

Mentoring for Ministry in Islam

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His presence struck me most before I heard him utter a single word or teaching.

I studied with interest the man introduced to our summer camp as Chaplain Sohaib Sultan. Until this moment, I had only heard general references to chaplaincy in the corrections setting and understood very little about the profession.

Chaplain Sohaib and his wife, Arshe, were attending the summer camp for the first time. As the camp staff introduced Chaplain Sohaib as the Muslim chaplain at Princeton University, I noticed he had a peaceful ease and a warm, approachable smile on his face. He imparted a spiritual confidence that prodded an ancient ache deep within my heart. It was 2013, and I was a full-time mother of two young children. Our family was attending a week-long Muslim camp in the mountains of Northern California. Ten years prior, I had graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and creative writing and had since struggled to find purpose in my vague dream to become a writer. As any parent of young children knows, ample free time rarely, if ever, exists. Working every minute of the day (and night) to fulfill those young toddlers' needs left me physically, mentally, and spiritually depleted. I missed my pre-motherhood purposeful life of studying and working, and yet, paradoxically, I also wanted more children. After years of trying to conceive a third and fourth child, a diagnosis of "secondary infertility" put a pause on those plans.

On the more challenging days, I could validate my decision to stay home and raise my two children by my personal values. But, come nighttime, I could not help staining my prayer rug with tears of frustration, asking God to show me my purpose in this life when the two options of a writing career and building a family were dwindling. While my loved ones slept peacefully, I prayed earnestly, forehead pressed to the ground: *God, I don't know what You want from me. Please show me where to go. God, please fling open doors for me where I can use the talents and gifts you've given me. I am following Your lead.* In part, I went to the Muslim family camp to rediscover my relationship with God in this new season of my life when any doors I had eyed for my future plans appeared to be closing, one after the other.

Eager to learn more about Chaplain Sohaib's unique role, I did what any inspired individual would do: I followed him around camp with an annoying obsessiveness.

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Chaplain Sohaib, what does “chaplain” mean? What does your “9–5” look like? What did you study to become a chaplain? True to form, he responded to all my questions with patience and kindness, and I found myself mentally checking off so many of my seemingly disparate interests: listening to people’s faith journeys, interfaith dialogue, spirituality, contemplation, and ways of connecting to the Divine.

I also noted that many of the qualities of chaplaincy he described mirrored my life trajectory. As a child, I experienced the loneliness of public elementary school in the tiny town of La Crescenta as one of two Muslim students, the other of whom—which shocked my third-grade self—ate pork pepperoni. From there, I experienced the elation of belonging when my parents transferred me to an Islamic school for sixth through eighth grade, when, upon graduation, I decided to wear the hijab alongside four other girls in my class. For high school, I attended a Catholic all-girls institution where one could easily spot me in a crowd as the only student wearing a hijab. In my first year of college, 9/11 quickly propelled me into the spotlight at interfaith vigils and on countless “Islam 101” panels as the token Muslim with a reassuring face and fluent English. It felt like my formative psychological and spiritual years unfolded alongside my identity as a Muslim and a minority in interfaith settings where I was expected to articulate with coherence my religious journey and listen for common ground in others’ journeys.

Chaplain Sohaib recommended that I enroll in a master of divinity program in chaplaincy followed by Clinical Pastoral Education, and eventually apply for board certification, which he described as the “gold star” of chaplaincy. “Sondos, aim for the best that you can. Our community deserves it,” he said, encouraging me toward certification.

To underscore my complete ignorance of the profession, I felt shocked that chaplaincy even had an actual educational path. I had been bracing myself for cobbling my own path forward. At the time, only two MDiv-equivalent options existed for Muslims who wanted to include Islamic studies as part of their seminary education—a master’s degree certification in Islamic chaplaincy from Hartford Seminary in Connecticut and an MDiv degree in interfaith chaplaincy from Claremont School of Theology (CST) in Southern California. While my heart yearned to obtain the Islamic chaplaincy certificate, I knew that I could not leave my husband and young children to study on the opposite coast with CST only an hour’s drive away. As an interfaith chaplaincy MDiv student at CST, I could register for Islamic studies courses under Bayan Claremont, a then-nascent institution for Muslim seminary students incubated on CST’s campus.

