

The Illuminating Lamp: A Four-Step Model for Islamic Chaplaincy in North America

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Abstract

This article presents a four-step framework for Islamic chaplaincy in North America, derived directly from the Qur'ānic description of the Prophet Muhammad as a witness, bearer of good news, warner, and beacon of light (Qur'ān 33:45–46). Rooted in foundational Islamic sources, this model offers Muslim chaplains a structured sequence of actions that build upon one another, providing a focused approach to spiritual care. The model emphasizes a God-centered, holistic vision that integrates service (khidma), compassion (rahma), love (maḥabba), and ongoing self-purification (tazkiya), while honoring the sanctity of the care seeker's physical, emotional, and spiritual journey. By following the four-step progression—witnessing, affirming goodness, offering gentle correction, and inviting toward divine connection—chaplains can align their technique and interventions with the Prophetic example while also engaging thoughtfully with contemporary chaplaincy practices. The framework encourages chaplains to cultivate presence (ḥudūr), ethical restraint, and compassion, equipping them to serve with theological integrity and pastoral wisdom. Rather than treating psychological relief as an endpoint, Islamic chaplaincy orients care toward holistic well-being in this world and the Hereafter. The article concludes by affirming the necessity of mentorship, accountability, and continuous self-refinement for Muslim chaplains, ensuring that their work

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remains a sincere reflection of the Prophetic model of service. In offering this framework, the authors seek to contribute a distinct and faithful paradigm to the broader field of spiritual caregiving, one that is both rooted in Islamic tradition and responsive to the diverse realities of contemporary practice.

Keywords: *Islamic chaplaincy, spiritual care, prophetic ethics, God-centered care, clinical pastoral care*

Introduction

Islamic chaplaincy is a profound journey of service, embodying principles rooted in Islam's values and teachings. This model draws from a divine framework guided by service (*khidma*), love (*maḥabba*), compassion (*raḥma*), and the centering of God in every interaction (*tawajjuh*). Unlike many present-day psychosocial approaches to chaplaincy that are methodologically non-theological—rooted in postmodern philosophical approaches such as treating revelation as non-authoritative and spirituality as individually constructed (Doehring 2006)—Islamic chaplaincy encourages a God-centered approach, emphasizing the chaplain's role as a *khalīfa* (steward of God's creation) who is actively engaged in an ongoing spiritual effort of self-refinement in the service of others. This approach is inspired by the Qur'ān and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, whom God sent as the most exemplary guide for humanity. Accordingly, our critique targets the underlying worldview of psychosocial models (e.g., authority without revelation), not the methods themselves. Techniques from these models, such as assessment, reframing, reflecting listening, and drawing on trauma research, remain instrumentally valuable when re-anchored in *tawḥīd*. As with contemporary uses of yoga or meditation detached from Hinduism and Buddhism, psychosocial practices may yield benefit; however, once severed from their spiritual sources, the purpose and limits of the practices shift (Antony 2018). While a full analysis of postmodern spiritual care frameworks lies beyond this article's scope, this paper argues for reintegrating psychosocial methods widely used in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) within a God-centered framework (i.e., retaining the tools while reframing their ultimate aim).

In presenting a model for Islamic chaplaincy in North America, it is essential to adhere to the values, framework, and faith tradition that guide Muslim chaplains. Chaplains are known as caregivers; however, their role extends beyond this as they receive and respond to what the care seeker needs. Each encounter represents a sacred moment, not just between two human beings, but one facilitated by the Divine. Operating from a God-centered worldview, Muslim chaplains understand that every being is a part of creation brought into existence by the Creator. Therefore, their role is to provide comfort, hope, and compassion, acting as a conduit between God and the care seeker—without coercion or proselytizing—not merely to provide care, but also to embody God's love and guidance in every encounter. In practice, this means leveraging psychosocial techniques where appropriate while anchoring aims in revelation and Prophetic guidance. This sacred calling

is deeply rooted in witnessing the care seeker's journey as part of a broader, eternal path, thereby acknowledging his/her reality and destiny both in this world and the next.

The chaplain recognizes the soul's journey and guides the care seeker with compassion and respect for this spiritual continuity. Understanding life's temporality, particularly the reality of death, helps the chaplain approach each encounter with humility and empathy, acknowledging the sanctity of the care seeker's soul. The Muslim chaplain is deeply aware that life on Earth is merely one stage in the journey of the human soul; a soul which has existed in the pre-eternal realm, resides briefly in this worldly life (*dunyā*), and continues through the intermediary state after death (*barzakh*), before reaching the Hereafter (*ākhirā*), culminating in the Day of Resurrection. Such awareness underscores the centrality of death and temporality, which, when accepted, often marks a person's spiritual strength. Understanding how one relates to their soul, life, death, and purpose is vital to making meaning out of life's experiences. This insight allows the chaplain to embody etiquette (*adab*), honoring the care seeker's journey with empathy and reverence, while recognizing the latter's inherent sanctity as a soul navigating life's challenges and joys.

This ability to witness both the worldly and otherworldly dimensions of a person's existence is fundamental to Islamic chaplaincy. The chaplain understands that each moment in this temporary life directly connects to the care seeker's eternal journey. As such, every encounter must embody an invitation to The Real (al-Ḥaqq), serving as a bridge to the care seeker's ultimate well-being in the Hereafter. This perspective affirms that health is not a morally or spiritually neutral concept. Rather, in Islam, true well-being (*ʿāfiya*) encompasses not only physical, neurological, and psychological health, but also moral and spiritual wellness. This involves caring for both the care seeker's immediate and eternal needs, striving to help them achieve balance and well-being in this world and the next. This holistic approach acknowledges that true health is inextricably linked with the soul's journey and relationship with God, adding a transcendent element to the care a Muslim chaplain offers and one which grounds their service to humanity squarely in the roots of the Islamic tradition.

