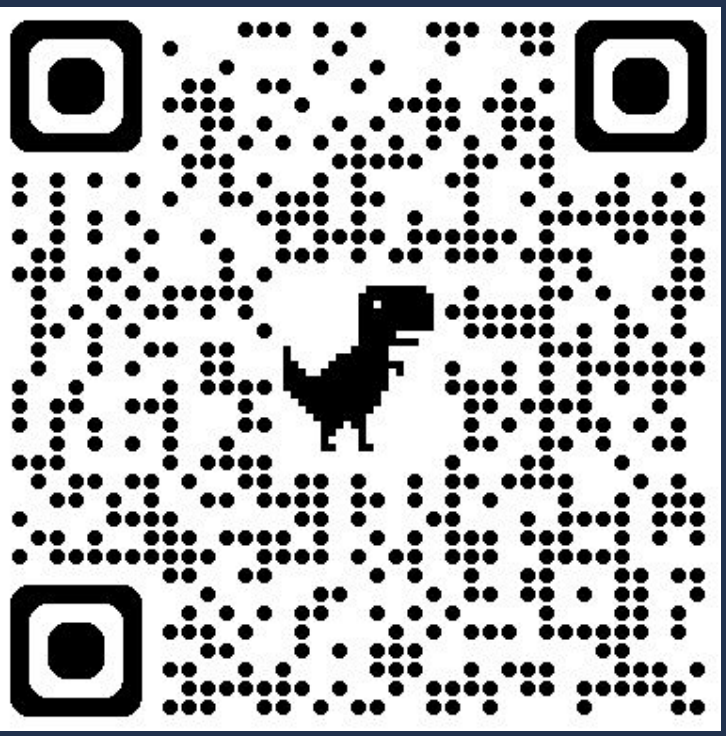# Advancing Online Spiritual Care: A Three-Phase Study with Chaplains on Co-Designing New Models of Delivery

Presenters: *C. Estelle Smith, PhD, Rev. George Handzo, APBCC, CSSBB*

Contributing Authors: *Dr. Alemitu Bezabih, Shadi Nourriz, Jesan Ahammed Ovi, Dr. Anne-Marie Snider, Dr. Daniel McKenzie*
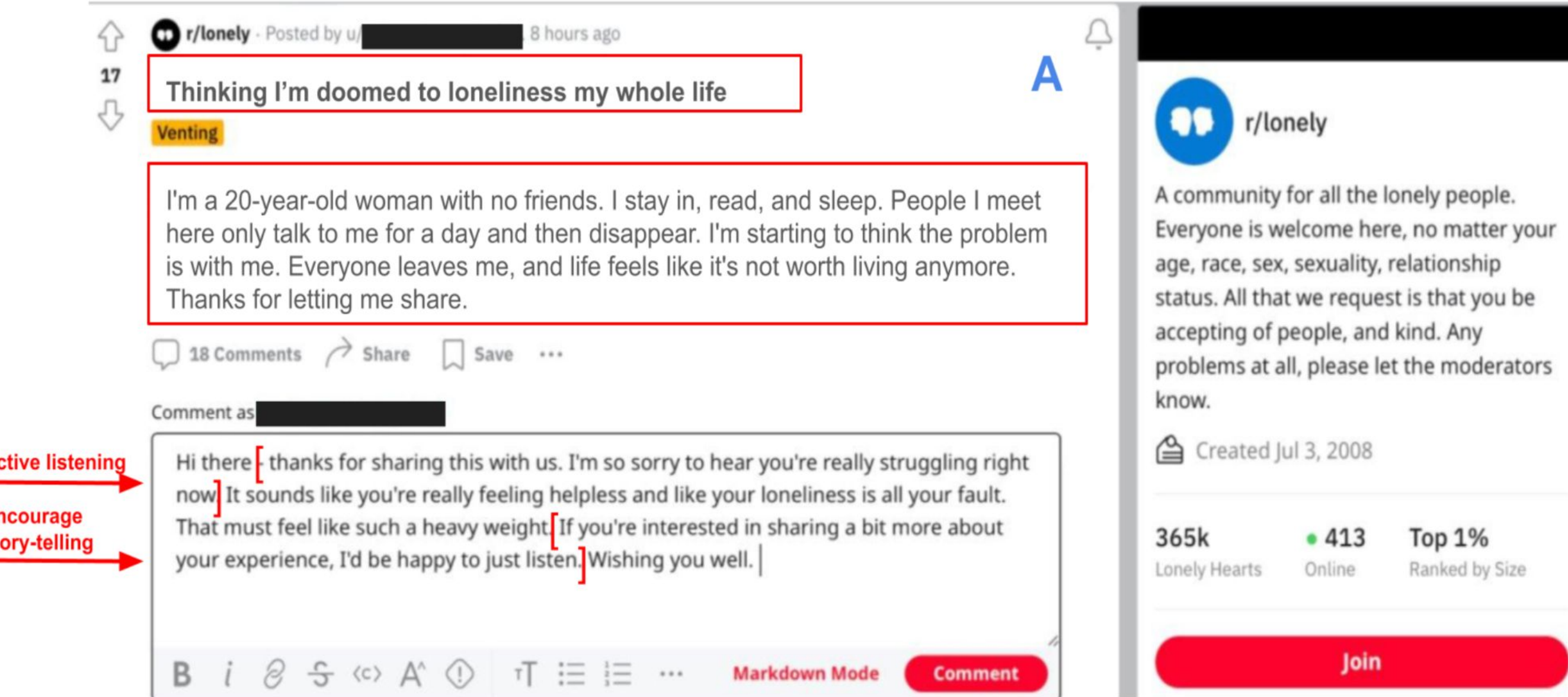
Abstract & References

