

CHAPTER 19

CHRISTINE

Christine Blice-Baum, sixty, is an ordained Lutheran minister. She entered the United States Air Force at the age of forty-one to become a military chaplain.

Call her reverend, lieutenant colonel, doctor or chaplain—she has earned all those titles. Christine is an example of where faith, discipline and curiosity can take one in life. She has already followed at least three career paths as pastor, professor and now Air Force chaplain. She is currently a wing chaplain, a position consistent with her military rank of lieutenant colonel.

A trim, petite stylish woman, Christine carries her air of authority with ease and friendliness. She wears brightly printed leggings of green and turquoise and a black fleece top, complemented with black boots and a turquoise-and-green scarf arranged casually around her neck. Her open smile and well-styled short hair complete a picture of confidence and approachability. She wears her sixty years unbelievably well.

She begins, “I’ve got two lives, pre-military and military.” The first life led naturally into the second, and she is already planning for her next, post-military life. “My journey began in Youngstown, OH, in Steeltown USA,” she says. “My parents were not college-educated but they believed in education for me and my older sister.” Their belief surely took root in Christine. She holds a bachelor’s degree in music, four master’s degrees (music, theological studies, divinity, and military art and science) and a doctorate in musical arts.

Music was and remains important in Christine’s life. She began taking piano lessons when she was six and playing the organ in churches when she was fifteen. She also played the flute in school. Her music degrees, both the bachelor’s and master’s in music performance, are from Youngstown State University.

She is a “cradle Lutheran” and her parents were active volunteers in church. Among her earliest memories, she recalls Sundays in the large neo-Gothic-structure church of her childhood. A religious theme, a common thread in her life, began to emerge when she was just a child. She remembers looking out her bedroom window and seeing her mother in conversation with two Roman Catholic sisters, for what reason she can’t imagine now. Christine was intrigued with the women dressed in religious garb. That was the beginning of a feeling “almost of yearning” for some sort of religious life. Later she visited a mother-house for sisters of the Lutheran church and thought about “taking this step of faith.”

When she began playing the organ in churches, she heard a lot about religion that left her with questions. Her curiosity about the Bible led her eventually to seminary in her early twenties. At that time, she had never seen a clergywoman, though Lutherans began ordaining women in 1970. She felt like taking “a daring step of faith,” preparing herself for something but she was not sure what. When she tentatively mentioned it to her parents, her father responded, “Oh, forget it,” and returned to his newspaper. She remembers her mother in the kitchen murmuring, “Oh, my.”

Christine attended Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, OH, a seminary of the American Lutheran Church, now the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Her second master’s degree was in theological studies, not in divinity as would be expected for her to be ordained.

While at Trinity Seminary she met Mark, who became her husband. They are both ordained Lutheran ministers and have been married more than thirty years. Christine laughs and says, “I followed Mark for the first ten years of our marriage. Now he follows me.”

They knew Mark would likely find a job first, so Christine moved with him to Oshkosh, WI, where he became an assistant pastor of a very large Lutheran church. The congregation there voted to send her back to school, so she earned a master’s degree in divinity from Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, IA, when their first child, a son, was just a baby. She became an assistant pastor in the same church where Mark was also an assistant pastor.

She laughs as she relates that she first served communion as an ordained pastor when she was eight months pregnant with their second child, a daughter, following her December ordination. She recalls that she filled out the vestments well and says, “What an Advent that was!” She also recalls that thirty-plus years ago there was no maternity leave so she took off four weeks without pay when her daughter was born.

The family moved to Albany, NY, when Mark became campus minister to Lutheran students at State University of New York at Albany. Christine served as associate pastor at a

downtown Lutheran church. She wanted to go back to school but vowed, "I was not going to use household money" from their already-stretched budget. She scraped together almost \$30,000 worth of grants and scholarships and enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music for her doctorate in musical arts, a performance degree in church music. During those years Christine played the organ at a church in nearby Schenectady. Mark arranged his schedule to care for their two young children while she was in Manhattan and somehow they managed until she received her degree.

An important part of Christine's religious development was staying with the Sisters of the Community of the Holy Spirit, a monastic order of nuns of the Episcopal Church located nine blocks from the Manhattan School of Music. While she worked on her degree, she stayed there a few days a week. She says, "They gave me my own cell."

