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### May 2021 Divinity School Graduate is First Military Chaplain to Have Certified Therapy Assistance Dog

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#### Recommended Citation

Office of University Communications, "May 2021 Divinity School Graduate is First Military Chaplain to Have Certified Therapy Assistance Dog" (2021). *Gardner-Webb NewsCenter Archive*. 2257.  
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**GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

## May 2021 Divinity School Graduate is First Military Chaplain to Have Certified Therapy Assistance Dog

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON JULY 6, 2021



### Maj. Christina P. Pittman Discovers How Four-legged Friends Open Lines of Communication

As the guardsmen's rough, scratched hands reached to pet and play with a couple of puppies, tension left the room and the group relaxed. The scene marked the first time U.S. Air Force Maj. Christina Pryor Pittman, 169<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing chaplain, utilized animal therapy at McEntire Joint National Guard Base (<https://www.169fw.ang.af.mil/>) in Columbia, S.C.

"The excitement and engagement with the dogs brought new life and opened lines of communication," shared Pittman, a May 2021 graduate of the Gardner-Webb University M. Christopher White School of Divinity. "I knew then that animal visits needed to continue, and I began to set goals to develop assistance dog integration for mental, emotional, and spiritual care."

Pittman had brought the animals on the base in 2018 after a death in the unit. The idea stemmed from a new initiative called MICS (Mental Health Integration in Chaplain Services), a project that focuses on increasing chaplains' versatility by integrating spiritual and mental health counseling.

Her efforts to find a full-time assistance dog led her to NEADS (National Education of Assistance Dog Services (<https://neads.org/>)) in Princeton, Mass. This 501(c)(3) organization provides therapy assistance dogs for several groups, including veterans, and offered to match her with a dog for ministry on the base. In the past, NEADS tried to place service dogs with active duty military, but were unsuccessful. Since Pittman was Air National Guard, the addition of a service dog assignment was more feasible and able to be accommodated.



In the meantime, Pittman reconnected with Dr. Doug Dickens, a professor in the GWU School of Divinity, who had been her mentor in the late 90s at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) in Fort Worth, Texas. She was one of the first two from SWBTS to graduate with a Master of Divinity in Chaplain Ministry. After her graduation in 2000, she served another year as Dickens' pastoral care assistant. When they crossed paths again in 2016, he told her about his work at Gardner-Webb and encouraged her to get her doctorate.

Excited to learn from Dickens again, she enrolled in Gardner-Webb's Doctor of Ministry in the Pastoral Care and Counseling program. On the first day of class, she received an email that she had been matched with her assistance dog, Avalon. "I was extremely excited, and she has been a part of my education journey at Gardner-Webb from the very beginning," Pittman reflected. "I had an opportunity to share her and her picture with my cohort and they really enjoyed having the opportunity to engage with her. She came with me each class and because of her high training as a service dog, she integrated and did beautifully during our meeting times and everyone else got to enjoy her as well."

Avalon, who walked across the stage with Pittman when she was hooded, is the first officially recognized certified assistance therapy dog assigned to a service member in the U.S. Military Chaplain Corps. Because she and Avalon are trailblazers, Pittman decided to focus her dissertation on learning more about the impacts of therapy assistance dogs. Her research was titled "The Benefits of Integrating Assistance Dogs in Military Chaplain Corps Services at the 169th Fighter Wing, McEntire Joint National Guard Base, South Carolina."



- ▲ Avalon, at left, went to every class with Maj. Christina P. Pittman and walked across the stage with her at commencement.

Pittman valued the support from Dickens and the rest of the faculty, who not only became personally interested in her project and success, but in the success of every student in the program. Those who helped her through the research and writing process were Dr. Jim Whitlow, an adjunct faculty member for the Doctor of Ministry program and retired GWU professor of psychology and pastoral care and counseling; Dr. Robert Canoy, dean and professor of Christian theology; and Dr. Danny West, professor of preaching and pastoral studies. The staff—Lisa Hollifield, administrative assistant, and Kheresa Harmon, director of admissions—were also helpful from enrollment to graduation.

“I know I couldn’t have done it without everyone’s help,” Pittman praised. “Dr. Whitlow was fabulous. I appreciated that even amongst some of the things he had in his life and on his plate, he always kept connected and accessible. He even gifted me with a book that he felt was particularly helpful for my line of work, which there is not a lot out there in the research of service dogs in military. I’m the first one. He introduced me to the book, which talked a lot about animal assisted therapy.”

Pittman was grateful that the faculty allowed her to work on the innovative project and gave her flexibility to work around deployments. “It’s a pioneering field,” she noted. “Our military is looking for different ways to help and aid in our mental and emotional care of our service members. Without the flexibility and the openness of the approval process and the research project, I don’t know that it would get some of the attention and the organization that it needed.”

She discovered two important concepts in her research that underscored the value of her work as a military chaplain. “Chaplains have been a part of the military since the early colonial and establishment times,” Pittman asserted. “Even when Jamestown was established one of the next people they brought over was a minister. What I discovered is that chaplains, regardless of whether you have an assistance dog or not, are always going to have a place, because they are the spiritual and emotional caregivers and because, holistically, that’s what we all have as a part of ourselves—the spiritual piece, whether or not you attest to a certain faith or religion.”

The second part of her dissertation affirmed the valuable contributions of a therapy assistance dog. “I discovered that the already heightened level of impact from the chaplain was only enhanced more by the presence of a service dog, but never the relevancy was lessened without her either,” she said. “That was a wonderful affirming piece. And also to see that in areas where a chaplain could not engage with a member, the service dog opened that door. In those times of crisis, I watched Avalon engage in this physical contact that helped to open and break down some emotional walls. Having that safe space to share emotions enhances that spiritual resiliency we talk about.”

