



An Executive Summary

Can We Strengthen Spiritual Care in Catholic Healthcare?

FALL 2026

The main concern of this paper is the importance of spiritual care as part of Catholic identity and a strategy for whole-person care, demonstrating its effectiveness for patients and healthcare workers by multiple studies. These studies also show that spiritual care enhances the patient experience and may contribute to both reduced costs and lower burnout among clinical staff. Despite the need and desire for spiritual care, internal and external factors limit its availability.

Spiritual care is rooted in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, which, over the centuries, evolved into many forms of institutional care. Quality healthcare recognizes healing is holistic — body, mind, and spirit. The Catholic tradition and the ERDs that guide Catholic healthcare insist upon the care of the spirit. Chaplains are professionally trained clinicians who provide holistic spiritual support to patients, residents, and staff regardless of one's faith tradition. As trusted members of the interdisciplinary team, chaplains attend to the whole health of persons and teams through spiritual interventions, meaning-making modalities, and sacramental provision to those who are Catholic.

External challenges to effective spiritual care include the predominance of a secular, clinical model of healthcare that tends to marginalize the spiritual. Internal challenges include a lack of awareness of chaplaincy as a vocational choice, low compensation, a lack of commitment to CPE programs, and a reluctance to recognize chaplains as full-fledged members of the care team. The limited availability of priest-chaplains is a significant problem for pastoral care in the sacramental Catholic tradition.

Upholding a commitment to strengthen the quality of spiritual and pastoral care across Catholic healthcare requires collaboration among key stakeholders, including mission leaders, sponsors, executive leadership, spiritual care leaders, and chaplains themselves.

We have summarized specific suggestions for each of these groups in Table A1.

Table A1. Upholding Our Commitment to Strengthen Spiritual Care

Role	Responsibilities
Mission Leaders	✦ Advocate for resources to ensure quality spiritual care is accessible 24/7 for patients, caregivers, and staff ✦ Prioritize spiritual care in organizational decisions ✦ “Ensure the vibrancy and professionalism of spiritual care services to meet the unique needs of patients, residents, families, and associates”⁵⁸ ✦ Model and promote spiritual care literacy
Sponsors	✦ Hold executive leadership accountable for the problem of unmet spiritual care and workforce shortages, and ensure CPE accessibility ✦ Advocate for institutional changes that could advance and enhance a pipeline of qualified Catholic spiritual care professionals ✦ Ensure just compensation and adequate resources so that quality spiritual care is accessible and available to all who need it
Executive Leadership	✦ Promote spiritual care literacy and integration of spiritual care leadership in organizational decisions ✦ Support the hiring of Board-Certified Chaplains, accessibility of CPE and certification support for those already hired ✦ Ensure adequate staffing and compensation for quality spiritual care
Spiritual Care Leaders and Chaplains	✦ Embrace spiritual care as a clinical role (documentation, assessment, quality improvement, best practices) ✦ Track and provide data to tell the story of how chaplains impact patient and staff outcomes ✦ Educate on the role of the chaplain and promote spiritual literacy at every level ✦ Partner with interdisciplinary teams and align with organizational strategic initiatives ✦ Uphold Board Certification standards