Through this God-centered approach, Muslim chaplains help others navigate their challenges not by imposing, but by meeting them where they are and offering compassion, wisdom, and guidance. In the Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad perfectly embodied this approach, and thus his appearance, speech, relationships, and lifestyle offer profound guidance for Muslim chaplains. A four-step model for Islamic chaplaincy can be derived from the following:

O Prophet! We have sent you as a **witness**, a **bearer of good news**, a **warner**, and as **one who invites to God**, by His permission, as a beacon of light. (Qur'ān 33:45–46)

These Qur'ānic verses highlight the Prophet's mission as a guide for humanity to connect with their Creator. Ultimately, a Muslim chaplain is simply an individual seeking to fulfill the Prophetic mission of helping humanity to realize this potential. Therefore, he/she strives to emulate this role by serving as a witness, a bearer of good news, a warner, and a beacon of light (steps 1–4). While the chaplain has a defined understanding of the human

purpose and journey, this is for his/her knowledge in determining spiritual assessments as opposed to imposing his/her own solution. The Muslim chaplain must offer care that meets care seekers where they are in their spiritual journeys and stages of faith, aiming to unite Creator and creation.

This paper draws from these verses to derive chaplaincy practices that address the holistic nature of the human being, considering both their physical and spiritual existence as per the Prophet's mission. In doing so, it aims to shed light on how Islamic chaplaincy can uniquely nurture and care for the human spirit.

Step 1: Witnessing God and the Care Seeker

The Act of Witnessing

In Islamic chaplaincy, witnessing involves seeing the care seekers as they truly are, both in this world and the next. Unlike frameworks that focus solely on one's physical or psychological well-being, it considers the care seeker's spiritual welfare. For Muslims, this is encapsulated in the concept of *ʿāfiya* (holistic well-being), which includes physical, emotional, and spiritual health. A Muslim chaplain witnesses the care seeker through the lens of divine guidance, striving to see each individual as God sees them—worthy, dignified, and connected to the soul's larger journey. This act of witnessing goes beyond providing care; it involves becoming a living example of the values one wishes to impart.

To be a witness (*shāhid*) to another human being is a transformative act of care. The beauty of chaplaincy often lies in the practitioner's ability to create a space in which the care seeker feels fully embraced and welcomed. To this end, the act of witnessing requires establishing a stillness that allows the care seeker to be present in an environment of safety, compassion, and warmth. In such an environment, truth can manifest, and the care seeker feels seen and understood. In his seminal work, *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk emphasizes that feeling understood has a profound effect on our physiology (van der Kolk 2014). Research demonstrates how the brain changes when people feel truly seen and heard. Social support, whether in a community of many or just two people fully present with one another, is the most powerful protection against trauma and stress. This example encourages us to be present for others with full attention, fostering connection as an antidote to trauma.

Every human soul is a unique creation of God, and each encounter is an opportunity to extend a sincere, loving gaze that heals and uplifts. Muslim scholars of spirituality held the view that merely the gaze of a friend of God could impact the state of others (Al-Ghazālī 2015, 45). However, this sincere gaze can only be given when chaplains acknowledge that they themselves are being witnessed by God. For the believer, witnessing another person's condition is intimately grounded in witnessing the Divine Source. As caregivers, chaplains witness the care seeker from the vantage point of the chaplain's connection to God, striving to see the ennobled Adamic child (“*wa laqad karramnā Banī Ādam*”) who is before them (Qurʾān 17:70). When chaplains consider God's name, al-Ḥaqq—that God is the Real, the Truth, and in Witnessing the Truth—they can come to witness the care seeker's true condition. Interestingly, the Islamic tradition contains a link between seeing God and being

seen by God, as exemplified in the Ḥadīth Jibrīl, when the Prophet responds: “It is to worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, then, He sees you” (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 50). When one internalizes that one is constantly being seen by God, chaplains can extend that sacred gaze to those they care for, offering the care seeker the same sense of compassion, acceptance, and love that one experiences from our Creator.

Witnessing Through the Prophetic Example

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) serves as the ultimate example of witnessing, as he was a witness to God before he was a witness to humanity in terms of embodying mercy, compassion, and guidance. As Muslim chaplains, we are called to emulate this role, witnessing others with compassion and understanding. Part of the act of witnessing is to stand as a model for others, and so chaplains bear witness both for and against themselves through what they exhibit in the world. As the Prophet stands as a true witness over us by providing a model for us to follow, chaplains are called to witness humanity by embodying the Prophetic message of mercy and guidance: “And so we made you a justly balanced community so you may be witnesses over humanity, and the Messenger is a witness over you” (Qur’ān 2:143).

According to the Sīra, the Prophet’s followers loved him greatly and desired to sit with him for as long as possible, “for when he spoke to anyone he would turn to him so fully and make him so amply the object of his attention” (Lings 1983, 221). He exemplified this through small gestures, such as never being the first to withdraw from a handshake, allowing others to take as much time as they needed (Al-Tirmidhī 2007, ḥadīth 231). As narrated by Anas ibn Mālīk, the Prophet told a woman, “Sit in any street you wish, and I will sit with you until I fulfill your need” (Al-Tirmidhī 2007, ḥadīth 334). This reflects his deep commitment to being fully present for others; an essential part of the act of witnessing. Spiritual care guides often emphasize active listening, teaching us to stop fidgeting, turn our bodies toward the other person, and listen attentively.

