

# *The Art of Spiritual Care*

**BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CLINICAL  
PASTORAL EDUCATION (CPE)**



**CHAPLAINCY**  
Innovation Lab

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# A Beginner's Guide to Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE)

Mychal B. Springer

## What is CPE?

Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE, is a nationally accredited internship in which people learn the art of spiritual care as they provide that care to others. CPE students function as religious professionals while they receive in-depth, expert supervision from Certified Educators.

The educational model involves providing care, reflecting on that care, and then providing more care with an enhanced sense of the possibilities for that care.

The people students are caring for may be in any setting - including healthcare, corrections, the military, higher education. And CPE students often report that they themselves are transformed by the CPE process.

## What is “Clinical” about “Clinical Pastoral Education” (CPE)?

The core experience of CPE is that students learn by ministering directly to people who are suffering. Bryan Stevenson talks about proximity as a key element in fostering empathy.<sup>1</sup> The founders of CPE believed that theology students and people in formation for ministry of all kinds must be able to integrate the lived experience of the people they encounter, especially their brokenness and marginalization, with any beliefs they might espouse about those experiences.

Rather than rushing to offer hope and promises of redemption, religious and spiritual leaders need to tolerate all the feelings that get stirred up when they draw close to someone who is suffering. CPE teaches emerging spiritual caregivers to foster spiritual resilience that is grounded in people experiencing the healing that is possible when they feel accompanied, without covering over the myriad challenges that human beings and communities face.

CPE teaches them to cultivate healing relationships with a diversity of people by drawing on what they already know – from life, from faith, from academic work – and enhancing that knowledge through an in-depth form of education that is tailored to the clinical environment. The clinical process of learning invites students to immerse themselves in a holistic learning process that engages their hearts, minds, and souls.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Spiegel & Grau: New York, NY, 2015

## What is the curriculum of CPE?

ACPE: *The Standard of Spiritual Care & Education* is the national accrediting body of CPE programs that is recognized by the US Department of Education and the various bodies that certify chaplains, (e.g., [Association of Professional Chaplains](#), [Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains](#).)

All [ACPE accredited programs](#) uphold the standards of ACPE and are run by ACPE Certified Educators.

- The objectives of CPE ([Objectives and Outcomes for Level I/Level II CPE - ACPE Manuals - 2020](#)) are divided into three categories: Pastoral Formation, Pastoral Competence & Pastoral Reflection.
- **Formation** focuses on the person of the practitioner – your self-awareness as a particular human being in your social location and your faith journey and your ability to engage feedback from others.
- **Competence** focuses on skills you are learning to apply in pastoral practice.
- **Reflection** focuses on your demonstration of professional practices of assessing your strengths and growing edges and setting goals as a key aspect of on-going professional development.

## How do CPE students learn the art of pastoral care?

Each ACPE Certified Educator has their own unique style of supervision and draws on their creativity to support students in engaging the objectives and meeting the ACPE outcomes. While Certified Educators construct their programs in keeping with their own theoretical perspectives, all CPE programs include the following curricular components:

- **Access to people to whom you provide pastoral care, under expert supervision**  
needs. While the population you are serving will vary from setting to setting, a core commitment of each CPE program is that you will have ready access to provide care so that you can learn the art of pastoral care in the action-reflection-refined action model of learning.
- **Learning Contract**  
Each unit includes the collaborative construction of a learning contract in which students articulate their learning goals, in dialogue with the objectives of CPE. Students draw on what they already know about themselves as practitioners to envision a path toward learning what they do not yet know.



- **Verbatim Seminars**

Students are exposed to a large body of knowledge from the behavioral sciences, diverse cultural and religious realities, various theologies and spiritualities, systems thinking, different pastoral methodologies, health sciences and the healthcare field, ethics and pastoral research.

The predominant method for approaching these topics is through the presentation of verbatims, in depth write-ups of pastoral visits in which the student recalls the visit as fully as possible and reflects on the visit using a template that guides them in addressing key aspects of care.

