CONSILIOETA

### VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

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## OFFICE OF THE CHAPLAIN

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## A NOTE FROM CHAPLAIN JOHN CASPER '04, D.MIN.



Twenty-four years ago, on a hot August afternoon, I was peering through a window on the side of the Chaplain's quarters with my dad, trying to get a good view of the video being played

inside. It was the night before matriculation and the house was teeming with new cadets and their families. A recent Rat Line video was being shown in the room, but it was too crowded, so my dad I and went around the

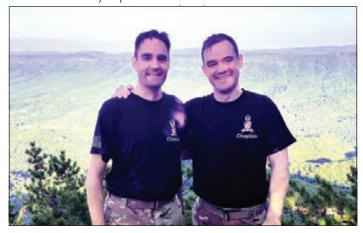
The mission of our office is to ensure the free exercise of religion and to provide pastoral care regardless of religious affiliation. That means caring for all cadets. day care and conversations, the walk-throughs in barracks, the after-hours visits, and responses to cadets in crisis is where much of our most meaningful work is accomplished. Nevertheless, my prayer is that this newsletter is an

outside of the house to watch through an open window. Today, that room is my family's breakfast nook, and we now live in the Chaplain's quarters. Amazing! This is special to me for at least two main reasons.

First, the journey from one side of the window to the other over the past two and a half decades has unfolded with a mixture of struggles and joys. While I wrestled with my faith for much of my cadetship, in my last semester as a cadet I began to engage with my faith deeply. Then, as a recent graduate, I got involved with ministry to cadets while I worked across the Parade Ground in the admissions office. The experience was truly life changing. I left VMI to attend seminary thinking I would only ever return as a visitor. Today, I sit around the table with my family in that same room eating a meal or playing a board game, and I am reminded of God's faithfulness and love throughout all these years.

Second, I am reminded that ministering to the Corps of Cadets as the Institute chaplain comes with a profound sense of personal calling and responsibility. I love cadets and cherish the opportunity encouragement to you that we love caring for cadets and sharing in both their struggles and joys as they make their way through VMI.

I hope you will stop by our office to visit whenever you can. Our door is always open.



to ensure that each one is cared for and has the ability to connect with their faith in meaningful ways. The mission of our office is to ensure the free exercise of religion and to provide pastoral care regardless of religious affiliation. That means caring for all cadets. It means showing them compassion and support during what can otherwise be one of the most challenging times of their lives. Some cadets struggle with their faith, like I did. Others experience the painful loss of a family member or loved one. Many cadets are in the middle of navigating difficult life decisions or relationships. Some cadets just have a bad day and need someone to talk with to provide encouragement or a brief prayer. In each of these cases, that's where I want to be – supporting, encouraging, and meeting the needs of cadets.

In the pages that follow, you will see some of the practical ways the Chaplain's Office cares for cadets and carries out its mission. Chaplain Facemire, Mrs. Cannon, and I count it a sincere joy to ensure cadets feel seen and supported by our office. The programs, initiatives, and events that you'll see and read about are just a few of the ways we come alongside cadets. The uncaptured day-to-



## A NOTE FROM ASSOCIATE CHAPLAIN ELI FACEMIRE '19

It is hard to believe that my first year has come and gone. I feel like it was just yesterday that I was low crawling across the Parade Ground with the Class of 2027 at last year's STP and getting reacclimated to life at the Institute. I can confidently say that this has been a highlight year for me; one of personal and professional growth, challenge in adjustment and loss, and just a lot of fun. Experiencing multiple changes at once can produce plenty of pressure but can also result in a lot of positive change. A new home, a new ministry, and new relationships did just that for me over the past year, contributing to my overall development in ways I could not have foreseen and granting me great joy as I saw God's hand at work on all fronts.

Getting to call the historical City of Lexington home is quite a treat. Often, I find myself thinking—or saying aloud, "I can't believe I get to live here!" Furthermore, engaging in ministry to cadets and the VMI community is also a gift worthy of joyful, spontaneous exclamations; and getting to do so with two of the most special individuals VMI has to offer is more than a cherry on top! Chaplain Casper and Mrs. Cannon, thanks for helping me through year one. You showed me the ropes, helped me focus on what was most important, and often reminded me to simply have fun! I am so honored to serve with you and look forward to doing so for years to come, Lord-willing.

