

Ministry 9/11

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Kristin Aasmundstad Walsh

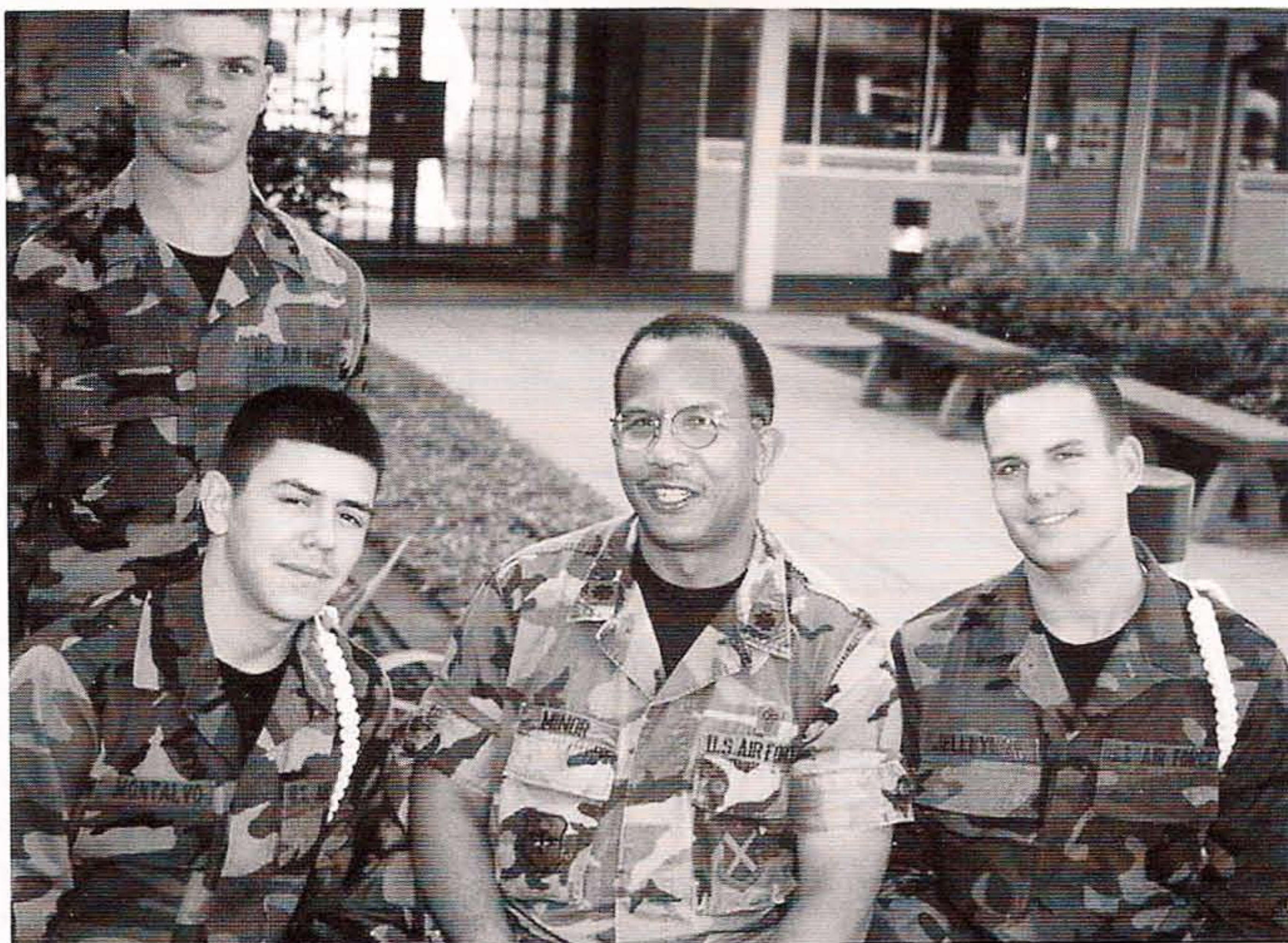
Chaplain, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J.
Minor, United States Air Force (M.Div.,
1972) talks about being at the Pentagon
on September 11 and his ministry as a
chaplain in the United States armed forces
since that fateful day.

When
Chaplain,
Lieutenant

Colonel Thomas J. Minor went to work that morning of September 11, 2001, he had no idea the world would be forever changed. A chaplain with the military for 26 years (20 of them on active duty), Minor had been serving on the staff of the Chief of Chaplains Office with the U.S. Air National Guard handling personnel and recruiting (Minor is assigned to the Chief of Chaplains Office of the Air National Guard on a three year liaison, but is an active-duty Air Force chaplain). The building where he works is five blocks from the Pentagon, and he was in his office that day when he heard that a plane had hit the Pentagon. He was sent over to the Pentagon with another chaplain.

Driven to the casualty point by an FBI agent, Minor discovered that the people who had been found alive but injured had already been taken to local hospitals for treatment, and those who were able had already evacuated the building. He hovered in the area over the next several hours, talking with the firefighters, nurses, and other rescuers resting up between shifts. Minor called his wife [the former Pamela Harris of Chicago, with whom he has three adult children] and cousin to let them know he was fine, and performed "ministry of presence" over the next seven hours, meaning he had no specific tasks assigned to him but was visible and present, available for people to talk with as they felt the need.

Minor says that although everyone was aghast at what had happened, there was a surprising wave of



Rev. Thomas Minor (center, seated) is pictured with airmen at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas. The airmen had completed basic training and were in advanced school training.

calm about the area and people were not expressing anger toward anyone about what had happened. Looking back, he still feels a certain sense of disbelief. "I never thought I would see an attack on America like this," Minor said. "The Pentagon always seemed like a pretty good assignment to have, a safe place to work. But now I have been witness to this terrible incident; I have my own Pearl Harbor story."