- **Didactics**

In addition to the topics that emerge organically from the verbatims, during each unit there are scheduled didactic presentations on key themes, such as listening skills, genograms, ethics, pastoral assessment, running spirituality groups and trauma. CPE centers may draw on outside speakers - from the clinical setting, local seminaries or beyond - to augment the expertise of the Certified Educator. Didactic topics vary from program to program.

- **Theological/Spiritual Reflection**

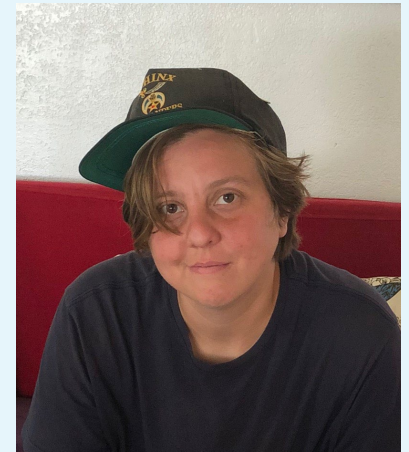
Theological/Spiritual Reflection is interwoven throughout the curriculum. Verbatims include opportunities to reflect on theological/spiritual dimensions related to pastoral visits. Many CPE programs assign special theological/spiritual reflection papers or projects. The orientation of these assignments will be influenced by the religious/spiritual/humanist orientation of the CPE students who generally participate in a particular center's programs and the religious/spiritual/humanist background of the CPE center's faculty.

- **Group Processing Seminars**

Group processing is an open-agenda component of CPE in which peers are involved in two activities at the same time: interacting with one another and engaging in a disciplined process of inquiry about that interaction. It engages behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of each person to help group members learn about their own motives, feelings, and strategies for dealing with others, and for learning greater emotional communication with others.

- **Individual Supervision**

This is an opportunity to explore learning goals, pastoral work, emerging relationships and issues in ministry and other



**Chaplain TJ Douglas**

*“In CPE, the entirety of your person as a human being comes into conversation with the work you are learning to do as a chaplain. For me, it has been a rigorous and deeply rewarding process of self-uncovering, self-discovering, self-awareness, and self-healing, all in the service of helping others find pathways of healing too. CPE has not only trained me in the technical skills of chaplaincy, but it has also introduced me to and prepared me for the ongoing, lifelong work of recognizing and making space for my own humanity - in all its brokenness and wholeness - as I recognize and make space for the humanity of others.”*

pertinent concerns. This one-on-one regular meeting with your Certified Educator is the only part of the curriculum that occurs separately from the peer group.

- **Research**

CPE students engage with research related to pastoral care and allied fields. Some programs put more of an emphasis on this aspect of pastoral education than others, so it's worth inquiring about the place of research in the curriculum if this is a particular interest of yours. People who are interested in pastoral research should familiarize themselves with the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab's work and [Transforming Chaplaincy](#).

- **Mid-Unit & Final Evaluations**

Mid-Unit Self-Evaluations and Final Self-Evaluations are opportunities to integrate the learning, paying particular attention to progress on learning goals and engagement with the CPE objectives. Every Certified Educator provides each CPE student with a timely written Final Evaluation which tells the story of their learning in CPE and assesses their progress in meeting the ACPE outcomes.

If you want to learn more about the theoretical perspectives that inform the specific program(s) you are applying to, feel free to ask the Certified Educator(s), students who have completed CPE at that center, or field education faculty at your seminary. You can also read the center's website and pay attention to the specific language that the center uses to describe its program.

## How long is a unit of CPE?

- Every unit of CPE includes at least 400 hours of training, with at least 250 clinical hours providing care to people with spiritual needs and at least 100 hours of educational seminars in small groups (3-8 people) and individual supervision. (The remaining 50 hours can be satisfied either with clinical hours or educational seminars.)