Overall Project Motivation

- During COVID-19, access to spiritual care was severely limited
- Beyond COVID, millions continue to seek support online for spiritual and existential concerns during serious illness
- Need to explore alternative models of spiritual care delivery
- This 3-phase project examined acceptability, feasibility, and design of Online Spiritual Care Communities (OSCCs).

Phase 1: Interviews & User Testing

Methods:

- **Interviews** with professional spiritual care providers *(n=22)*
- **User testing sessions** to elicit feedback on "state-of-the-art" online support communities on Reddit.com
- **Ideation** on what needs to change to enable meaningful spiritual care in future OSCCs
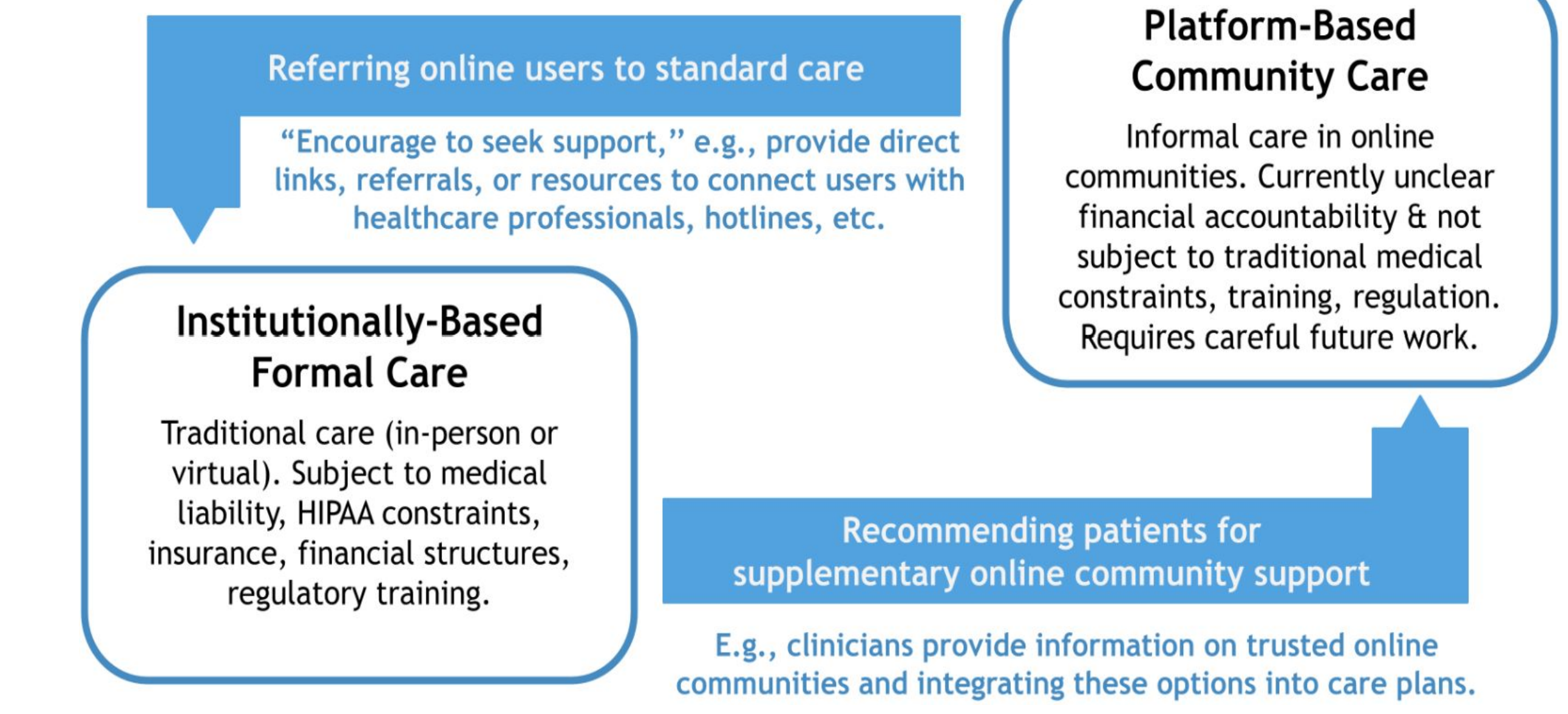- **Simulated user interaction:** Writing Responses to live, unfiltered, real user posts