Speaking of God's will, while new home, ministry, and coworkers were all special gifts from the past year, I am eager to announce what is by far the most significant—and nearly unfathomable blessing from 2023/2024—a fiancée! I proposed to my dear bride-to-be, Rachel, in the spring and we plan to get married this fall before we begin our life together in Lexington. She is from Blacksburg and despite her Hokie connections, she is





well on her way to being a superb Keydet-supporter! Please pray for us as we enter this new phase of life. And Rachel, it really is hard to grasp the depth of God's goodness toward me in bringing you into my life. May I feel that way forever! I love you so much.

Finally, I want to end with a word on our cadets. In February I was reminded of how impactful a single cadet life can be when I lost my Brother Rat Jack Casey '19 in a tragic Marine helicopter training accident. This deepened my perspective on the impact cadets can have on so many and helped me see more clearly the grand opportunity I have been granted to help them in their journey. Their development as men and women is our top priority and I personally feel very blessed to help provide daily spiritual and emotional support and guidance. While they are outstanding on their own, they need the mentorship, instruction, encouragement, and provision from staff and faculty as well as family, friends, and the larger VMI community. So, please join me in supporting them however you might be able-time, resources, conversations, and of course prayers. They are a remarkable bunch, but without our support, their experience-and future-will not be what it could be - what it should be. Cadets are, after all, why this place is here. They are certainly why I am here.

"Honor God, Never Quit, Finish Well," Chaplain (Capt.) Eli B. D. Facemire '19.

## VMI CHAPLAIN'S OFFICE GROWS BY FOUR FEET



Chaplain Casper with facility dog CAVU.

The chaplain's office recently welcomed a new staff member in the form of a warm, furry, and faithful facility dog named CAVU. Facility dogs assist people to cope after a traumatic event or overly stressful environment. CAVU's occupational specialty is to assist the Institute chaplain in bringing morale, welfare, and care to cadets, especially those who are faced with upsetting news or painful issues, like the death of a family member.

The two-year old golden lab was trained by Mutts With a Mission (MWAM), a nonprofit located in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and accredited through Assistance Dogs International (ADI), the world leader in the service dog industry. MWAM prepares service dogs for disabled veterans, first responders, and law enforcement. Facility dogs undergo the same rigorous training that service dogs go through, but instead of helping an individual with a disability, facility dogs ultimately help multiple people. They are often placed with police departments and courtrooms to assist with victims having to testify. Donations to MWAM fully cover the nearly \$60,000 price tag of training each dog, so there is no cost to any recipient.

Col. John P. Casper '04, Institute chaplain at VMI, first learned of MWAM about a year-and-a-half ago while he was associate chaplain. Project Horizon hosted an event on post to bring awareness to victims of sexual assault, and brought their facility dog with them. "Seeing how the dog was interacting with everyone, and the impact it made at Project Horizon, I thought a dog like that could make a huge impact with cadets," said Casper.

When Casper was promoted to Institute chaplain last July, he was encouraged to think outside the box for fresh ideas in his ministry. "I thought about it for a little while and knew I had an out-of-thebox idea. I was aware of other facility dogs placed with colleges and floated the idea to General Wins. We invited Brooke Corson,

#### "His presence can start conversations that probably wouldn't have otherwise happened. He has a calming presence..."

executive director of MWAM, to visit post, and she agreed a facility dog would be a great addition for us. We then started the process for approval, which took about a year," he explained.

Providentially, along the same time the idea of bringing a facility dog to VMI first sparked in Casper's mind, a puppy was undergrowing his two-year training. The pup, along with seven others, spent a large portion of his training on the aircraft carrier, USS George H.W. Bush, which is where he received his unusual name from the servicemembers stationed aboard. CAVU is an acronym for Ceiling



CAVU enjoys the May Memorial Parade.





Cadets introduce themselves to CAVU.

and Visibility Unlimited, a term commonly used among Navy pilots, which means flying conditions are ideal. "In the Navy, we young pilots all prayed for CAVU. But, you see, that is where my life is now. Thanks to my family and my friends, my life is CAVU," said the late President Bush on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Casper explained that because so many of the dogs were to be placed with first responders and veterans, having them trained in a military environment was ideal. "That was coupled with the fact that Captain Dave Pollard, commanding officer of the Bush at the time, saw the value of having these dogs come aboard and positively impact his sailors, airmen and Marines. That connection is very special. CAVU is very familiar with a military environment and being around people in uniform, so it is an ideal fit for him to be here."

When we come home and I take off his vest, he knows it is time to relax, and turns into a different dog.