- CPE in most clinical contexts, such as hospitals, require a rigorous on-boarding process which includes health screening and a background check. On-boarding can take a month or more prior to the beginning of the unit, so you should factor this in when you think about your availability to enroll in a unit of CPE.
  - Units can be offered full-time or part-time. (Part time units are often called “extended” units.)
  - Full time programs generally run for 11 weeks, including orientation.

- Summer units are a popular option for seminary students.
- Some students complete an extended unit during the academic year, made easier if CPE counts for your seminary’s field education.
- Half units of CPE are available at some centers.
- Once you have completed a single unit you are eligible to apply to a CPE Residency, which is an intensive 9 or 12 month program that generally includes 3 units of CPE and prepares you for board certification as a chaplain.

## How do I choose between CPE Programs?

There are CPE programs located throughout the United States and Canada. You can search for programs on the [ACPE website](#) by name, location, units offered and center type.

- Clinical environments include acute care hospitals, hospices, military, parish, corrections, community and more, though the preponderance of centers are based in hospitals. The “Center Type” search on the ACPE Directory provides some of this information, but you will find more precise information about clinical options if you search the websites of the individual centers in the geographical area that you are interested in.
- When selecting a CPE program, consider your interest in serving the population you would be caring for. It’s worth reflecting on what draws you to care for people in this population and what in your own experience might be a barrier for you.
- When selecting a hospital, it’s worth seeing if the hospital is a Trauma I Center, a Children’s Hospital, a Psychiatric Hospital, for instance, and asking the Certified Educator what kinds of units you would be assigned to, and how much choice you might have in those assignments.
- A few centers offer Online Programs.
- One great way to choose a CPE program is to talk to ask classmates who have completed CPE and your seminary advisors for their recommendations. They can offer specific guidance that takes your interests and background into account in helping to make a great match with the Certified Educator and the clinical context.





## How invested are CPE Educators in fostering the well-being of students from diverse backgrounds?

All ACPE Centers are committed to upholding admissions policies that state that the center does not discriminate against persons because of race, ethnicity, religious/spiritual tradition, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability. This is the minimal standard. ACPE fosters an environment of respect and sensitivity for students of all backgrounds. The 2021 annual conference was themed “Creating Room to Breathe.”

It offered essential resources for all Certified Educators and challenged Certified Educators to reflect on how the organization and all its individual members can commit to anti-racist practices. All ACPE students and Certified Educators are invited to join the Racial and Ethnic Minorities (REM) Community of Practice. Please visit [Resources for Chaplains of Color - Chaplaincy Innovation Lab](#) for an array of relevant resources.

## Does CPE have a particular faith perspective?

CPE Educators are trained to respect people of all religious and spiritual backgrounds. While historically CPE Educators were Christian, today there are CPE Educators of all faith backgrounds, including spiritual but not religious.



If you enroll in CPE in a geographical area that has a large population of Muslims, Jews, Buddhists or Hindus, for example, then you can expect that the CPE Center will have experience educating people from those faith traditions. But if you choose to enroll in a part of the country which has less religious diversity, then you may be a first or an only in your peer group.

While there are religious resources available to your Certified Educator to learn about your faith tradition, you may need to attend to dynamics around religious difference as part of the process.

Resources are available through chaplaincy organizations such as the [Association of Muslim Chaplains](#), [Neshama: The Association of Jewish Chaplains](#), [North American Hindu Chaplains](#)

[Association](#), the [International Buddhist Chaplains Foundation](#)

The [Chaplaincy Innovation Lab's Resources](#) tab links to many helpful resources.



## Who can apply to CPE?

CPE is for seminary students, clergy, and religious leaders. Most students who apply to CPE have completed some theological or seminary education or have been involved in a spiritual formation process appropriate to their faith tradition. Some programs will accept students who have a grounded religious or spiritual identity even if they have not attended seminary.

If you are discerning whether you are eligible to apply to CPE you may contact a CPE center that interests you and have a conversation with the Certified Educator about your unique situation.