Results:

- Accessibility & scalability
- Increased agency for patient-initiated care
- **Care Loop Model:** OSSCs should be implemented as a supplemental form of care to extend clinical care pathways

Concerns:

- Trustworthiness
- Online risks, e.g., scams
- Distracting/busy UI/UX
- Need user trainings
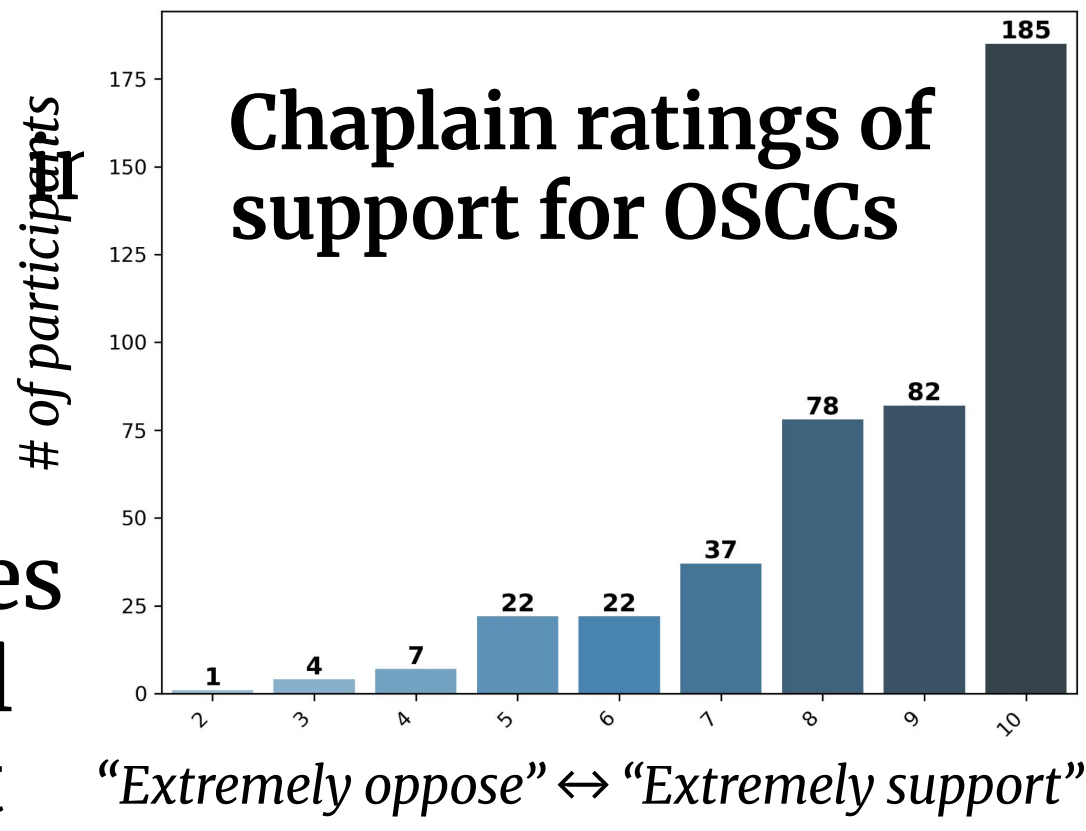- Need referrals to formal care