The Arabic word *ḥuḍūr* stems from the root *ḥa-ḍa-ra* (ح-ض-ر), which means “to be present” or “to attend” (Wehr 1994, 214). Etymologically, *ḥuḍūr* conveys the state of being present not only physically, but also mentally and spiritually. It encompasses an awareness and attentiveness that transcend mere physical attendance, thereby implying a deeper engagement with the moment. In Islamic mysticism, it represents a state of heightened spiritual awareness, one in which God’s presence is felt continuously. Students of the science of purification of the heart (*tazkiya*) often seek to cultivate this state of constant awareness of and connection to the Divine, known as *ḥuḍūr al-qalb* (presence of the heart), regardless of external circumstances. In essence, *ḥuḍūr* is more than mere physical presence—it is a state of spiritual consciousness where one’s heart, mind, and soul are fully attuned to the presence of God; i.e., where they are witnessing God.

From an Islamic and spiritual perspective, *ḥuḍūr* is often understood in relation to one’s presence before Allah. It reflects a state of mindfulness and spiritual awareness (*taqwā*), one in which the believer is conscious of God’s omnipresence and always strives to act with sincerity and devotion. In this sense, *ḥuḍūr* signifies a heart fully attentive to divine guidance and immersed in worship, and it implies an inner stillness and focus where the distractions fade away.

Chaplains are being given the gift of sitting with a care seeker in his/her most vulnerable state of heart. When invited into this sacred space of conversation, one assumes the role of both host and guest. As hosts, one offers the best of oneself to the other person, and as guests, one allows the other to take the lead, savoring their time together. This dynamic requires the chaplain to be humble and open, and to actively listen, as taught by the Prophet, tailoring one's approach to meet the other's unique needs. The Muslim chaplain's heart is fully attentive to God through practicing *ḥudūr*, thereby granting a stillness, alertness, and humility that allows him/her to fully focus on the needs of God's creation—truly witnessing them as they are. Through this sacred exchange, one embodies the Prophetic tradition of care and presence.

Preparing Our Disposition: Adab

The act of witnessing requires the chaplain to approach the care encounter with *adab* (proper etiquette and conduct), which includes balancing one's own internal state to reflect the Divine in every interaction. Thus, it is not about the words one says, but about the state of one's heart. One must clear away all internal distractions and impurities to witness the care seeker with sincerity and clarity. Emotional regulation is fundamental to improving the quality of the interaction and allowing for a care seeker to be served in the greatest capacity. Chaplains continuously cleanse their hearts of negative traits, such as arrogance, impatience, or condescension, to be vessels of God's light. By doing so, they lift others and offer them genuine guidance and support. True witnessing involves being honest with oneself in the moment and understanding that God is the source of all that is to occur, allowing one to respond rather than react. This internal regulation—managing urges to fix, advise, or comment—helps create an internal environment that manifests externally as a calm and inviting presence, which communicates attentiveness, love, and awareness so that the care seeker has space to show up as he/she is. By removing the weeds of the *nafs* (ego) so they can be in constant contact with God's light, chaplains lift people up and help others.

Witnessing in an Age of Loneliness

In today's world, where loneliness is pervasive, the act of witnessing another person becomes even more critical. Often, individuals feel unrecognized, unvalidated, and disconnected. Muslim chaplains' task is to affirm the intrinsic worth of each care seeker and remind them of their connection to their Lord. Recognizing these individuals' divinely given spirit (*rūḥ*) offers them an opportunity to see themselves as God intended—worthy and significant. Witnessing also involves helping them clear away barriers, distractions, and confusion so their hearts and souls can find a direct path to the Divine. Therefore, the chaplain must function as a mirror that reflects these individuals' potential, encouraging them to recognize and embrace their inner light.

In summary, the goal of witnessing is to offer peaceful stillness, compassion, and love, while recognizing that this gaze is rooted in being witnessed by God Himself. This acknowledgment enables chaplains to see the care seeker clearly, allowing them to offer sincere, transformative care that connects the individual back to his/her Creator.

Step 2: A Bearer of Good News

In times of crisis, the opportunity to discover meaning surfaces in various ways. Some revive and internalize what they already know theoretically from a religious tradition, and others must renew meaning. In the end, it's always God's timing and God's way on the path. Prophet Muhammad knew this, and thus served as a gentle guide who was patient with people's individualized journeys to God while consistently choosing to see each person's potential rather than the unrefined version presently manifesting.

The Goodness of Human Nature

Bringing good tidings (*tabshir*) is fundamentally about instilling hope, particularly when an individual feels overwhelmed or trapped by despair. This role involves reminding them of God's mercy, compassion, and omnipresence, thereby helping them rediscover the light of divine guidance in times of darkness. A crucial aspect of this process is affirming the human being's inherent dignity and goodness, as God has honored humanity by granting them an elevated status (Qur'ān 17:70). The chaplain achieves this by recognizing and validating the care seeker's strengths and qualities, such as expressing empathy, dedication, or resilience. Statements like, "I see that you care deeply for your family," or "Your efforts show immense strength," serve to affirm the care seeker's experience and sense of self.

This process stems from the act of witnessing, where the chaplain holds what the care seeker shares with sacred confidentiality, vulnerability, and trust. In doing so, the chaplain bears witness to the individual's journey, affirming his/her struggles and strengths as part of his/her divinely ordained path. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified this approach by never leaving anyone in a state of despair but instead offering them hope and encouragement. For example, when a young child grieved for the death of a pet bird, the Prophet showed empathy and acknowledged the pain, validating these feelings in a tender and compassionate manner (Al-Tirmidhī 2007, ḥadīth 337). In more trying circumstances, such as a family member's death or the suffering of the oppressed, the Prophet always demonstrated a deep understanding of human sorrow and uplifted and comforted those around him. By doing so, he laid out the approach for Muslim chaplains: offer hope, compassion, and affirmation and guide them gently back to the path of divine connection.