## Are there special steps for international students?

Students studying in the United States on an F-1 Visa are eligible to enroll in a unit of CPE once they have obtained approval for Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or Optional Practical Training (OPT). CPT and OPT are designed to enable students to acquire internship and job experience. Even though most CPE summer and extended units do not pay stipends, students should still apply for CPT or OPT. For detailed information, please read [CPT vs OPT: What Is the Difference and How to Apply](#) and consult your designated school official.

## When in my training should I take a unit?

Some seminaries build a progression of pastoral care courses into the curriculum and advise students to take CPE after they have had an introductory pastoral skills course. Other seminaries take a less structured approach, in which case students should assess their readiness based on their interpersonal skills and where they are in their formation process.

CPE teaches basic pastoral skills in an action-reflection-refined action model, so students with beginning level skills are welcome in CPE. Students need to be able to work with feedback and cope with surprises in the process of providing care in order to thrive in CPE.

The process-orientation of CPE invites students to begin where they are and engage their individual learning goals in dialogue with the ACPE objectives. If you have experienced a recent loss or trauma, you might do well to give yourself some time for self-care before jumping into the rigors of CPE.



**Rabbi Ben Perlstein**

“When I think back on my years in rabbinical school, CPE stands out as a uniquely wide-ranging, integrated and transformative part of the curriculum. With its seamless interweaving of clinical training and intensive reflection and supervision, CPE's holistic pedagogy afforded me truly profound learning and growth on practical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels - all at once and all with intentional focus on helping me and my peers to help others. I was privileged to meet, accompany and learn from many holy people in CPE, and the experience lives on alongside them in my heart, as an inspiring testament to the best of what is possible in education.”

## What do I need to know about a CPE application?

- CPE applications generally follow a standard format of a cover sheet, essays, a resume, and references.
- The required essays are:
  - A reasonably full account of your life (3-6 single spaced pages)
  - A description of your spiritual growth and development (3-6 single spaced pages)
  - An account of a “helping incident” in which you were the person who provided the help (3-6 single spaced pages)
  - Your impressions of CPE (up to 6 single spaced pages, though this might be much shorter.)
- The standard application can be found here: [CPE Application \(acpe.edu\)](https://www.acpe.edu) You should check the website of any CPE center you are applying to for their specific application.
- Certified Educators read your application to learn about you as you understand yourself. CPE draws on self-awareness to help you develop your capacity as a caregiver, so these essays are both a way to get to know you as a human being and as a potential reflective practitioner, someone who can draw on what you know and where you have been to help you learn the art of caring for others.
- The first essay is not meant to be a detailed recounting of everything that has happened to you in your life. Before you start writing you might want to identify some key themes and bring them to life through brief vignettes. What should someone know about you in order to be able to enter into a successful supervisory relationship with you?
- It’s worth proofreading your application so that you catch typos and present yourself professionally.
- You will need to ask three people to serves as references for you:
  - Academic Reference – someone who can attest to your academic proficiency, ideally a faculty member of your seminary.
  - Faith Group or Denominational Reference – someone who knows you in your religious or spiritual context who can speak to your qualities of spiritual leadership. If you are in an ordination process, or are ordained, this can be someone who is connected to your ordination. If not, you can think creatively about who can speak to where you are in your spiritual development.
  - Personal Reference – someone in your personal life who knows you and can attest to your readiness to do CPE in terms of your personal qualities.
- Some CPE Centers have priority deadlines, though many programs have rolling admissions. We advise you to consult the websites of the programs you are interested in. Although the timing of the application season varies, we recommend that you begin looking into programs about nine months prior to when you want to start.

