

Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Guidelines

Reprinted with permission from Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Company and The Washington Post

Chaplains Face Survivors' Questions

Chaplains Try to Help Survivors Face the Most Painful Questions

By Fredrick Kunkle

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, September 15, 2001; Page B01

The nicely kept middle-class home was filled with framed pictures, visitors from all over and the kind of disarray that surrounds a family thrown together in mourning.

Say a prayer for us, they asked.

So Rabbi Brad Hoffman, a chaplain in the U.S. Naval Reserve, obliged. Standing in a stranger's house in a town he had never heard of, he doctored a Jewish prayer enough to comfort a Christian family.

"They're scared," said Hoffman, a Navy reservist from Philadelphia, whose task it was to try to comfort the young woman whose husband was missing. "They were just in total emotional disarray."

Chaplains from every major religion and every branch of the armed forces have been ministering round-the-clock to the people closest to the horror of Tuesday's attack on the Pentagon: military personnel shaken by the terror in their workplace, rescuers carrying out the unspeakable work of recovering bodies, relatives grieving over loved ones lost without warning.

On the front lines and in the triage areas, on the telephones and at a family reception center set up in Crystal City, chaplains are finding themselves shoring up someone's religious faith after it has been pushed to the breaking point.

"They may say, 'Why did that happen?' And I say I can't answer," Hoffman said. "I could say it's God's will. But I personally think that's very unsatisfying. And it doesn't address that sense of loss.

"I mean, one of them said they didn't have a chance to say, 'I love you.' And that really was something -- that she hadn't brought closure to it in some way. It's an interrupted journey."

Hoffman was part of a team officially notifying families on Wednesday that their relatives were missing and presumed dead. Other chaplains began ministering to people within minutes after the hijacked airliner hit.

In 25 years of service as an Army chaplain, Col. Janet Horton, of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, never experienced the kind of hell that she found at ground zero in the Pentagon's center courtyard.

Burned and bloodied people sat or lay on the ground. Women staggered by, their clothes and nylons rent with gaping holes. Rescuers were already working to pull people out when Horton arrived.

As doctors and nurses began treating those who were the most critically injured and in horrific pain, Horton knelt beside the victims to try to allay their fears. She recited the 23rd Psalm. She prayed the Lord's Prayer.

Out of respect to those whose faith might differ from hers, she always asked the victims first if they wanted her to pray for them.

"We were on our knees praying with each one of the victims," said Horton, a Christian Scientist.

But Horton, who also served in Bosnia, said she was moved by the compassion people showed for each other in the midst of disaster. Some offered their own garments to people whose clothing had been cut away by emergency teams or lost in the explosion. Others raced to a Pentagon cafeteria, gathering up ice and beverages to give to the wounded.

Sometimes she would approach a gravely injured person only to be told by that person that she should assist someone in worse condition.

"I guess what people may underestimate in the average American is how selfless they are," Horton said.

Chaplains also were on hand at the Defense Department's family assistance center at the Sheraton Crystal City Hotel.

Marine Corps Maj. Ben Owens, a Department of Defense spokesman, said military staff and volunteers at the hotel were helping families trying to learn the status of loved ones. Yesterday, 350 family members of 60 people still missing were at the center.

"There are some who are just so overwrought. There are others that are resigned to the fact," said the Rev. William McEllroy, a chaplain in the Naval Reserve at the military's family assistance center in the Sheraton Crystal City. "I know there's one family who still feel their loved one can be there. God is the god of miracles, and you never know."

The chaplains have been joined by civilian clergy members, including the Rev. Louis Lakatos, who spontaneously appeared at the family reception center to help.

"The Lord asked me to come here. There's people here who are hurting," said Lakatos, an evangelist minister from Manassas. Clutching a maroon Bible, Lakatos said he wanted to reassure people to keep their faith in God.

"I have not yet heard anybody say they're angry at God -- which you sometimes hear," said McEllroy, who in civilian life is pastor at St. John's Evangelical Congregational Church in Annville, Pa.

"God is the god of love. He is not the one who makes these things happen. It grieves him to see these things happen," McEllroy said.

"But then I remind them that we are in a fallen world."

Copyright 2001, Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive and The Washington Post. All rights Reserved.

The Washington Post Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com>