A bachelor's degree and a qualifying master's degree, together with prescribed graduate study.
- Faith-group endorsement or recognition.
- Professional chaplaincy experience.
- Demonstration of professional competence through written materials and an interview.

An MDiv is one possible academic route, but it is not the only qualifying master's degree under current BCCI standards.

Completion of CPE units does not itself confer certification or guarantee that every BCCI requirement has been met. It does mean that eligible CPSP units can be applied directly toward BCCI's clinical-training requirement.

What If I Do Not Meet BCCI's Academic Requirements?

There is more than one road to professional chaplaincy, and not every position requires certification. For those seeking certification, CPSP offers a respected, legitimate pathway.

CPSP certification emphasizes demonstrated clinical, theological, conceptual and ethical competence. CPSP does not require an MDiv for certification as a Clinical Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor.

Under current CPSP standards, candidates demonstrate competence through their education, clinical training, professional functioning, written work and review by professional peers. For CPSP Clinical Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor and Associate Clinical Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor certification, at minimum, a four-year degree is required. Ordinarily:

- Associate certification involves at least two CPE units or equivalent clinical training.
- Clinical Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor certification involves at least four CPE units or equivalent clinical training.

Candidates must also demonstrate accountability to a faith or spiritual community, or endorsement according to that community's established practice.

A person who does not meet BCCI's graduate-education requirements may therefore still have a viable pathway toward CPSP certification and professional chaplaincy employment.

Do All Chaplaincy Jobs Require Four Units, a Degree and Board Certification?

No.

Many large healthcare organizations require—or expect a candidate eventually to obtain—a graduate degree, four CPE units, faith-group endorsement and board certification or certification eligibility. Those are the most highly sought-after and typically best-paying professional positions, but they are not the whole employment landscape.

Requirements vary substantially by employer and position. Chaplains work in:

- Hospitals and community healthcare systems.
- Hospice and palliative care.
- Long-term care and senior living.
- Behavioral-health and addiction-treatment programs.
- Correctional institutions.
- Schools and universities.
- Community organizations.
- Disaster response and crisis services.
- Workplace and corporate chaplaincy.
- Congregational and community-based ministries.

Some entry-level, associate, per-diem and community-based positions accept fewer than four units. Some employers require a bachelor's degree rather than a graduate degree. Others consider substantial related ministry or chaplaincy experience in place of a degree. Still others emphasize demonstrated competence and the ability to work respectfully with people across religious and cultural differences.

A job description—not a generalization about “what chaplains must have”—determines the qualifications for a particular position.

Hospice Chaplaincy

Hospice is one important pathway into professional chaplaincy.

Federal Medicare hospice regulations require the interdisciplinary care team to include a qualified and competent ‘pastoral or other counselor’ to help address the spiritual needs of patients and families. The federal regulation does not prescribe a degree, ordination, board certification or a particular number of CPE units for that role.

Individual hospices establish their own hiring requirements, subject to applicable federal, state and local law. Some seek board-certified chaplains with graduate theological education and several units of CPE. Others consider candidates with a bachelor's degree—often in a field outside theology or ministry—and one or two CPE units. Still others accept substantial related experience in place of a

bachelor's degree. We are aware of hospices in Utah, Kansas, Michigan and Georgia—and possibly elsewhere—that have hired or advertised positions for chaplains without requiring a bachelor's degree. Job postings reviewed in August 2026 in Kansas, Michigan and Georgia required only a high-school diploma or GED, while identifying a bachelor's degree and CPE as preferred rather than required. These are employer-specific practices, not statewide standards.

CPE can therefore be especially valuable for someone seeking hospice employment. It provides supervised clinical experience, documented professional formation and preparation for interdisciplinary work—even when four units and board certification are not immediately required.

Must I Be Ordained?

Typically, no. Ordination is not required for every chaplaincy position and need not precede CPE.

Ordination, commissioning, endorsement and faith-community accountability are related, but they are not identical.

BCCI requires faith-group endorsement or recognition. CPSP requires documented accountability to a faith community or endorsement according to that community's regular practice. Individual employers may require ordination, commissioning, endorsement or another form of recognized spiritual authority.

People who do not belong to a traditional denomination may still have legitimate options. Interfaith communities and other recognized spiritual bodies can sometimes provide formation, ordination, ministerial standing or ecclesiastical endorsement. Candidates should verify that a particular employer or certifying organization recognizes the body through which they seek standing.

Our Record of Professional Employment Success

No responsible CPE program can guarantee employment. Hiring decisions are made by hiring institutions and organizations according to their own requirements and their assessment of each candidate.

Prospective chaplains-in-training should nevertheless know that the supervisory tradition behind ClinicalChaplaincy.org has an exceptionally strong record of professional success.

Chaplains who received their CPE under Dr. David Roth—and chaplains subsequently trained by the CPE supervisors he prepared—have repeatedly secured highly competitive positions in hospitals, hospices, healthcare systems and other professional settings. Graduates of his CPE programs have gone on to manage spiritual care departments, provide leadership within major healthcare organizations and become CPE supervisors who train other chaplains.

That record does not promise the same outcome for every trainee. It demonstrates that this training is grounded in decades of experience preparing chaplains whose clinical competence has been recognized by demanding employers and whose careers have advanced into leadership, management, clinical training and the training of other chaplains. Some have had an enduring effect upon the profession itself.

Our Serious Standards—Without Unnecessary Gatekeeping

ClinicalChaplaincy.org does not promise that completing one unit will produce a job, nor do we suggest that everyone we train will qualify immediately for professional certification.

We do promise to take each applicant's vocational aims seriously, and we have a history of working to optimize success for those in our CPE programs.

We will help prospective trainees distinguish among:

- What is required to begin CPE.
- What is required for the kind of employment they seek.
- Which certification pathway may be available to them.
- What additional education, training, experience or spiritual-community standing they may eventually need.

Do not rule yourself out because your background does not resemble the traditional seminary-to-residency pathway. Let us help you understand the pathway that may be available from where you are now.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need an MDiv to enter CPE?

No. An MDiv is not a universal prerequisite for entering Clinical Pastoral Education. Admission is based on readiness for clinical learning, vocational purpose, an appropriate clinical placement and the ability to participate fully in supervised formation.

Do I need four CPE units before I can work as a chaplain?

Not in every setting. We do encourage everyone to take advantage of the opportunity four units provide to develop oneself and one's knowledge, skills and abilities. Four units are commonly expected for board certification and many advanced hospital positions, but some employers consider candidates with one or two units, particularly for associate, per-diem, hospice, long-term-care and community-based roles. Some hospice and other spiritual-care employers also consider substantial related experience in place of a bachelor's degree.

Will these units count toward BCCI certification?

Eligible CPSP units granted after January 1, 2024, are accepted toward BCCI's CPE requirements. Applicants must also meet BCCI's educational, endorsement, experience and competency requirements.

What if I cannot qualify for BCCI certification?

You may qualify for certification through CPSP. CPSP does not require an MDiv for Clinical Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor certification and evaluates candidates through demonstrated clinical, theological, conceptual and ethical competence.

Does CPE guarantee employment or certification?

No. No CPE program can do that. Employment decisions belong to employers, and certification decisions belong to certifying organizations. Our CPE provides cutting-edge clinical training, supervised experience and professional formation that substantially strengthen a candidate's preparation and qualifications.

Can someone help me understand my own pathway?

Yes. Prospective chaplain trainees are invited to speak with us about their education, ministry background, spiritual-community standing, any previous clinical training and employment goals before deciding whether and how to move ahead.