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Associated Baptist Press

U.S. AIR FORCE THEATER HOSPITAL, Iraq (ABP)—At the U.S. Air Force Theater Hospital in Iraq, the sounds of Army Blackhawk and Marine Sea Knight helicopters are a call to duty for Air Force Chaplain Shane Gaster.

Gaster, one of more than 90 military chaplains endorsed by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is stationed at the Air Force Theater Hospital—the busiest U.S. trauma center in the world. He works 12-hour shifts, six days a week, ministering to wounded men and women brought in by helicopters and humvee trucks.

Baptist chaplains James Kirkendall and Shane Gaster visit at Gaster's office at the U.S. Air Force Theater Hospital in Iraq. (Photo courtesy of James Kirkendall)

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“My chaplain assistant and I respond to the emergency department whenever we hear choppers incoming, or when ‘trauma code in the ED’ is sounded over the intercom,” Gaster said. “We are an extra set of hands for the doctors and nurses, and we do assist them. But our primary duty is, in Air Force terms, ‘a visible reminder of the holy.’ We are there to pray for the patients and the rest of the medical team.”

Gaster serves not only the emergency department but also four intensive-care units and four intermediate-care wards. From the Air Force hospital, patients either return to duty or are flown to medical centers in Germany and the United States. And while the survival rate at the hospital is 98 percent, one of Gaster’s primary responsibilities is to minister to the dying.

“Every time I am paged to a bedside where someone is dying, I think to myself, ‘I am able to be with this person as they leave this world, this temporary life,’” Gaster said. “I am able to pray for their families who may still be wondering what happened to them. Whether it is in the emergency room, the (operating room) or the ICU, there is a sense of being present with a human being when their life is ebbing away with their final breaths. Who is to say what these final prayers can do? Intercessory prayer is more real to me here than anywhere.”

Gaster, who began serving as an Air Force chaplain in 1989, also has worked in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. He made his first combat tour to Iraq in 2004 and was stationed in Baghdad.

George Pickle, CBF specialist for chaplaincy and pastoral counseling, praised Gaster’s sensitivity and dedication. “His ministry is a clear communication that these injured and dying people are not alone,” Pickle said.

In his current position, Gaster ministers to everyone in the hospital,

including doctors, nurses, technicians and non-American patients. Besides treating American troops, the staff helps coalition forces, Iraqi police, civilians and enemy prisoners of war.

“In America, we take the enemy that we capture, and our sense of the sanctity of life gives us no alternative but to give them the best care and treatment we can,” Gaster said. “That is part of what Jesus meant when he said. ‘Love your enemies.’”

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