Islam teaches that human beings are inherently good, and the chaplain's role is to affirm this goodness even in times of despair. Prophet Muhammad exemplified this in his interactions, always comforting, encouraging, and lifting others, regardless of their circumstances. His approach was not one of harshness or immediate condemnation, but of compassionate engagement, gentle guidance, and unwavering belief in a person's capacity for transformation. A Muslim chaplain, following this Prophetic model, fosters trust, hope, and a sense of divine closeness for those struggling with despair. By expressing *ḥusn al-dhann* (a good opinion of others) and responding with wisdom, chaplains do not merely counsel or advise—they become a vessel for mercy and divine guidance, encouraging the care seeker to return to his/her innate goodness and connection with Allah.

Such expressions foster a hopeful attitude, grounded in a good opinion of God, that with Allah's help and guidance, individuals can navigate their challenges. This belief

instills confidence that individuals possess the necessary tools to overcome difficulties and discover the answers and meanings they seek in their experiences. After the first revelation, Prophet Muhammad returned home trembling and overwhelmed by fear and confusion. In this moment of vulnerability, his wife Khadīja exemplified the qualities of a chaplain via compassionate reassurance and validation. She listened with empathy and acknowledged his fear without dismissing or minimizing it. More importantly, she affirmed his noble character, reminding him of his long-standing virtues—his kindness to kin, generosity to the poor, support for the downtrodden, and commitment to truthfulness (Lings 1983, 51–52). By doing so, she offered a profound reminder of God’s love and favor upon him, assuring him that God would not abandon someone of such moral excellence. Her words not only comforted him in his moment of distress, but also reinforced his sense of divine purpose and mission, thereby illustrating the power of compassionate chaplaincy rooted in both empathy and affirmation.

The Prophetic emphasis on maintaining a good opinion of others is especially relevant in the context of Islamic chaplaincy. For Muslim chaplains, the care seeker is viewed as a fellow “child of Adam,” a being honored by God above all creation (Qur’ān 17:70) and into whom God has breathed His spirit (Qur’ān 15:29). This recognition compels the chaplain to approach care seekers with compassion, encouraging them to embrace their potential and aspire to their highest selves. The chaplain is, therefore, guided to have *ḥusn al-dhann* in the care seekers’ capabilities, affirming their inherent strengths and assuming the best in them. Islamic chaplaincy’s approach emphasizes a sincere recognition of all care seekers’ inherent worth and potential. Rather than simply affirming all aspects of their perspective, the chaplain strives to highlight their God-given strengths and noble qualities. This sincere affirmation, grounded in the belief that every person has a divinely inspired potential, encourages the care seeker to aspire to his/her highest self while fostering an authentic, compassionate connection with the chaplain.

An essential aspect of listening is serving as a mirror, reflecting the intrinsic goodness present within everyone. A Muslim chaplain helps the care seeker become aware of his/her connection to God, as this awareness distinguishes a spiritually attuned perspective from one that denies the existence of the spirit (*rūḥ*), God, or the spiritual realm altogether. The chaplain’s approach affirms and reinforces the care seeker’s realization that he/she possesses a *rūḥ*, a divine spirit bestowed by God.

Providing a space for reflection allows people to discover their inner resources and abilities. The chaplain’s responsibility is to help clear away the barriers, distractions, and confusions that impede one’s journey, thereby enabling the heart or *rūḥ* to find a direct path to the Divine. This process facilitates the care seeker’s reconnection with his/her true self and strengthens his/her relationship with God.

To bear good news and bring good tidings is to offer hope when all seems lost. This act involves affirming the care seeker’s strengths and reminding them of God’s mercy. In his teachings, Prophet Muhammad encouraged hopefulness, even in difficult situations, demonstrating how to uplift others through kindness and compassion.

Step 3: Warning or Directing the Care Seeker

Change is a process. God sent revelation over a period of 23 years. Healing follows a lengthy timeline. Human beings evolve over time. Relationships are a process. Like everything in life, spiritual development happens in stages. Thus, guiding someone toward spiritual growth requires patience and wisdom. The chaplain must carefully assess when to provide direction, ensuring that it is offered with love and at the appropriate time. This echoes the approach of the Prophet, who always paired his warnings with compassion and understanding, ensuring that his guidance was rooted in genuine care (Qur'ān 3:159).

Prophet Muhammad reinforced the Qur'ān's clear warnings—warnings that were initially delivered to the people of seventh-century Mecca, a society that was distant from recognizing the divine truth of God's Oneness (*tawhīd*). One must note that he did not begin his mission of warning against corruption, injustice, and transgression until he reached the age of forty. By that time, he had already established himself as a man of such integrity and trustworthiness that he was known as “al-Ṣādiq” (the truthful) and “al-Amīn” (the trustworthy). The Prophet's life was marked by his exemplary character—having nurtured relationships with his family and community—which allowed him to deliver his message from a position of respect and credibility. This deep foundation of trust meant that even those who opposed his message could not separate his noble character from the warnings he conveyed.

Islamic teachings emphasize that guidance must be offered within a framework of love and trust. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, demonstrated this approach in his interactions, such as when he patiently nurtured his companions' faith before guiding them toward more profound spiritual truths. For example, when a bedouin urinated in the mosque, rather than reacting harshly, the Prophet calmly instructed him on the sanctity of the space, thereby establishing an environment of trust and understanding (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 220).