The order practiced silence, even at mealtimes, and Christine says, "I discovered silence." She remembers that the two-hour train ride from New York City to Albany gave her time to transition to the noisy world and she was able to feel more available to her family when she arrived home. She later told the Mother Superior, "I'm not sure which was more important, living here or doing my degree." Christine later wrote an article called "A Season of Silence," and silence and meditation remain an important part of her spiritual life today.

"It almost felt like coming home [being in the silence of the community]," she remembers. "I didn't know how to find that in the Lutheran Church. It felt like I was home, almost a beginning. I didn't know how to harness that feeling."

Her first few calls had been part-time, but Christine accepted a job at Thiel College, a private liberal arts college in Greenville, PA, associated with the ELCA, and the family moved there. She was college pastor and also taught religion and music, since she was both an ordained minister and had the required academic credentials. She became tenured there before she left.

While she was working at Thiel College, her son joined the Civil Air Patrol (CAP). As a "mom-thing" she says with a laugh, Christine volunteered to be the chaplain for the squadron of cadets. She had to seek the endorsement of the ELCA in order to become the volunteer chaplain. She explains that each denomination has an "endorser," an official in the church charged with giving federal chaplains an endorsement to enter federal chaplaincy. She received the endorsement and set about the daunting task of teaching "moral leadership" to twelve- to eighteen-year-olds in the CAP. In return, she says, "The cadets taught me how to march and salute. I'm not typical military!"

The ELCA federal endorser asked her if she was interested in becoming an active duty military chaplain. "I was forty years old, tenured faculty. Previously I had looked into Army National Guard and Navy chaplaincy because I was curious. This needed to be a family decision. We sat at the dinner table and discussed it. My daughter said, 'We move every three or four years anyway. Why not?'"

Christine was forty-one years old when she was commissioned, first as a first lieutenant and then she entered the Air Force as a captain. Her federal endorser told her it was a thirty-six-month commitment and she could choose to separate from the military after that if she wanted to.

That was nineteen years ago and Christine is nearing the time when she can retire from the Air Force. She says, "I have now been in the military longer than I was a civilian pastor."

At the beginning, her mother was not so enthusiastic, however. She told Christine, dismayed, "I prayed you home." She asked Mark, "Can't you do something about your wife?" to which he replied, "You raised her!"

Thus began her military career. Christine believes the Biblical verse, "We walk by faith, not by sight," 2 Corinthians 5:7. "Very few chaplains come off the street into a direct commission. Most are prior military or have enlisted experience or were children of military," she says. "All I had was my father's long-ago World War II service. I was totally off the street." Her husband does not have military background, either.

So Christine made the transition from college professor and pastor to military chaplain. She says the first time she saw herself in battle dress, she laughed at her image in disbelief. "I was entering a new career at forty-one years old, a time when most people in the military retire."

Mark has adapted, finding work in the federal service as a civilian, serving as an interim minister on occasion. He jokes that he works mostly with women while Christine works mostly with men. He helps military personnel leaving the service to plan their finances as they enter civilian life.

She has had nine assignments in her nineteen years in the Air Force and has lived all over the world—Germany, Hawaii, Korea, including two tours in Iraq and one in Turkey—as well as stateside assignments. She has spent time at the Air University as a student at Air Command and Staff College and has taught at Chaplain School, as well as worked at the staff level for the Air Force chief of chaplains. She says her variety of assignments has helped develop her spirituality.

In many ways, being a military chaplain is like being a campus pastor, she says. "The age group is approximately the same milieu but the uniform is different. Young people have the same issues, aspirations and spiritual quests. The young people are no different in the military except they have chosen that career, have raised their right hands and sworn to protect the Constitution

of the United States and now wear the uniform and share a common mission and commitment. You give up some freedoms but that frees you to serve.

“The beauty of the military chaplaincy is that you have ecclesiastic endorsement [from your denomination], fully a pastor yet fully an officer, too. You have two sets of rules, denominational and military.”

Part of the chaplain’s job is to ensure free expression of religion for everyone, regardless of faith or denomination, and to assist with accommodations for absolute freedom of religion. For example, Christine has helped establish a place for Buddhists to practice their chanting and helped Wiccans find a place to institute their circle, practice their rituals and study. All religious practices and protections on an air base are overseen by the chaplains on behalf of the commander, “including keeping one group from denigrating another. The key is showing respect and honoring all.”

The Chaplain Corps includes chaplains, enlisted assistants, and usually contracted musicians, religious education directors and worship coordinators. Work of the chaplain service includes conducting worship, counseling, visitation in units and even on the flight line (where planes land and take off). Chaplains are noncombatants and do not carry arms; chaplain’s assistants are combatants and do carry arms. Usually in a combat area, they travel as a team, affording some protection for the chaplains.

