



HINDU CHAPLAINCY

HINDU UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA, ORLANDO, FLORIDA

Over last 5 decades the population of Americans following eastern traditions and religions has dramatically increased. Along with that a large number of temples, Sunday schools (Bal Vihars) and various religious organizations have been established to cater to the spiritual needs of this community.

As a community Hindus also encounter issues related to illness, old age, infirmity, divorce, natural and personal disasters and bereavement. In India, extended families, the support of religious groups associated with one's family, ashrams and other socio-spiritual institutions provide necessary support and assistance in such situations. However in the fast paced American society many of these traditional support systems are either inaccessible or do not exist. Moreover, time constraints from heavy work schedules, family discontinuity (separation, divorce, loss of connection with relatives), community ruptures, geographic distance etc. enhance the impact of these realities, particularly for second, third, and future generations.

In the western society a trained chaplain (Spiritual and Religious Caregiver) assists those undergoing crisis in finding meaning and comfort through counseling and caring on the basis of traditions and spiritual practices of the person's religious faith. Their training consists of counselling skills, a solid foundation in clinical psychology, along with knowledge

of philosophy, and spiritual practices of his or her particular religion. Depending on the level of training these chaplains serve either in volunteer or professional capacity.

A variety of institutions like hospitals and healthcare centers, educational institutions, military etc. rely on professional chaplains trained in various faiths. In order to achieve the status of a professional chaplain it is necessary to obtain clinical training as a chaplain from an accredited institution. There are a variety of institutions in other faiths like Christianity; Judaism etc. that provide the necessary framework to provide accreditation to seminaries training chaplains in those faiths. Association of Professional

Chaplains (APC) has established standards of practice for various chaplaincy settings. Chaplains are certified by APC as board certified chaplains (BCC) or associate certified chaplains (ACC) according to established national standards. These standards also include 72 credit hours of graduate studies from an accredited University beyond undergraduate education.

Several years ago the Hindu Mandir Executive Council (HMEC) along with the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) launched an initiative to establish an infrastructure to facilitate Hindu American clinical chaplaincy. This effort has resulted in the establishment of a Hindu accrediting agency along with a Hindu religious acknowledgement body.

There is a need to establish seminaries which provide graduate level education. It is also necessary that these seminaries are accredited by appropriate agencies. Hindu University of America (HUA) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have partnered to establish various certificate programs to provide training for those wishing to serve as volunteer chaplains. The university also offers graduate level education leading to Masters and Doctorate degrees in related fields. Swami Sarvaanand, Ph.D. who is a board certified chaplain of Hindu faith and a member of APC recently developed and offered the first Training Course for American Hindu Leaders to



Swami Sarvaananda, PhD, one of the main teachers of the course, is seen here outside LOTUS: the Light of the Universe Shrine to all faiths located on the Ashram grounds.



become Certified Volunteer Chaplains of the Hindu Faith. The course was presented at Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville, in Buckingham, VA, in Jan. 2015. HUA also offers an online course which provides an introduction to Hindu chaplaincy.

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is education to teach pastoral care to clergy and others. CPE is the primary method of training hospital and hospice chaplains and spiritual care providers in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It brings theological students and ministers of all faiths (pastors, priests, rabbis, imams and others) into supervised encounter with persons in crisis. In order to serve as a chaplain it is necessary to undergo CPE training (1-4 credits) from an accredited institution.

Rambhoru Dasi is another Hindu chaplain who is a Board Certified Chaplain (APC) and a Supervisor Candidate certified by the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE). She has developed an urban interfaith CPE program. VITAS Hospice is one of the organizations that provide interfaith CPE training at various locations throughout USA.

Prarima Dharm was the first Hindu chaplain to serve the Department of Defense. Till her appointment, Hinduism, with nearly a billion adherents worldwide was the largest of the world faiths not represented by a chaplain in the US military. Joining the Army in 2006 as a Christian chaplain, Dharm returned to her family's religious roots during her service, eventually becoming the Army's first Hindu chaplain.

Several Universities in US such as Princeton University, Duke University, Harvard University, Georgetown University etc. have appointed Hindu Chaplains to cater to the needs of students of Hindu faith. As Hindu chaplains they also participate in a variety of religious, spiritual, educational, administrative and social activities within and outside the university.

Over decades a variety of organizations have worked to establish endowed Hindu Studies chairs at various universities. Now it is critical that similar efforts are undertaken to establish Hindu chaplain positions at various institutions.