However, despite this established trust, not everyone readily accepted his message. While human beings possess an inherent potential for goodness, they are also susceptible to being driven by their lower desires. For this reason, warnings are necessary to protect humanity from falling into harm due to these inclinations. But ultimately, God guides whom He wills. The Prophet's approach emphasizes that delivering such warnings must be grounded in compassion, empathy, and established trust. Without first witnessing and building a relationship with those whom one seeks to guide, any attempt to issue a warning can be ineffective or even detrimental. Timing is crucial, for issuing a warning prematurely can harm the individual, while delivering it too late may result in missed opportunities for growth. Therefore, the chaplain or caregiver must exercise wisdom, delivering guidance tactfully and at the appropriate moment, with the ultimate aim of removing harm and guiding others toward a path of light and goodness. Therefore, a Muslim chaplain must first cultivate this sense of safety and connection before offering guidance, recognizing that any form of direction without the groundwork of love, empathy, and trust can feel harsh, even harmful, and may be perceived as a breach of the sacred trust that exists within the care encounter.

In this context, once the chaplain has fulfilled the essential steps of witnessing both God and the care seeker and has established a relationship built on trust, affirmation, and an acknowledgment of the latter's inherent dignity, he/she may then be in a position to offer guidance or direction. As this stage can be particularly challenging, the underlying foundation of the prior steps has to be firmly established. Unfortunately, an untrained or inexperienced chaplain might attempt to prematurely guide or advise before building the necessary trust and rapport, not realizing that a caregiver or chaplain needs a significant degree of spiritual maturity, particularly in exercising restraint at the outset of the relationship with the care seeker. This maturity involves demonstrating patience, allowing trust to develop, and ensuring that any future guidance, redirection, or advice is more likely to be received positively. As practitioners are frequently confronted with diverse situations, ranging from grief and confusion to hope and pain, the ability to discern the appropriate response in any given circumstance is essential. Although some interventions may not be relevant in every context, chaplains must not overlook any step in the broader process of human growth and spiritual development.

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, exemplified this approach by displaying immense love and compassion, always desiring the best for humanity and guiding them toward their highest potential through God's transformative power. Muslim chaplains must similarly recognize where they are situated in the process of guiding someone toward God, whether that involves initial witnessing, building trust, or offering direct guidance. Some encounters may require more emphasis on one stage than another; however, the foundational steps should never be neglected, nor should one remain in a stage that requires progression. This approach involves a form of spiritual assessment and triage, which is rooted in an understanding of the Prophetic tradition of spiritual care, ensuring that each interaction is handled with wisdom, patience, and a genuine desire for the care seeker's growth and connection to the Divine. Only when the care seeker feels genuinely safe, understood, and valued will he/she be receptive to potentially uncomfortable truths or directions.

Offering Guidance and Naṣīḥa (Advice)

This Book has been sent down to you [O Prophet]—let there be no anxiety in your heart because of it—so that you may use it to give caution and to remind the believers. (Qur'ān 7:2)

In Sūrat Āl-ʿImrān, God reminds the Prophet to act with gentleness: “By an act of mercy from God, you [O Prophet] were gentle in your dealings with them—had you been harsh, or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed and left you” (Qur'ān 3:159). This verse highlights the importance of empathy and connection before correction, a principle that echoes through many of the Prophet's interactions.

Islamic teachings emphasize the etiquette of offering advice (*naṣīḥa*), grounding it within a framework of compassion, privacy, and humility. The ideal method is in a private, one-on-one setting during which a tone of love and gentleness is maintained. One must avoid any sense of superiority or self-righteousness, as these attitudes can undermine the sincerity of the guidance and diminish its effectiveness. *Naṣīḥa* should be offered in a way

that is both creative and tailored to the individual's unique circumstances, as exemplified by Ḥasan and Ḥusayn (may Allah be pleased with them) when they gently and tactfully corrected an elder's performance of *wuḍū'* (Lings 1983, 102).

Anas ibn Mālik recounts an incident where Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, responded with patience and empathy to a grieving woman who initially rejected his counsel. Rather than scold or judge the woman for her rejection of the Prophet's advice, he simply walked away. Perhaps the grieving woman's raw reaction informed the Prophet that she was cognitively and emotionally unable to reason due to her overwhelming emotional state. This story underscores the importance of timing, empathy, and understanding when offering advice. Only when the woman realized that the Prophet was the one delivering the advice and sought his forgiveness did the Prophet remind her that "patience is at the first strike (*al-ṣabru 'inda al-ṣadmat al-ūlā*)" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1283). When the woman approached the Prophet herself, she may have demonstrated a receptivity to receive. We learn from this encounter that *naṣīḥa* must be delivered with patience and at the most appropriate moment. This approach aligns with the broader Qur'ānic principle that divine guidance and laws are intended to serve not as punitive measures but as compassionate guidance. Notably, even when the woman was at her most vulnerable, the Prophet sought to guide her, illustrating the Prophet's profound understanding of human resilience and capacity.

This principle stands in contrast to the often lower expectations placed upon human capacity in psychosocial frameworks, which may prioritize immediate comfort over long-term spiritual growth. From an Islamic perspective, recognizing that all human states are meant to direct one to God is critical in facilitating holistic well-being and spiritual growth. By maintaining this expectation, chaplains actively facilitate the individual's journey toward realizing his/her higher self.

An additional consideration in offering *naṣīḥa* is the concept of advice as a form of charity (*Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn*, no. 693), whereby the chaplain offers the *naṣīḥa* for the care seeker with an open palm rather than dropping it from up top (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1442). For example, the Prophet, peace be upon him, offered advice, rather than compelling it, by frequently prefacing his advice to his companions with, "Shall I not inform you of...," thereby ensuring that his counsel was welcomed and respected.¹ This practice serves as a powerful reminder of the need to balance the act of imparting wisdom with respect for the individual's autonomy.