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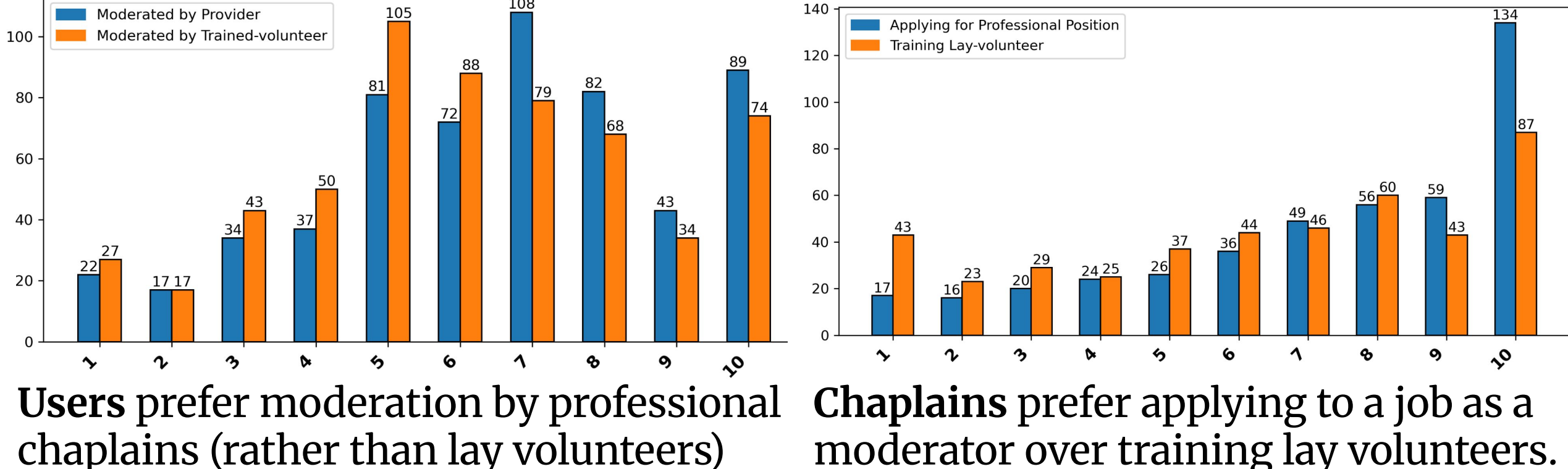## Phase 2: Large National Survey

Methods:

- National Survey of USA Stakeholders *(n=1010)*:
  - Spiritual care providers (437), lay users (573)
- Distributed by spiritual care orgs (e.g., APC, SCA) and online communities (e.g., CaringBridge, Reddit, Facebook)
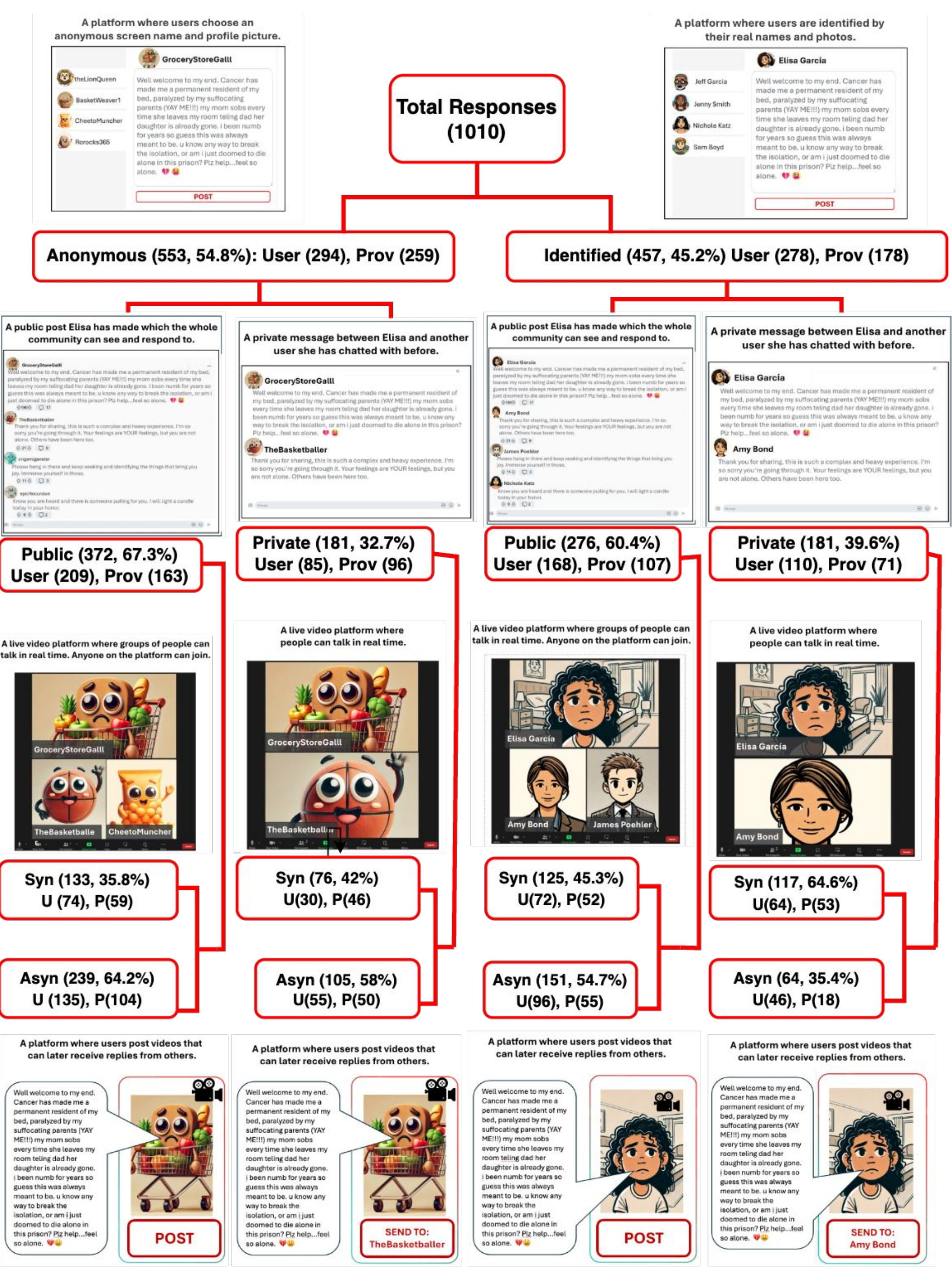
Results:

- **Excessive support** from chaplains to invest resources implementing OSCCs
- Significant preferences for **building new communities** rather than rely on existing ones
- OSCCs will require institutional affiliation for feasibility & trust

Chaplain ratings of support for OSCCs

"Extremely oppose" ⟷ "Extremely support"

Preferred Moderation by Professional Chaplains:

Users prefer moderation by professional chaplains (rather than lay volunteers).