Chaplain Sohaib gave me his number and continued to answer my questions well after the family camp. He planted the idea of chaplaincy in my mind, but I would not apply to CST’s program for another three years so that I could remain at home to care for my young children and complete other commitments. When I finally applied for and subsequently received the acceptance letter into CST’s interfaith chaplaincy program, I sent a message to Bayan’s president, Dr. Jihad Turk, saying, “Look for me on campus next semester!” Less than a minute passed before Jihad called me on the phone.

“You’ll never believe this,” Jihad said, “but I just came out of a board meeting where we approved the Bayan MDiv degree in Islamic chaplaincy. Would you consider transferring as part of the first Islamic chaplaincy cohort?” I marveled at the timing of it all. Had I applied three years earlier, I would have missed the chance to graduate with a degree specifically in Islamic chaplaincy. That divinely timed moment marked the beginning of what continued to feel like a gentle Wave carrying me, almost effortlessly, toward chaplaincy. In the Islamic tradition, one’s sincere intention carries much significance and weight; the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended.” I think back to those moments in the darkest part of the night during my ten-year period of purpose-seeking when I surrendered my “plan” and asked God to guide me to that which would bring me true fulfillment.

As a part-time student, I completed the MDiv degree in Islamic chaplaincy from Bayan after four long years during which I met other MDiv students and forged meaningful connections with Muslim faculty who continue to serve as my main sources of support. I thought that I would tackle CPE in the last year of my program, but God, of course, had other plans. In my first year at Bayan, I bumped into a nurse friend I had not seen for years. After exchanging warm greetings, she asked what I was up to, and I mentioned my new foray into chaplaincy. “You should come with me to my hospital’s annual Spirituality Conference next week,” she said. At the conference, she introduced me to the CPE supervisor and the lead chaplain, who encouraged me to apply to their program. Motivated by their enthusiasm and warmth, I applied, and I began as an intern in the fall. During this time, I gained much benefit from joining the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC), a national association dedicated to supporting and supplementing the professional development of Muslim chaplains. The cohort of healthcare chaplains, some staff, and some CPE students met monthly for online “huddles” to discuss various topics pertaining to the challenges of our work. The night before I started my internship, I scheduled a call with one of the more senior AMC healthcare chaplains, Dr. Kamal Abu-Shamsieh, who served as a chaplain for ten years at Stanford Health Care. I still carried only a vague understanding of chaplaincy, and I asked Kamal what I should say, how to pray, and how to explain my role and what I bring with me into the room. Kamal patiently explained his approach and ended with, “You bring yourself into the room. That’s it.” I felt my heart drop at that answer. I needed *things* to offer, like prayer beads and Qur’an books and pamphlets, didn’t I? I could tell that Kamal was enjoying my pre-CPE anxiety as he reassured me that I had everything I needed. When I looked down at my notes after ending the call, I had nothing concrete written down. I did not know it at the time, but Kamal was already preparing me for the unique methodology of CPE. That one phone call turned into several phone calls over the years, and Kamal would later invite me to join his nonprofit organization Ziyara Spiritual Care and his advisory board

at the Graduate Theological Union after he transitioned out of patient care and into educating and training chaplains.

On the first day of CPE orientation, I knew that my intentions and goals had finally aligned. At the hospital chapel, I had a flashback of being at that exact chapel several years ago while visiting a sick friend. I remembered admiring the prayer space and studying the telephone that connected one to the Spiritual Care Department. Something had sparked inside me that day, and I recalled thinking, "I'd love to be the person whom hurting people would call." Fast forward many years later, and God brought me back full circle to the exact same chapel at the same hospital branch for my chaplaincy internship orientation. I still remember my first case as a CPE intern with the family of a cancer patient on comfort care, how I was afraid to sit in the room alone with the emaciated, sedated patient. I remember the first code blue in the Emergency Department and how the deceased was still wearing their jogging shoes when the doctor called time. I lived each day immersed in the space between life and death, saw people in their most raw and authentic state, waded in the sacred waters of their worries. I learned that my ordinary day at the hospital was somebody else's worst day. I learned that everyone is hurting in some way, that God's creation is so beautifully complicated. And I was still creating meaning out of stories, only the stories I encountered were ones that were real and still unfolding and that I took part in, undeservedly, as an intimate stranger.