Moreover, the technique of reframing is crucial to presenting alternative perspectives in a caring and respectful manner, for it allows chaplains to communicate different understandings and viewpoints in a way that fosters an environment of mutual respect and growth, thereby ensuring that guidance is received as an act of compassion rather than imposition. Through the reframe, the care seeker can consider a different perspective to reflect upon and accept.

To truly listen and respond with wisdom, chaplains must employ *takhliyya*, a process of emptying themselves of preconceived notions and assumptions. A Muslim

¹ See for example *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2606.

chaplain cultivates the ability to engage in spiritual care via minimizing the obstacles of bias, judgment, or unresolved personal wounds. The act of emptying oneself allows chaplains to make space for the care seeker's experiences, creating an atmosphere of hospitality akin to preparing one's home for guests. If chaplains approach the care seeker burdened by their own assumptions or personal struggles, they risk projecting those onto the care seeker, thereby hindering the healing process. By relinquishing the instinct to offer immediate solutions, chaplains open the possibility for deep, meaningful listening.

True spiritual growth comes from first building a relationship, then offering correction, which underscores the importance of the first two steps of witnessing and offering hope. Offering *naṣīḥa* should be done with humility, respect, and an understanding of the care seeker's journey. The chaplain must act with wisdom so that his/her advice will resonate, just as the Prophet's did. His advice was grounded in a relationship of trust and care and, as a result, the hearts of his companions were open to his guidance. This principle highlights the importance of building connections before offering correction or advice. A chaplain must first ensure that the care seeker feels empowered and supported, not burdened or judged.

An individual's cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development follows a gradual and evolutionary trajectory from childhood to adulthood. Just as physical and mental faculties mature over time, so too does one's spiritual growth. From a theological perspective, Muslim chaplains draw upon the foundational themes of the Qur'ān and Sunna, particularly concepts such as God's mercy (*rahma*) and the ethical guidelines established by divine revelation. Chaplains must have a nuanced understanding of the influences of the ego (*nafs*) and Satan (Shayṭān), both of which can divert individuals from their path of spiritual progress.

By integrating these theological principles into their practice, chaplains become equipped to offer compassionate guidance, helping individuals to reorient themselves toward spiritual alignment. This process requires them to adapt their approach according to the care seeker's developmental stage and level of spiritual readiness. Essentially, they must assess the individual's position on his/her spiritual journey and respond with the singular objective of guiding him/her toward a closer relationship with God, fostering a pathway that facilitates his/her return to divine connection and purpose.

Step 4: Inviting to God, By His Permission, and Reflecting Light for the Care Seeker

The central aim of Islamic chaplaincy is connection to God, recognizing that true holistic well-being—spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically—cannot be fully realized without divine connection.² Therefore, the model retains contemporary psychosocial techniques but re-anchors them within a God-centered framework. This principle of inviting to God, by His permission, distinguishes the approach not by discarding practice but by redirecting its ends. For Muslim care seekers, this is a natural and accepted framework; the Qur'ān clearly answers the question of human purpose as worshiping or,

² “And whoever turns away from My remembrance—indeed, he will have a depressed [i.e., difficult] life, and We will gather [i.e., raise] him, on the Day of Resurrection, blind” (Qur'ān 20:124).

in many works of exegesis on this verse, intimately knowing Allah (Qur'ān 51:56). Regardless of the care seeker's level of practice or where he/she is in his/her spiritual journey, the chaplain's role is to gently remind, encourage, and facilitate the return to Allah in a way that is non-coercive and honors the care seeker's personal struggles. This is rooted in the Islamic understanding of *tawhīd*, where every difficulty, loss, or internal conflict is ultimately an opportunity to recognize the Oneness of God and turn toward Him (*tawajjuh*).

For care seekers of other faiths or belief systems, this reconnection to the Divine requires a different approach—one that remains anchored in the chaplain's Islamic worldview while engaging others with respect, wisdom, and sincerity. Muslim chaplains may explore the care seeker's own language of connection, assisting them in deepening their current relationship with the Divine. While those of other faiths and belief systems may understand the world differently and hold varying interpretations of spirituality, Muslim chaplains can still invite to God through embodying presence, compassion, and ethical engagement. By seeing such care seekers as honored creations of God—as affirmed in the Qur'ān, “And We have certainly honored the children of Adam” (Qur'ān 17:70)—Muslim chaplains acknowledge the value within every individual given by the Divine and interact through a lens of dignity, respect, and mercy. Even if a care seeker does not recognize God, the chaplain does, and that belief informs their every interaction. This way, the Muslim chaplain's presence itself becomes a reflection of God's mercy, offering care not to proselytize, but to witness, affirm, and gently invite—by Allah's permission—toward deeper spiritual and emotional well-being.

This core principle of inviting to God—without proselytizing or coercion—distinguishes Islamic chaplaincy. Where non-theological frameworks often bracket revelation and treat spirituality as individually constructed, we repurpose assessment, validation, and reframing toward remembrance of God.

A Muslim chaplain approaches spiritual care with the understanding that guidance ultimately belongs to God alone: “It is not for you [O Prophet] to guide them; it is God who guides whomever He will” (Qur'ān 2:272). This principle shapes the chaplain's role, ensuring that his/her focus remains on offering gentle and wise invitations to divine closeness, rather than assuming control over a care seeker's response. Because true help and victory stem only from Allah, the Islamic chaplaincy model is neither coercive nor proselytizing; rather, it is rooted in trusting that God alone changes hearts and brings about transformation. The chaplain's role is not to pressure, convince, or force, but to illuminate the path and allow the care seeker to walk it in his/her own time.