Casper is CAVU's exclusive handler, and, per ADI standards, was required to go through 120 hours of training with other handlers last April. "CAVU knows over 75 commands, so I had to memorize all those. Our training included taking our dogs to various places an average person would go, like the zoo, coffee shops, entertainment venues, museums, and stores. We learned how to interact with our dogs, and how to handle people who approached us. CAVU goes with me everywhere, so when he's not at VMI, he's at my house. When I go elsewhere, like to the store, I put his service dog vest on him so people know they shouldn't touch him. CAVU understands when he is wearing the vest, he is working. When we come home and I take off his vest, he knows it is time to relax, and turns into a different dog. He becomes playful and affectionate, and can be a little goofball, just like any other family dog." Casper remarked.

Casper shared that he is blown away by the barriers CAVU is able to break down. "His presence can start conversations that probably wouldn't have otherwise happened. He has a calming presence, and he matches your attitude. If your attitude is timid or quiet, CAVU will be docile and sit at your feet, but if you get down on the ground and play with him, he will eat that up! CAVU is also able to pick up on emotions. If he senses something is not quite right with someone, he will immediately give me subtle signals that I am able to pick up on. He has even given me signals about my own stress levels. Chaplain ministry is often crisis ministry, and I do absorb a lot. So CAVU is helpful to me too, on both a personal and professional level."

CAVU does not have a rank yet, but may soon. "In a military context and with first responders, dogs typically outrank their handlers to prevent any perception of abuse. The handler has ownership over the dog, but if the dog outranks him, that changes things a little bit," Casper quipped.

Because CAVU first arrived at VMI toward the end of spring semester, it wasn't long before the cadets left post for the summer. Casper looks forward to seeing CAVU interact with the matriculants in August. "I'm really excited about seeing him shine during the Rat Line. I think that's going to be a game changer." – *Marianne Hause, VMI Communications and Marketing.* 



CAVU enjoys attention from cadets after a practice parade in May.

## **RAT SUNDAY**

Rat Sunday occurs at the end of Matriculation Week and is the first Sunday of the Rat Line when new cadets can leave post to attend religious services. The Chaplain's Office coordinates with dozens of churches and religious organizations supporting cadets to ensure everyone is connected to their respective faith in meaningful ways. The day begins with a briefing to all new cadets on the role and function of the Chaplain's Office and ample opportunity to meet with local faith leaders. New cadets are then allowed to leave post to attend services of their choice. Witnessing the centrality of faith in the lives of so many new cadets is inspiring.



Chaplain Facemire answers questions about religious services.



Mary Cannon, the Chaplain's Office administrator, helps a new cadet.



Chaplain Casper briefs new cadets on the mission of the Chaplain's Office.



Chaplain Casper talks with a new cadet about local faith communities.



New cadets interact with various religious organizations.



## **RAT LINE SUPPORT**



Two new cadets offer one another a supportive embrace during a chapel service early in the Rat Line.



Chaplains Casper and Facemire encourage new cadets at the summit of House Mountain. Climbing the mountain is a hallmark of the Rat Line!



Rat road march passing through North Post.



Chaplain Casper with the 2024 Officer of the Guard Association (OGA) leadership after a road march. Among other responsibilities, the OGA provides supportive oversight of cadre, RDC, and new cadets during Rat Line activities. Chaplain Casper was vice president of the OGA 20 years ago as a cadet!



Rat road march on the Chessie Nature Trail.



The cadet chaplains join the VMI chaplains to support and encourage new cadets during Rat Line activities. Pictured from left to right are: Allen Stewart '24, Abby Soyars '24, and Gabi Woodward '24.

#### 2024 NEWSLETTER

## 9/11 MEMORIALS



Chaplain Casper addresses the Corps in New Barracks courtyard before the annual 9/11 memorial stair climb. Each year, members of the Corps gather to climb 110 flights of stairs, the heights of the two World Trade Center towers that were hit. Before joining the climb, Chaplain Casper was invited to address the Corps and provide a prayer.



Chaplain Facemire participated in a 9/11 memorial service with the Lexington Fire Department (LFD). He was invited to provide a few brief words and the invocation for the memorial. He is pictured with members of the LFD and Dakota Birdsong '24, who played Amazing Grace on the bagpipes.