I survived five units of CPE (one unit as an intern and four units as a resident) as the sole Muslim student chaplain because of my simultaneous enrollment in the Islamic Chaplaincy graduate program at Bayan and the friendship and mentorship of Muslim chaplains across the United States through AMC. Both spaces offered an all-Muslim community where I could feel at ease discussing challenging theological issues and patient cases without the need to "translate" my experiences into language that non-Muslims could understand or non-Muslim language into language that felt familiar to my Muslim heart and soul. Every semester at Bayan, my courses inevitably reflected issues that surfaced in both my personal and professional worlds, from end-of-life ethics to prophetic compassionate care. Whatever theory I read in assigned readings, I would turn around and find an application for it in my work at the hospital, and whatever challenge emerged for me, I could easily approach an expert in that subject through Bayan's faculty. More often than not, the reply I would receive from the professor sounded like, "Hmm, that's an interesting question and seems like a great topic for your final paper. Here are some resources you may want to check out." As a result, I built an incredible bank of graded research papers with topics directly pertaining to some aspect of chaplaincy, papers that—to this day—I continue to reference for my growth.

AMC provided a much-needed space for processing, venting, and resource sharing. Our healthcare cohort messaged on a daily basis via a WhatsApp group; we shared unfolding case studies in real time and asked for advice from one another, such as "What is my comfort level as a Muslim chaplain to offer non-Muslim rituals?" and "What inclusive

poetry or verses from the Islamic tradition work for an interfaith prayer service?" More importantly, given the dearth of available literature accessible to us as Muslim CPE students, we exchanged thoughts on our developing spiritual care theology from an Islamic perspective. From this shared frustration around the lack of literature, many AMC chaplains contributed to a now-published anthology of Muslim chaplain narratives called *Mantle of Mercy: Islamic Chaplaincy in North America* (Templeton Press, 2022). Our monthly huddles, annual weekend conference, and daily WhatsApp conversations helped me feel a sense of belonging and community as I navigated CPE. While less than a handful of AMC members had acquired board certification at the time, those who survived and succeeded in the process served as mentors for those desiring to pursue endorsement and certification, from hosting workshops on the process to sending encouraging messages to those knee-deep in the application. Now, more than a dozen Muslim chaplains (including myself) claim board certification, with many more in the pipeline.

By the time of my CPE graduation, the hospital lead chaplain, a Christian who served as my mentor during my residency and taught me the value of "showing up," determined that our hospital needed a regular Muslim chaplain presence and advocated for my hiring. He continued to serve as my mentor at the hospital, teaching me by example the do's and don'ts of the delicate and intentional work of spiritual care until he transitioned out of chaplaincy a few years later. Currently, as a staff chaplain, I still rely on the support and wisdom of my Muslim chaplain peer-mentors but have also widened my support network to include interdisciplinary voices such as Muslim palliative care physicians, ethicists, Imams, scholars and jurists, and mental health care practitioners to help me further understand the intersection of Islamic belief, Muslim practice, and supportive care.

In Islam, mentorship—guidance by a trustworthy representative of a profession or skill—combines the two concepts of *shura* (good counsel) and *suhba* (good companionship). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) called his community of followers his "companions" rather than his disciples and often encouraged group consultation. As Muslims, we follow this prophetic imperative by serving and leading with a support network of carefully selected mentors. More than mere advice and guidance, mentors offer a tangible and accessible model of a role and function actualized. To know that someone has successfully navigated and completed a career path, especially one as nebulous as chaplaincy, provides the novice with a sense of security and confidence. I think back to Chaplain Sohaib—God have mercy on his soul as he died from cancer in 2021—and so many others along the way who made space and advocated for me as a chaplain. The Muslim pioneers of this profession—from Black Muslim volunteers providing spiritual care and religious advocacy in the corrections setting from the 1960s to Muslims who founded Islamic chaplaincy institutions and associations to Muslims

who accepted the first positions as chaplain employees—focused their energy on establishing the profession. Now, with the initial path paved, this next generation of Muslim chaplains build upon that foundation by producing resources for the subsequent generation, which will further build upon those resources in their own way.

I reflected upon the beauty of this cycle as I attended a youth summer camp recently where, upon being introduced as a chaplain by camp staff, attendees approached me with familiar-sounding questions, such as “What does chaplain mean?” and “What does your day at work look like?” and “What do I study to become a chaplain?”

May we reflect the light of our mentors and predecessors with authenticity, grace, and an orientation of love and service, and may we provide that same light for those seeking our help in all ways. *Ameen.*