Just as the Prophet, peace be upon him, was commanded to call others with wisdom and sincerity while entrusting the outcome to God, the chaplain engages in compassionate listening, spiritual encouragement, and ethical counsel without attachment to results. This detachment is not indifference, but a conviction that the responsibility of conveying is separate from the responsibility of changing—the latter belongs to God alone. Qur'ān 2:272 further emphasizes that “whatever charity you give benefits your own soul,” reinforcing that the chaplain's effort itself—when offered sincerely for the sake of God—carries inherent spiritual reward, irrespective of whether the care seeker accepts or internalizes the guidance. This paradigm ensures that the chaplain remains both steadfast in his/her duty and free from the emotional weight of expected outcomes, embodying a

Prophetic approach to care that is at once deeply engaged and spiritually detached in its reliance upon God's will. It is precisely because outcomes are left to God that Islamic chaplaincy does not seek to control or impose; rather, it offers with conviction, and trusts in divine timing. God is at the center, and chaplains—at best—are only means.

The foundation of Islamic chaplaincy lies in fostering a genuine connection, both with the individual and with God. This work involves guiding the care seeker on his/her journey toward a deeper relationship with the Divine, aligning with the purpose of creation as expressed in the *ḥadīth qudsī*: to worship and intimately know Allah (Ibn 'Arabī 2002, 180). A significant part of this role requires the chaplain to exercise restraint against the inclinations of the lower self (*nafs*) and to recognize that only God bestows true guidance. Given this reality, rather than asserting control, chaplains aim to cultivate a supportive relationship by providing an environment in which the care seeker feels genuinely seen, heard, and understood. Within such a setting, the individual can engage in the processes of self-observation (*murāqaba*) and self-assessment (*muḥāsaba*), which are integral to his/her spiritual development.

In times of crisis, feelings of isolation and uncertainty can serve as catalysts, jolting the care seeker out of a state of heedlessness (*ghafla*) and creating an opportunity for introspection that fosters spiritual growth and divine connection. At such times, chaplains might be tempted to offer advice or judgments; however, these actions often fall short of addressing the care seeker's deeper needs. As the care seeker's narrative is mirrored back to him/her, he/she begins to engage in *tafakkur* (thinking), *tadabbur* (reflecting), and *tadhakkur* (remembering). Islam emphasizes the human being's capacity for deep reflection, reasoning, and contemplation as a means of drawing nearer to God: "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day are signs for people of understanding, those who remember Allah while standing, sitting, or lying on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth" (Qur'ān 3:190–191). Another verse urges individuals to self-reflection: "Do they not reflect upon themselves?" (Qur'ān 30:8). This divine call to introspection invites individuals to examine their past, present, and future to extract wisdom from every facet of life. As the scholar Ḥasan al-Baṣrī observed, "One hour of reflection is better than a night spent in worship (*qiyām al-layl*)," underscoring the value of contemplative thought in spiritual growth (Murata and Chittick 1994, 262).

A significant part of this reflective journey occurs in moments of silence, which is why it plays a pivotal role in chaplaincy encounters. Silence provides the space for care seekers to process their experiences, emotions, and struggles without the pressure of immediate response or guidance. By creating this environment of stillness, chaplains offer individuals the opportunity to find meaning, clarity, and healing on their own terms. For chaplains themselves, silence is not merely a tool, but rather a practice that fosters personal resilience and introspection and allows them to maintain their own sense of calm, cultivating mindfulness and presence in their encounters. This practice serves as a safeguard against the emotional fatigue and burnout often associated with the responsibilities of chaplaincy. Thus, silence within chaplaincy is a dynamic exchange—it serves as a sanctuary for care seekers and a source of renewal for chaplains.

The role of chaplains, following from the example of prophets, involves communicating in a way that resonates deeply with the people they serve. The Qur'ān emphasizes this by stating: “We have never sent a messenger except in the language of his people, to make things clear for them” (Qur'ān 14:4). Similarly, a chaplain's approach must be grounded in wisdom and compassion: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner” (Qur'ān 16:125). By balancing attentive listening, thoughtful reflection, and compassionate guidance, chaplains facilitate care that nurtures both spiritual and emotional growth, always steering the care seeker back toward the Divine Source.

Being a Beacon of Light

Islam is a living tradition of constant flow and direction that must be actively engaged with. To practice Islamic chaplaincy is to return to the core principles of witnessing, affirming, and guiding, all while ensuring that the chaplain's own mirror remains polished, free from the distortions of ego and unchecked assumptions. The chaplain fulfills this role by acting as a source of light, both in terms of alleviating burdens and offering spiritual illumination, reflecting the title “*Sirājan Munīran*” (Illuminating Lamp) that was bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him (Qur'ān 33:46).

For the Muslim chaplain in his/her efforts to embody this Prophetic comportment, the journey demands persistent self-examination and refinement. A memorizer of the Qur'ān traditionally remains in a constant state of revision, ensuring that sacred words remain imprinted in both mind and heart. A true scholar of Islam continuously revisits foundational texts, uncovering deeper insights with each stage of spiritual and intellectual maturation. A spiritual aspirant is never static, always engaged in the work of purifying the heart from that which clouds and darkens it. There can be no stagnancy.³ *Wuḍū'* can only be made with running water, signifying that purification requires motion and renewal. Sustaining the work of chaplaincy necessitates the presence of a skilled teacher, mentor, or guide—someone who can offer wisdom, accountability, and a model for self-refinement. Without such guidance, a chaplain risks mistaking his/her own unexamined perspectives, wounds, or limitations for truth, which may lead to harm rather than healing in his/her interactions. Chaplaincy, by its nature, requires continuous self-examination and ethical responsibility, and having a trusted teacher, coach, or mentor provides an essential safeguard against ego-driven decisions, unchecked biases, and misinterpretations of one's role.

