

The Hinge

About Chaplains – And Those Who Send Them

A hinge is rarely noticed—until it begins to squeak.

We who serve beyond the local congregation—in the military, in hospitals, in correctional settings, and other public institutions—are typically sent by our faith communities through a process known as “endorsement.” Across traditions, religious leaders are affirmed as prepared, authorized, and accountable to serve in those environments, and institutions rely on that endorsement as assurance that we remain connected to the community that sent us.

For more than two decades I served as a United Methodist chaplain under endorsement. I came to understand chaplaincy as a ministry lived at the edge of the Church’s institutional life—present in places where the Church cannot gather itself in familiar ways, yet still unmistakably the Church’s own.

That experience is not unique to United Methodists. Across traditions—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and others—those who serve under endorsement share a common reality. We are sent by our communities of faith into public institutions that operate by different rules, different expectations, and different forms of authority. Yet in those places, we remain who we were called and authorized to be.

This reflection comes at a time when, in The United Methodist Church, we are reexamining our structures—how authority is ordered, how ministries are supported, and how responsibilities are carried across a changing landscape. In such seasons, some parts of the Church’s life come into sharper focus, while others risk being overlooked. Ministries that operate at the edges, by their very nature, can be among the easiest to miss.

Chaplains serve at the fringes: in military formations, hospitals, correctional institutions, veterans’ settings, and other environments where the Church—or, more broadly, the faith community—sends ministers to represent it in public life.

Life at the edge can be lonely. Over time, I learned that survival in those spaces depends on two kinds of connection.

The first is the small, human kind: friendships with fellow clergy, trusted colleagues, and companions both inside and outside one’s immediate setting. These are the relationships that provide comfort, perspective, and the kind of safe harbor every minister needs when serving in demanding places.

The second is what United Methodists know as the Connection, with a capital C—the covenantal bond of clergy membership, episcopal oversight, conference relationship, and the shared promises made through ordination and appointment. Other traditions name this differently—communion, jurisdiction, presbytery, diocese—but the reality is widely shared: ministers are not self-sent. We are authorized, accountable, and sustained by a body that stands behind us.

Chaplains are sent into these settings through the gateway of endorsement, with the understanding that the Church—or their endorsing body—remains present with us, even at its edges. At the same time, we remain accountable to the vows we have made and to the community that continues to hold us in covenant.

Over the years, I came to think of the ministry of endorsement as the hinge that holds these promises together.

Endorsement is, in a sense, a gateway. On one side stands the sacred source of a minister's calling—formed in community, confirmed through discernment, and authorized through the practices of a particular tradition. On the other side stands the institutional world in which that calling is exercised—structured, regulated, and often described as “secular,” though never untouched by questions of meaning, suffering, and hope.

The hinge is what allows that gate to move.

The hinge does not serve only the one who passes through the gate. It also makes passage possible for another to follow. Through endorsement, the Church—or the representatives it sends—can cross that threshold as well. When bishops, supervisors, or colleagues engage chaplains in their settings, they are not merely providing care from a distance. They are entering, however briefly, into the environments where ministry is carried out under conditions the Church does not ordinarily experience. In those moments, endorsement becomes more than authorization. It becomes encounter. The Church is given a way to see, to listen, and to learn from the very edges it has asked its ministers to inhabit.

That movement matters. Without it, the Church risks imagining these ministries rather than understanding them. With it, the connection remains not only intact, but alive.

A hinge is rarely noticed when it works well. It simply bears weight, allows movement, and keeps what belongs together from drifting apart. In much the same way, endorsement quietly sustains the relationship between the sending body and the minister who is sent. It translates the trust of a faith community into forms public institutions can recognize, while preserving the minister's living accountability to the doctrine, discipline, and covenant that shaped them.

It does something more as well. It makes it possible for the minister to move faithfully between these worlds without becoming divided between them—to be fully present in an institution without ceasing to belong to the community that sent them.

I have seen what happens when that hinge holds. Chaplains thrive in difficult settings. Church authorities trust the ministries carried out in their name. Institutions know that the faith community stands behind its ministers. The connection—however named—remains alive, even across distance, uniform, bureaucracy, and the unique isolation of ministry beyond gathered congregational life.

I have also seen what happens when the hinge weakens.

The breakdown is rarely dramatic. More often it begins as drift: fewer intentional touchpoints, less clarity about responsibility, assumptions replacing communication, and the gradual erosion of the mutual promises that once felt obvious. The gate does not suddenly fall off its frame. It begins to resist movement. It squeaks. It sticks. And over time, what should move freely becomes difficult to open at all.

Isolation grows. Misunderstandings multiply. Both the minister and the sending body begin to experience the effects of distance in ways that are difficult to repair once fully established. More than once, I've heard the question asked: "When are you coming back to the ministry?"

In my experience, the issue is rarely a matter of fault. More often, it is the opportunity for rupture itself. A hinge left unattended long enough does not need to be broken to fail. It simply needs to be neglected.

That is why I have come to believe that the ministry of endorsement deserves careful and sustained attention in the life of the Church—and, more broadly, in the life of any faith community that sends its ministers beyond its gathered spaces.

Its value is not found in visibility. Most congregations will remain only dimly aware of the work chaplains and other endorsed ministers perform. That is simply the nature of ministry at the edges. Even fewer will be aware of the ministry of endorsement itself, which operates quietly, often at the margins of institutional awareness.

Yet invisibility need not mean neglect. At moments of transition, there is also an opportunity—a quiet invitation—for those entrusted with the Church's structures to notice what has long gone largely unseen. To notice with intention is not to elevate a ministry beyond its place, but to understand it more fully, and to ensure that what has quietly sustained connection at the edges is not weakened simply because it has been out of view.

But leaders entrusted with the structures of the Church—or of any sending body—should understand what is held in this hinge.

It is not merely an office or an administrative process. It is a ministry of connection. It is the means by which a community of faith keeps covenant with those it sends into some of the most demanding settings in society. And it is the means by which those ministers—those who are sent—remain faithfully joined to the community that sent them, even as they serve far beyond its walls.

My hope is simple: that future generations of endorsed ministers inherit a system so clear, so well-resourced, and so durable that the kinds of relational ruptures my generation sometimes experienced become increasingly rare.

The Church does not need this hinge to be prominent.
It does need it to hold.

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