## **GOLD STAR MEMORIAL DEDICATION**

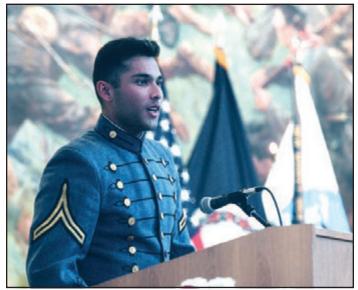


Chaplain Facemire offers the invocation prayer for the Gold Star Memorial dedication at Jordan's Point Park last fall. The memorial honors the families of Capt. Andrew Ross and 1st Lt. Chase Prasnicki, both with strong ties to VMI and the local community. They made the ultimate sacrifice while serving in Afghanistan. The Woody Williams Foundation made the memorial possible and is one of over 130 similar memorials nationwide.



## **RING BLESSING CEREMONY**

The Chaplains Office was invited by the Class of 2025 to participate in the annual ring blessing ceremony during Ring Figure. The ecumenical service was held in Memorial Hall immediately following the ring presentations in Cameron Hall. The ceremony included special music, remarks, and prayers from class leaders. Chaplain Casper was invited to be the guest speaker.



Mohammad Khan '25 (Cadet Chaplain, AY 2024-2025).



Sedona Dancu '25 (Cadet Chaplain, AY 2024-2025).



Maximilian Kleeberg '25 (Cadet Chaplain, AY 2024-2025).



Chaplains Casper and Facemire lead a prayer over the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Class and their rings.

## **FTX SUPPORT**



Each spring and fall, the Chaplain's Office works to coordinate religious services support during field training exercises (FTX). Hundreds of cadets chose to attend services across multiple FTX locations. Father Daniel Kelly, a Catholic priest serving in the local area, graciously provided our cadets with a special field Mass.



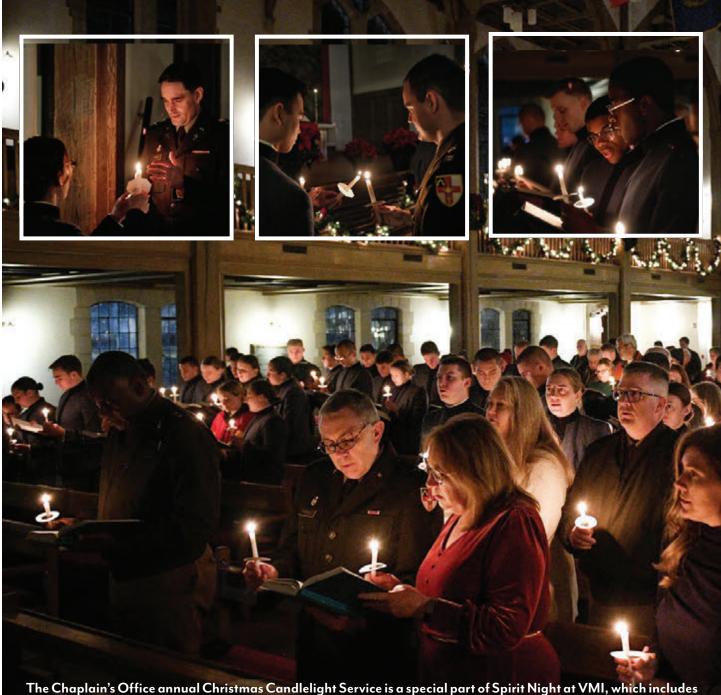
One of the most enjoyable parts of the school year is tossing candy off our office porch to cadets as they pass by during the winter exam period. It is a huge morale boost during exams and a unique, fun way to express care for cadets.



During Yom Kippur, the Chaplain's Office hosted Rabbi Danielle Leshaw, the senior educator and campus support director at Hillel International. Rabbi Leshaw helped to provide encouragement to our Jewish cadets while the Hillel House at Washington and Lee University was without a rabbi. After a tour of VMI, a special meal was enjoyed. Pictured with cadets are Chaplain Casper, Rabbi Leshaw, and Briana Williams (VMI's Chief Diversity Officer).



## CANDLELIGHT SERVICE



a Corps meal and the Carols in the Courtyard event. This year, the candlelight service included special music, scripture readings, carols, and a devotional from Chaplain Casper. The night concluded with lighting candles while singing Silent Night and Go Tell It on the Mountain. It was a wonderful evening!

## JONATHAN M. DANIELS '61 CEREMONY

#### 



## **BIBLE STUDIES & FELLOWSHIPS**



The I<sup>st</sup> Class Bible Study is a special opportunity for BRs to join in fellowship and discuss topics related to life after graduation. It gives members of the I<sup>st</sup> Class a chance to share a meal, deepen their bonds, grow in their faith, and approach graduation from VMI with increased confidence. "It is consistently the highlight of my week," said Chaplain Casper.

