



## Clergy vs Chaplain: Is there a Difference?

Rev. Peter R. Hook, State Chaplain

The term “clergy” refers people who are ordained or recognized by a religious community as ritual or spiritual leaders. As such, they can perform religious duties and minister to individuals within a particular faith community.

Generally, their duties include conducting religious services, delivering sermons or religious teachings, providing pastoral care and counseling to congregants, performing religious rituals and ceremonies (such as weddings, funerals, and baptisms), offering guidance on matters of faith and ethics, and leading the overall spiritual and administrative affairs of the religious community.

Depending on their religious or denominational affiliation, clergy are referred to as pastors, rabbis, priests, or imams. With some of these religious leaders, depending on their geographical location and situation, they wear distinctive clerical clothing which sets them apart and identifies them as clergy.

Historically, the term “chaplain” referred to members of the clergy who ministered to people in a variety of settings outside a particular faith community. Chaplains can be found in a variety of settings such as hospitals, prisons, fire and police departments, educational institutions, and the armed forces.

While the clergy minister primarily within a particular faith community, chaplains minister to individuals outside of a faith community from a variety of religious or spiritual backgrounds, including those who may have no faith affiliation. Therefore, most chaplains feel it is best not to wear any distinctive clerical clothing or jewelry or do anything that could hinder their ministry.

Within the broad category of Chaplaincy, at least three different types of chaplains can be identified.

1. The Ceremonial Chaplain: Within many organizations there is a person designated as chaplain. The position is basically ceremonial, and from time to time, the chaplain may be called upon to offer a prayer. The U.S. Senate Chaplain, and those within most community and service organizations, are basically ceremonial chaplains. In most cases they are clergy, but not necessarily so.
2. The Caring Chaplain: This is a trained individual who offers person-centered, compassionate care. A caring chaplain will come along side of a person to listen, encourage, and offer comfort and guidance as a caring friend would do. They care for the whole person and treat everyone with dignity and respect. Hospital, hospice care, and nursing home chaplains are almost exclusively caring chaplains.

3. The Tactical Chaplain: These chaplains operate primarily with law enforcement agencies and the first responder community (fire departments and emergency medical services--EMS). They are trained in crime scene protocols, dealing with trauma scenes, and helping those who have been traumatized. In addition to responding to critical incidents, they spend time in the trenches with those involved in first-responder work, establishing trust and rapport. The tactical chaplains are vital members of the first responder team. During critical incidents, they wear an outer garment that identifies them as CHAPLAIN, but nothing that indicates they are with the police department.

Historically, the chaplains in the VFW were considered ceremonial chaplains. They were called upon to offer the prayers and maybe send a card if someone was ill or passed away. That perspective of the chaplain's role has been changing. The VFW Chaplain exists to minister to veterans and their families. And according to our Congressional Charter, the VFW Chaplain *"shall be concerned with the spiritual needs of the members, and by precept and example, point the way toward a high moral plane for the organization."*

Blessings as you serve,



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