A Muslim chaplain must both offer and receive counsel, learning firsthand the humility of accepting guidance before guiding others. Just as chaplains strive to be beacons of light, they must also seek illumination from those who have walked the path before them, learning how to navigate spiritual, emotional, and ethical challenges with sincerity and balance. Without experiential submission to wise counsel, the chaplain may risk

³ As reported by 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak: 'Awn ibn 'Abd Allāh (may Allah be pleased with him) said, “A man advised his son, saying: ‘O my son, you must be mindful of Allah. If you are able to be better today than you were yesterday and to be better tomorrow than you are today, then do so’” (*al-Zuhd wa-l-rqā'iq*, no. 832).

offering advice without fully understanding its weight or recognizing when a care seeker is truly ready to receive it. A qualified teacher or mentor not only provides insight but also serves as a mirror, reflecting the chaplain's blind spots and areas for growth, ensuring that the latter's service remains rooted in wisdom, patience, and sincerity.

However, not all who assume the role of a guide are suited for it. Some mentors, despite their titles or institutional positions, may lack the self-awareness, integrity, or ethical grounding necessary to guide others effectively. Just as spiritual teachers may be unqualified to lead others in self-purification, so too may some clinical supervisors or educators carry personal biases that hinder rather than facilitate a chaplain's growth. A title alone is not enough—a true teacher must demonstrate deep self-awareness, mastery over his/her own ego, and a history of ethical, transformative mentorship.

A reliable teacher, mentor, or coach must also be under a system of accountability, ensuring that he/she does not misuse his/her authority or lead others astray. Whether through a recognized chain of teachers (*silsila*), institutional oversight, or ethical review structures, mentors themselves should be subject to guidance and correction. The presence of such accountability benefits not only the chaplain but also those he/she serves, as it ensures that both guidance and care remain aligned with principles of justice, integrity, and compassion.

While a skilled mentor may offer valuable psychosocial tools for emotional regulation and self-awareness, his/her guidance—if purely psychological—may not fully address the chaplain's spiritual core from an Islamic perspective. A mentor grounded in Islamic ethics and spiritual purification (*tazkiya*) is especially important in helping the chaplain align ego, intentions, and service with divine guidance. However, in the absence of a sound teacher—whether due to geographic limitations, lack of access, or the prevalence of unqualified alternatives—a Muslim chaplain may turn to the practice of sending abundant blessings (*ṣalawāt*) upon the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The Prophetic tradition establishes that one who is without a teacher should increase in *ṣalawāt*, for in doing so, the Prophet himself becomes his/her guide and nurturer (*murabbī*).⁴

This practice is not merely devotional; it is a means of receiving divine openings as well as illumination from the most exalted teacher, whose character, wisdom, and mercy form the foundational model for Islamic chaplaincy. Given that a Muslim chaplain already draws heavily from the example of the Prophet in their pastoral care, deepening this connection through *ṣalawāt* serves as both a spiritual anchor and an active means of guidance. By immersing themselves in the remembrance and love of the Prophet, chaplains cultivate an approach to their work that is spiritually rooted and grounded in self-refinement, one infused with Prophetic gentleness, insight, and sincerity, ensuring that their chaplaincy remains refined, supported, and illuminated.

Thus, the responsibility ultimately lies with the Muslim chaplain to carefully discern the right guides—both clinically and spiritually—who will support his/her journey

⁴ “Whoever sends abundant *ṣalawāt* will find the Messenger as their teacher, guiding them in ways they do not perceive.” Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Tanwīr al-ḥalak fī imkān ru'ya al-nabī wa-l-malak* (Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1988).

of self-refinement. Only by carefully selecting their mentors can chaplains polish their own spiritual mirrors, ensuring that the light they reflect is free from the distortions of ego, bias, or unresolved wounds. In doing so, they cultivate a presence of true service and divine-centered guidance, illuminating the path for those they serve.

Just as the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was described as an illuminating lamp (Qur'ān 33:46), the chaplain, too, must strive to be a vessel through which divine light reaches others—dispelling darkness with wisdom, compassion, and sincerity. Sound teachers, like well-lit lanterns, support the chaplain's psychological and spiritual growth in a way that is holistic, rooted in divine consciousness, and aligned with Islamic teachings on self-purification. By grounding his/herself in this tradition of seeking knowledge and mentorship, the chaplain does not merely offer guidance but becomes a source of light, embodying Prophetic care with clarity and warmth.

Conclusion

An Islamic model of chaplaincy is anchored in revelation and Prophetic guidance. Its distinctiveness lies in reintegrating its methods within a God-centered aim, namely witnessing, bearing good news and hope, offering timely and measured guidance, orienting to God, and illuminating a way forward. Islamic chaplaincy is a journey of embodying the highest values of faith, rooted in the example set by the Prophet Muhammad, who was sent as a mercy to all creation. By adopting the framework outlined in Qur'ān 33:45–46, the Muslim chaplain stands as a witness, bearer of good news, warner, and beacon of light who guides care seekers toward a deeper connection with their Creator. This role requires a deep commitment to *khidma*, *rahma*, and the principles of centering God in all encounters, offering a path of compassion and wisdom that aligns with the Prophetic tradition.

As Muslim chaplains in America, our mission extends beyond providing care—it is about helping others fulfill their potential as caretakers of this earth, reflecting the divine attributes of mercy and love. In this, chaplains fulfill the purpose of *khalīfa*, nurturing ourselves and others on the path to worshiping and knowing God. Ultimately, Islamic chaplaincy is a means for both the chaplain and care seeker to achieve their highest purpose: to serve as vessels of divine light, guiding one another toward a more profound understanding of God and our role as caretakers in this world. May we continue to uphold this sacred tradition, striving to embody the values that Prophet Muhammad so beautifully exemplified, bringing us closer to the ultimate reality of Divine Oneness. Ameen.

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