Bible studies and fellowships occur at multiple times and places throughout the week on post. The Corps Bible Study, Officers' Christian Fellowship, The Navigators, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, The Newman Society, InterVarsity, Women's Fellowship, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Class Bible Study are only a handful. There are several other studies and fellowships that occur weekly, and many of them are cadet-initiated and led. There are so many opportunities to connect with faith-based fellowships that cadets can choose from almost every day of the week to join a group!



## FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIAN ATHLETES

#### Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! - Psalms 95:2

"Reflecting on the 2023-24 academic year, we can make a joyful noise of thanksgiving to God! We held nearly 500 huddles with 20 teams, witnessed 15 FCA cadets profess faith in Christ through baptism, and watched around 350 graduates become VMI alumni. God is good, and He continues to bless FCA in many ways! These blessings are continuing into the 2024-25 academic year with summer huddles and FCA camps," said Al Soltis '79, FCA at VMI area director. "We cannot wait to see what God has planned next, and we are grateful to the Chaplain's Office for their continued support," shared Haley Shotwell, FCA at VMI collegiate representative.



#### **BAPTISMS**



PASSION 2024-ATLANTA, GEORGIA



MONDAY EVENING HUDDLE





SPRING BREAKFAST



2024 NEWSLETTER

## **OFFICERS' CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP**



Capt. Robert McMasters administers the commissioning oath to Ulrich Meintjes '24 (left) and Keanu Williams '24 (right).

"This was our best year ever in Officers' Christian Fellowship (OCF). I'm not sure why, other than it's a God thing," said Capt. Robert McMasters, OCF coordinator at VMI. "Hosting bonfires each semester likely helped the group bond and buy in, and despite the new academic schedule moving Bible study to Mondays at 8 a.m., we nearly doubled participation! As far as Bible studies are concerned, we engaged with various topics usually under the leadership of a cadet. The OCF 100-Day study provided engaging topics including 'objections to the faith' and 'the fruit of the Spirit.' We also conducted surveys to solicit interests of cadets, which led to topics like 'understanding cultural Christians' and 'following Jesus more closely.'

"Finally, I was quite impressed with this year's cadet leaders," he continued. "Our group thrived under our cadet-in-charge, Ulrich Meintjes '24 and assistant cadet-in-charge, Liam Noonan '25. Next year is set up well for continued progress as Liam will become cadet-in-charge and Sam Waters '26 will become the assistant cadet-in-charge."

## **INTERVARSITY**



InterVarsity leadership team – academic year 2023-24.



Rat small group from fall 2023.



## **SPRING RETREAT**

Our annual spring retreat at the Eagle Eyrie Conference Center in Lynchburg, Virginia, is always a special highlight for ministry to the Corps of Cadets. This year, our guest speaker was Lt. Col. Jason Quash '04, executive officer to the Commanding General; Intelligence & Security Command (INSCOM). Jason was joined by his wife, Jill, and his family. Jason and Jill inspired cadets to embrace their calling using several case studies of biblical figures. Jason is president of the class of 2004 and brother rats with Chaplain Casper, so he immediately connected with cadets. It was a memorable weekend! As one cadet remarked, "This retreat has changed my life forever. I am not the same."







The leadership team (left to right): Chaplain Casper, Capt. Bob McMasters (OCF), Michaela ('14) and Jon Speas (worship pastor), Chaplain Facemire, Jill and Jason Quash.





## **SERVICE TRIP**



For the third year in a row, we gathered a team of cadets and traveled to Mayfield, Kentucky, to help with rebuilding efforts from catastrophic tornado damage. On December 10, 2021, Mayfield was hit by an EF4 tornado, leveling houses, destroying crops, and damaging infrastructure. Our first trip was a few months later, in March 2022. We spent that time engaged in disaster relief efforts, clearing and cleaning debris from large farm fields. In March 2023, we joined the rebuilding and construction of homes. Finally, this past March, we helped work toward completing a brand new subdivision of homes. The project will be completed later this year. We are so grateful for the sustained relationships we have created with the Samaritan's Purse leadership team and the residents of Mayfield. We look forward to our next service trip, helping and ministering to those impacted by natural disasters.



















## **BACCALAUREATE SERVICE AND AWARDS**



The VMI Chaplains awarded the Cadet Chaplains for exemplary service. The Cadet Chaplains were also awarded the VMI Protestant Service Award. Pictured left to right: Chaplain Casper, Jack Pendleton '24, Abby Soyars '24, Allen Stewart '24, Gabi Woodward '24, and Chaplain Facemire.