Christine says it’s important to maintain objectivity and an inclusive manner toward those who believe differently. She has worked with chaplains and assistants from many denominations that do not ordain women. She maintains her own liberal views but insists that others who work with her have equal right to their own more conservative beliefs. She has worked with a wide range of Christian and non-Christian faith leaders throughout her military career.

She has advanced from her initial entry rank of captain to her present rank of lieutenant colonel. “In the Air Force, chaplains’ official title is chaplain, not their military rank. We are also permitted to be called pastor, father, rabbi, etc., according to our faith tradition. I have had some folks call me Chaplain Christine. Most call me Chaplain Blice-Baum or Chaplain BB for short. We generally do not use first names—I never do. I joke that my first name is ‘Chaplain.’”

She wears all-purpose battle uniform—ABUs—to work most days. The general public might call them camis, the grayish-sandy desert-pattern military fatigues most generally seen these days. For special occasions she wears service dress, a more formal uniform.

“Over the years when I do services—I don’t do that much now that I am at a higher rank because I oversee everything—I wear my typical liturgical garb—alb, stole, chasuble over a suit with a clerical collar. In the deployed setting, I always wore the same robes but over the ABUs. I usually led a liturgical service, serving mostly Lutherans, Episcopalians and more mainline folks. The worshipping communities (we don’t call them congregations) consisted of active duty and families, retired military, and overseas civilians.”

There are currently two Lutheran women serving as Air Force Chaplains, about five percent of the total chaplain force. She says the military chaplaincy is the first time she has received pay equal with men in her profession.

“Chaplains serve at the base level as duty chaplain,” says Christine, “which means the Command Post will call them after hours for all base-wide emergencies or when someone wants to speak with a chaplain. Most chaplains are duty chaplain for a week at a time. As the wing chaplain, I generally do not answer after-hour emergency calls but will go when needed. Our ‘congregation’ is the entire base! The base-level chaplains serve as part of disaster teams. Chaplains are trained to accompany commanders when we have to do death notifications to next of kin.”

All chaplains and chaplain assistants have to do readiness training and be prepared for deployments and contingency operations at all times. “I feel the training is excellent for everyday life,” she says. “We are taught situational awareness that I did not have as a civilian pastor. We are always ‘on,’ even when on leave. We consider what we do twenty-four/seven. I remind my staff that we always represent the Chaplain Corps and that our actions reflect our vocation and calling. My staff salutes me when they meet me outside. I consider it an honor to return the salute!”

Throughout her nonmilitary and military careers, Christine says though her faith has changed, she herself has never experienced a personal crisis in her faith. She has evolved in her spiritual beliefs over time. “I’ve become more introspective, moved from believing and belonging to loving and living, more contemplative and meditative, moving from head knowledge to heart knowledge.”

She has become interested in the Taizé Community in France and has visited there. This ecumenical movement offers silence and meditative singing as a means of worship, not talking but experiencing. Christine practices mindfulness meditation and is receiving her training in mindfulness-based stress reduction.. She is also a certified yoga and mindfulness instructor. She began doing yoga with a group of women while she was in Iraq and believes Christian meditation and silence may be a part of the next phase of her life and work.

She says, “When I go into a silent retreat, it’s a different world, no electronic devices.”

Christine advises women considering the clergy to “be secure in who they are. Also be curious, willing to learn and grow. In our vocation, as the Spirit moves, so will we change and grow.” She grins and adds, “And have fun!”

She talks about the religious thinkers who have influenced her development—Richard Rohr, Thomas Keating, Cynthia Bourgeault, Jack Kornfield and Donald Rothbert—especially in the areas of mindfulness and meditation.

She contemplates her future as she retires from the military. Her two adult children are both scientists, though born of non-scientific parents, and she has no grandchildren, so she and Mark can choose wherever they want to live. They are building a retirement house in Ponte Vedra, FL, and plan to use it as a second home until they retire. Christine hopes to lead meditation groups in Florida in retirement, helping others find their own spirituality through meditation and yoga.

“Or maybe I’ll write books...” She has one publication listed on Amazon, a paper she wrote for Air Command and Staff College, on psychological effects of bombing in World War II, *O Day of Wrath: A Case Study in Collateral Damage and Psychological Effects*, and has published several articles on various topics. Clearly her future will be active, evolving, and full of curiosity as well as spirituality as she develops her post-retirement life’s work.