Chaplains prefer applying to a job as a moderator over training lay volunteers.

"Build Your Own OSCC" Design Tournament:

Purpose: Determine feasible and acceptable design configurations and affiliations.

Grounded in narrative comic of a fictional user persona, Elisa Garcia.
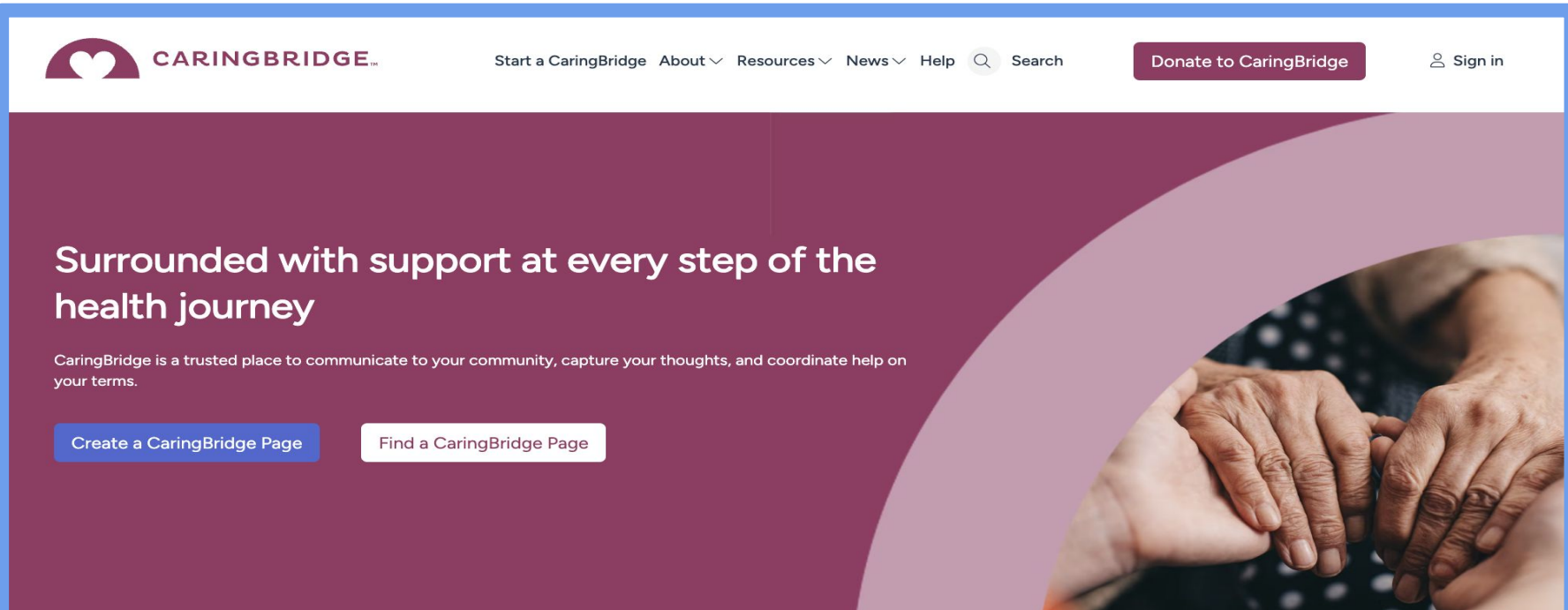
Most Popular Config:

Anonymous, Public, and Asynchronous

(Similar to Reddit config)