Dr. Sabrina Laroussi was awarded the VMI Muslim Service Award for her extraordinary service to Muslim cadets in partnership with the Chaplain's Office.



Mr. Marcos Ramos provided special music during the evening. Pictured singing in the background is Alex Salisbury '24.







Chaplain (Maj. Gen.) William Green Jr., U.S. Army Chief of Chaplains, encourages graduating cadets and their families.



Father Maxwell Appiagyei presented the Catholic Service Award to Paul Murray '24 and John Paccassi '24.



The VMI Chaplain's Office staff, along with Chaplain Green and two members of his staff. Pictured from left to right: Mrs. Mary Cannon, Chaplain Facemire, Chaplain Casper, Chaplain Green, Chaplain Alley '01, and Chaplain Nichols.



Members of the Class of 2024 gather on stage for a photo with Chaplains Casper, Green, and Facemire.

## BAPTISMS



Chaplain Casper and Miles Johnson '24

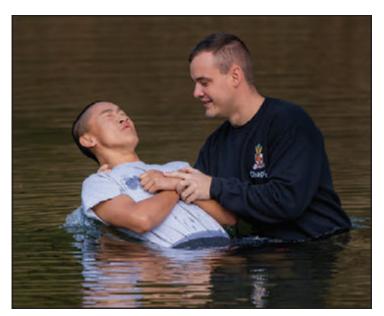


Chaplain Facemire and Calin Green '24



Fall baptism gathering.





Chaplain Facemire and Ben Fong '27



Chaplain Casper and Conner Felts '24. Conner is the son of Tim Felts '04, Chaplain Casper's brother rat and roommate for three years at VMI.



Spring baptism gathering.

## **COMMISSIONING AND GRADUATION**

It is always a tremendous honor for our office to be involved in commissioning and graduation. The opportunity to provide an invocation and benediction on these occasions highlights the important place of ethics, morality, and faith as part of the comprehensive development of cadets. Although general and ecumenical, these ceremonial prayers offer a brief moment to recognize something bigger than ourselves and give thanks. We are so proud of the Class of 2024 and celebrate with them!













### **OUTLOOK FOR A NEW YEAR: STP 2024**



The Summer Transition Program (STP) this year was a resounding success! Our office was fully engaged with the students, regularly participating in morning physical training, and attending extra-curricular activities. We also offered a lunchtime Bible study fellowship twice a week, entitled "Faith for the Fight: How to Survive the VMI Rat Line." We had some great attendance and were encouraged by the feedback and relationships built during our time together. One of the highlights of STP was our annual picnic, when we hosted all STP students at the Chaplain's Quarters for dinner. It was a great time of fellowship, games, and a wonderful meal from VMI's Parkhurst team. STP students were able to learn more about the role of our office as well as connect with representatives from the VMI Alumni Association, various parachurch and support ministries, the Cadet Counseling Center, and Intercollegiate Athletics. The STP students finished well, and we are excited to welcome them back in the fall for start of the 2024-25 school year!





#### Thank You For Your Financial Support

The VMI Chaplain's Office receives no funding from the State of Virginia. All operations and ministries of the Chaplain's Office are funded through endowments and donations. We are extremely grateful to those who have given to the chaplain ministries at VMI and who have enabled us to do so much with cadets. Without your support none of this could happen. If you would like to give to the VMI Chaplain ministries, you may make checks payable to the VMI Foundation and designate your gift to one of the following:

#### The Chaplain's Discretionary Fund

This fund is all encompassing and provides salary support, operational and logistical support, and funding for all cadet ministries and faith groups. It also provides funding support to cadets in crisis.

#### The Cooper Christian Witness Fund

This fund is designed specifically for Christian related ministry. Some of our donors give to the VMI Chaplain's Office as part of their church tithes and offerings. Because of their personal faith convictions, they are more comfortable giving to this fund and knowing that their gifts are being used within the context of their Christian faith.

#### Donations may be mailed to:

AUGUST 2024

VMI Chaplain's Office Old VMI Hospital Lexington VA 24450

#### **Office Contact Information:**

Phone: (540) 464-7390 E-mail: VMIChaplain@vmi.edu



## Use the QR Code or the link below and click then on the "Give Now" button at the bottom of the page to give online:

PLEASE NOTE- if you make your donation to the Chaplain's office through the VMI Foundation, our office is only notified of your name. Because of the Freedom of Information Act, the amounts donated cannot be disclosed to us.