While his involvement at the Pentagon that day marks an important contribution, it is how Minor's ministry has changed since then that is even more significant. For six weeks, he worked at the Family Support Center at the Sheraton Hotel, a briefing location, talking with people who had lost family members and counseling them as needed. While he talked to many people during that time, he recalls one particularly touching story of an officer who displayed great anger when he found out his wife, who had

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worked in the Pentagon, had been killed. After moving past his anger, he asked the general in charge if there was any way he could help out, and was there as a volunteer counseling others for a month.

"He was able to take a tremendous burden and turn it into helping other families," Minor recalls.

As a result of the attacks, Minor was taken out of his personnel role as chief for sessions training and education, and moved into a role called chief of programs, where his main responsibility is to minister to the people in the large office building where he had worked at the time of the attacks. The 12-story structure is just five blocks from the Pentagon, and after September 11, employees returning to work were fighting fears of their building being attacked. Just coming to work was a daily reminder of their vulnerability.

"Some people were dealing with loss of friends or family, and others hadn't been personally affected but were simply afraid to come to work every day to a building that felt very much like a target," Minor says.

Minor's job includes visitation ministry—helping people to talk about the experience and their concerns, weekly worship services in the building, bible studies, and prayer breakfasts and lunches meant to bring people together to talk and share. While people wanted to talk and pray about the tragedy a lot at first, that intensity has downshifted as the months go by. In this way, Minor does not see a revival of religion as a result of the attacks.

"For a few days there was a heightened interest, but that has died down," he observes. He says when there is an immediate threat people rally around religious leaders in greater numbers, but that dissipates as the threat is less present. "That is human nature," he notes.

While Minor says that life has pretty much gone back to normal, with the exception of the ever-present reminder of tighter security, he says people are still very much on alert. "The President says we're at war," says Minor. "It's not the same intensity that it was, but we are all still living in wonderment of what's next." †

WAGNER HONORED BY BOARD

Committed to preparing women and men for ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and its predecessor bodies, The Rev. Dr. Joseph M. Wagner was honored by the seminary's board of directors at its May meeting. Wagner retired at the end of May as executive director of the ELCA Division for Ministry, a position he has held since November 1987.

The division for ministry supports all the ministries of the church. It develops standards for ministry and provides for the recruitment and guidance of candidates for church occupations, through theological education and continuing education.



The Rev. Dr. Joseph M. Wagner, who retired in May as executive director of the Division for Ministry of the ELCA, was honored by the seminary's board of directors at a banquet attended by the board, foundation trustees, alumni board, faculty and many donors and friends.

Under Wagner's tenure, the division conducted a study of ministry, which proposed definitions for the official ministries of the ELCA and a study of theological education that developed a plan for a system of theological education among the church's eight seminaries.

In announcing his retirement, Wagner said, "We've been through some important times together with studies on ministry and on theological education. We have strong cooperation among our seminaries, and there's a developing strong sense of teamwork across the church," said Wagner.

The certificate presented to Wagner by the seminary expressed gratitude for his ardent support of theological education and of the seminaries, and it gave thanks to Almighty God for his faithful witness and effective service. †



U.S. Air Force Chaplain Thomas Minor (M.Div., 1972) at the Historical Chapel Number 2, Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. The chapel was used during the civil war.

MILITARY CHAPLAINCY: It's a job, it's a spiritual adventure

Rev. Thomas Minor (M.Div., 1972) served in a Chicago congregation for five years before entering the military as a chaplain, and has also served in campus ministry at Texas Southern University and the University of Houston. He had never really considered being a chaplain in the military, but was recruited by Bertrand Gilbert who introduced him to the job's wonderful aspects. He could not be happier with his decision.

"I work with all kinds of people, from one-strippers to four-star generals," says Minor. "I get to be involved in a lot of historical moments and events, I get the chance to travel overseas, to learn about other cultures." He was stationed in England for three years during Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and also was in Bahrain for 240 days, ministering to troops who were maintaining the No Fly Zone in Iraq. Minor was also a chaplain at the Andrews Air Force Base hospital when the injured soldiers who fought in Somalia were returned to the States, and he talked with them and welcomed them home as they returned from a war fraught with shades of gray.

"We really do get a unique opportunity to minister to people—particularly military members and their families, to live and travel in different places, to see how other people live. I'm thankful for that opportunity," says Minor. There is also a patriotic element involved. "I remember during Desert Storm, feeling proud that I was counseling family members of personnel who were going into harm's way for the sake of our country," he says.

Minor also enjoys the ecumenical aspect of his job. The military has chaplains of all denominations, so Minor works with not only other Protestant clergy but also Jewish and Muslim religious leaders. He enjoys ministering to people of all faiths, at times in their lives that are both mundane and momentous, when they are contributing to a cause greater than themselves.

There are from 16 to 20 ELCA Lutheran Armed Forces Reserve chaplains who have been called up to active duty since September

11. According to Lloyd Lyngdal, executive assistant to the Bishop for federal chaplaincies, there are 145 ELCA Lutheran ministers who serve in the active duty armed forces and 248 reservists.

There is a need for many more. "Anywhere there are troops, there are chaplains," Lyngdal says. "ELCA Lutherans, as what they call 'liturgical Protestants,' are very highly sought after as military chaplains because they tend to be more open and comfortable ministering to people of all faiths.

"A military chaplain's position is exceptional," Lyngdal notes, "because he or she gets to share in everything the troop does. It is rare to be so close to the community you are serving." †

If you or someone you know is interested in serving as a chaplain in the military, call the Office for Federal Chaplaincies, 202-408-8403.