

Bringing Peace to the Military

BY ELLEN BIRKETT MORRIS

After 27 years of service as a chaplain, Army Colonel Donna Weddle is ready to retire. But before relaxing in retirement, Donna added to her already-full schedule by attending the 2006 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women. At the Gathering, she taught attendees what chaplaincy means, leading a workshop entitled “Military Chaplains in War.”

“Chaplains are ministers of Word and Sacrament in the military. We bring our ministry to different places, to serve those in need,” said Donna.

Her duties as chaplain include serving as a pastor, performing baptisms and marriages, and comforting the wounded and families of the deceased. As a member of the military, she receives the same training as other soldiers but does not bear arms. Donna decided to become a chaplain after serving as an enlisted soldier, noncommissioned officer, military wife and mother. Donna also is an ordained PC(USA) minister and a member of National Capital Presbytery.

“I felt absolutely called by God to this form of ministry. All of my background had prepared me for this call,” Donna said.

During her career, she has faced many difficult situations, including work on September 11, 2001 at the Pentagon, during the 1982 recovery of Air Florida Flight 90 from the Potomac River and early in the 1990s in Bosnia as a division chaplain. She described in detail running toward the fireball erupting from Pentagon on 9/11 and finding herself faced with the ensuing tragedy there. During the rescue and



Army Chaplain Colonel Donna Weddle

recovery efforts of Air Florida Flight 90, she served as the only chaplain for 10 days.

Donna currently serves as joint staff chaplain in the religious affairs office in the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This office is responsible for providing the chairman and the joint staff advice on religious and moral issues, and the implications of religion across the full spectrum of military operations.

“I think having been an enlisted soldier helped me relate immediately to all enlisted soldiers, not by rank, but as important children of God. . . . Service members’ ranks don’t matter much when people are hurting and want to see a chaplain,” Donna explained.

“When people find themselves in a life-threatening situation, the focus becomes clear. When they recognize they could die, they often seek out the presence of God. A chaplain’s job is to help them seek it out in their own faith tradition and to honor their religious needs,” Donna

observed about her ministry to people with a variety of faith backgrounds.

“I feel good about what I have managed to accomplish. I see myself in the continuum of history, standing on the backs of those who came before me and trying to do my part,” she said.

Donna said there are many ways in which members of Presbyterian congregations, pastors and staff can support their military members and families, especially when the service member is deployed far from home. She shared Web addresses for sites that provide encouragement to military personnel, including www.americasupportsyou.mil, a Department of Defense project that gives voice to citizens’ support of the armed forces, and www.pccmp.org, the site for the Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel.

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