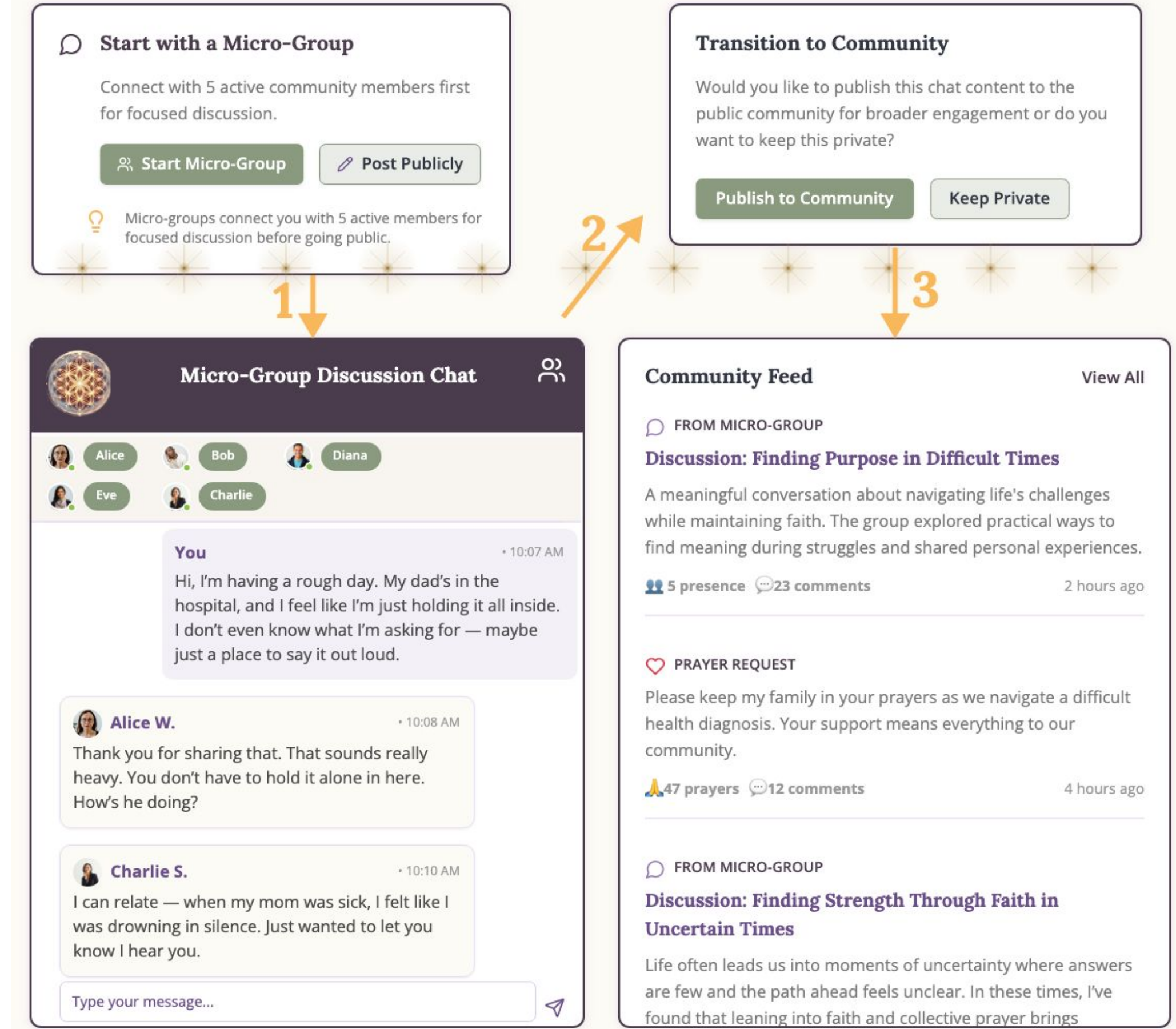## Phase 3: Co-Design Workshops

Methods:

- **Co-design workshops** (*n=24* chaplains)
- **Purpose:** Design novel interfaces that can effectively mediate spiritual care via commuity
- **Interface Prototyping** with CaringBridge.org

Hybrid OSCC Configuration:

Begin with "Micro-Group" (Synch, Private, Identified)

Transition to "Congregation" (Asynch, Public, Anonymous)

Digital Presence & Relational Togetherness:

"Light a candle" provides nonverbal solidarity and shared presence through ritualized transition from asynchronous feed into a synchronous space with others.