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**Five years later, minister remembers Ground Zero**

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The events of Sept. 11, 2001, are more than a series of television images for Bill Williams.

He still remembers the smell — even the taste — of Ground Zero, after the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. Nearly 1 million tons of steel and

concrete became a giant incinerator for the bodies of more than 2,000 people. The smell of burned flesh and jet fuel was heavy in the air.

It's not something he likes to talk about — even five years later.

Williams, senior minister for the Cedars church in Wilmington, Del., served as a volunteer chaplain at the site of the attacks. Offering comfort and prayers for hundreds of emergency responders and recovery workers, the minister listened to stories from people struggling to cope with the evil they had seen firsthand.

“Not a day goes by that I am not affected by the events of Sept. 11,” Williams said.

The experience has made him more sensitive to people dealing with smaller-scale, personal disasters.

“Because we witness these sorts of disasters so frequently, we've become somewhat desensitized to the pain,” he said. “I hope that I'm able to be more compassionate to others as a result of having been in the belly of the abyss.”

## **FROM AMARILLO TO GROUND ZERO**

Born in Amarillo, Texas, Williams grew up in Keyes, a farming community in the Oklahoma panhandle. His parents didn't go to church often, but didn't discourage their son from getting

involved. At age 12 he commandeered the huge “Family Bible” stored in an end table and dragged it to his bedroom.



“So much of what I read didn’t make any sense to me, until I found the red-letter parts,” he said. “I read those over and over.”

After high school, Williams joined the Navy and trained as a hospital corpsman in San Diego. After completing his service, he moved to Lubbock, Texas, and worked for an electric company. Rick West, a young man in the department he supervised, invited Williams to church. He was baptized in 1979.

One Sunday night Williams watched a graduation ceremony for students at Lubbock’s Sunset School of Preaching. He asked his friend, Telesa, if they’d let him train to be a preacher. All he had to do was ask, she said. He did.

Later he asked Telesa to marry him. She did.

Williams completed his training at Sunset and began preaching in 1982, a path that eventually led him, his wife and their four children to the 160-member Cedars church in Delaware.

In addition to his pulpit duties, Williams began volunteering with the Chapel of Four Chaplains, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit named in honor of four military chaplains who died on the U.S. Army Transport Dorchester. A German submarine sunk the transport off the coast of Greenland in 1943. The chaplains, who were Jewish, Catholic, Methodist and Dutch Reformed, gave their life jackets to four young sailors fleeing the ship.

In the weeks following Sept. 11, the Salvation Army announced that its chaplaincy services at Ground Zero were rapidly being depleted. The Chapel of Four Chaplains responded. About 350 chaplains volunteered. Williams was one of 48 selected — and the only Church of Christ minister.

“We did a lot of listening,” Williams said. “Our main function was to provide those who were working 14 to 16 hours per day, usually seven days per week, an opportunity to vent their feelings.”

Williams talked to a New York City police officer who arrived, with his partner, at the World Trade Center just after the planes hit. “The thing that haunts me still is the noise,” the officer said, describing the towers’ collapse. “It was like the roaring of a thousand freight trains. When those beams were twisting and bending, it was like ... mournful moans.”

Williams asked the officer about his partner. The officer nodded toward the piles of debris and said, “He’s still out there, and I’m not leaving till we find him.”

Working in a shift with other chaplains, Williams traveled to New York about once every eight days between October and December 2001. The Cedars church’s leaders supported and

encouraged him.

“He put himself at great emotional and physical risk — who knows what toxic things he was breathing?” said elder Michael Spokony. “There is no way to prepare for such an event, and he did not give his personal well-being a second thought. He had to be there.”

A native of the Bronx, Spokony and his wife once worked on Wall Street and watched the twin towers as they were built. The couple lost friends in the attacks, but most of their church’s members didn’t have such personal connections, he said.

Church secretary Lynne Bower said that, as a result of Williams’ experience, “we felt the impact a little harder, felt the pain of these people a little more.”

### **REMEMBERING DUSTY, DETERMINED FACES**

Williams brought the lessons he learned about disaster preparedness home to his congregation. In 2002 he was appointed to the Delaware Citizen Corps Council, which trains people to assist local emergency responders and to participate in disaster relief and community safety.

The group has provided disaster preparedness training for more than 800 people. The Cedars church was the first in Delaware to organize a Community Emergency Response Team.

“Chaplain Bill” has been involved in every program launched by the Citizen Corps, said director Bob George.

“His service to the state of Delaware and its citizens is invaluable,” George said.

Williams’ experiences counseling people after 9/11 have made him “less of an answer man and more of a disciple-making minister,” he said.

“Many people had been living on the faith of others for so long that they had not taken the time to develop a relationship with God for themselves,” he said, adding that their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures pertaining to hope and comfort “alarmed me — alarms me still.”

Despite the profound sense of loss that still hangs in the air where the World Trade Center once stood, Williams remembers fondly the “dust-covered, determined faces” of the people he met.

**Photo Caption:** Metal beams resembling a cross were discovered in the remains of the World Trade Center. (Photo by Chrisanne Mortensen)

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