***“CPE in my opinion is likened to where the rubber meets the road, or where theology meets praxis, or where Chaplaincy meets the Word of God...”*** Chaplain Paula Shorter

## What do I need to know about a CPE interview?

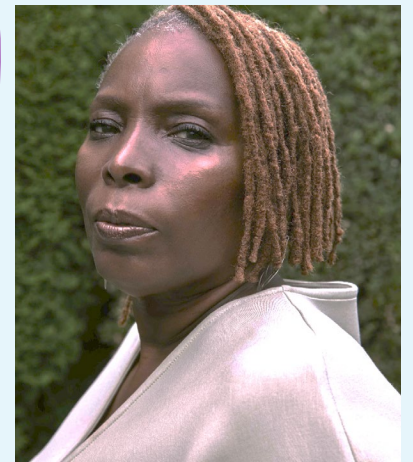
The interview is a chance for the Certified Educator to get to know you and for you to get to know them. Your interview for CPE is not about demonstrating that you already know how to provide pastoral care. While you will draw on your seminary learning and other contexts that inform how to provide care as you respond to questions that you are asked, the Certified Educator is interested in you as a learner.

Are you able to reflect on your life? Can you receive feedback non-defensively? Do you demonstrate transparency, vulnerability and curiosity?

The interview allows you to ask questions about the clinical context, the learning environment, the educator's supervisory style, the CPE group. Some questions you might want to ask are:

- What kinds of clinical units might I be assigned to cover? How many patients will be on my assigned units? Will I have the option to request specific units?
- Will I be expected to complete hours in the evening? On weekends?
- How well does the clinical context support pastoral care? Understand what pastoral care is?
- How many chaplains are on the pastoral care team and how are they involved in the educational program?
- What are the components of a CPE program?
- What kinds of written assignments are there?
- How many hours should I expect to devote to written assignments at home each week?
- For part-time/extended units: when will the educational seminars take place?
- How would you describe your supervisory style?
- What theories do you draw on as an educator?
- How much experience do you have supervising people of different racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender and religious backgrounds?
- Is there something you think is most important for me to know as I apply to your program?
- Do you have any financial aid or scholarship funds available?

In addition to asking questions, we suggest that you pay attention to the relational dynamic that you experience with the educator during your interview.



### Chaplain Paula Shorter

“The CPE educators, administrators, staff, and my fellow Chaplain interns have all contributed greatly to my CPE experience which has had a huge impact on my life!

The CPE experience has been an open classroom that has provided a very rich and unique set of opportunities to learn/experience many things: exploring and discovering deeper levels within myself, learning to care for and to be fully present with the human spirit, all while feeling and seeing the hand of God move throughout it all.

CPE in my opinion is likened to where the rubber meets the road, or where theology meets praxis, or where Chaplaincy meets the Word of God...”



You might consider:

- Is this someone with whom you can imagine developing a strong supervisory alliance?
- Do the educator's questions engage you in ways that work well for you?

It is now common for prospective students to be able to have virtual CPE interviews. Be sure to minimize distractions in your environment so that you can be fully present during your interview.

## How do I pay for CPE?

- CPE Centers charge tuition that ranges from \$500-1,000/unit.
- Some CPE Centers offer minimal financial aid to cover tuition.
- Your seminary might have some stipend funds available for CPE, so it's worth inquiring.
- Residencies pay a stipend.

## CPE not accredited by ACPE

There are CPE programs that are accredited by organizations other than ACPE. Many religious denominations will only recognize an ACPE CPE unit in fulfillment of their CPE requirement. While the major certifying bodies require ACPE CPE units for certification, they will generally accept one non-ACPE unit of CPE as an equivalency to a unit.

Please see the certification requirements of the various certifying bodies (APC, NACC, NAJC) for the latest equivalency requirements.



## Resources for further information

- You can check out [www.acpe.edu](http://www.acpe.edu), including their section for prospective students. They address visa questions for international students.
- Please speak with faculty at your local institution. Field Education faculty members tend to be particularly knowledgeable about CPE and specifically about CPE in relation to your seminary.
- The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab [offers mentoring](#) to people who are interested in chaplaincy as a career.



[ChaplaincyInnovation.org](http://ChaplaincyInnovation.org)

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