

How FAITH COMMUNITIES Can Help VETERANS and Their Families readjust

(Adapted by VA chaplain David Lundell from speakingoffaith.org – The Soul of War)

THE ROAD HOME from war can be more challenging than the road to war for both combatants and their families. While the reunion is wonderful, after the reunion there may be a difficult period of transition and readjustment. For those who serve in the military (“soldiers”) and families with faith, their faith community can be a crucial partner in this process.

The June 2004 *New England Journal of Medicine* reveals that as many as 18% of returning combat vets struggle with significant mental health issues. Department of Defense medical authorities now state that as many as 30% of returning Army Reserve and Guard members struggle with significant mental health issues four to six months after returning from combat. These studies highlight the need for faith communities to partner with returning soldiers, discharged soldiers (“veterans”), their families, and with other community resources in the complex readjustment process.

Clergy and faith communities need to understand what the soldier and his/her family face as they reunite. Each has been through their own odyssey: challenged, stretched, pushed to the limits of endurance, even perhaps overwhelmed.

The families filled voids left by the soldier. New roles were assumed; new rules took effect; money was managed by the family without the soldier's direct input; new skills, experiences, and friendships gained. While the soldier's family is the same family, it is a newer model. The soldier's role in the family has changed, yet neither soldier nor family may realize this ... yet.

The soldier returns from a life of danger to a life of uncertainty. In combat training the soldier mastered dependence on combat buddies, vigilance, reactive obedience, and weaponry. In combat the military directed and provided. In civilian life the veteran must live by complex societal codes, and often resume the role of provider. In combat the soldier bonded deeply with a few – survival depended on this. In civilian life the soldier must interact with a myriad of networks of people – family, friends, co-workers, relatives, etc. In combat the soldier felt safe within the confines of the base and his/her team. At home the soldier, now unarmed and away from his/her team, may feel vulnerable, not sure where (or if) he/she is safe and secure.

The veteran may experience alienation because of the unique experiences (both good and bad) of combat, and the inability to adequately share those experiences with those who haven't been there – even loved ones. The veteran may feel that friends and co-workers have "leapt ahead" while he/she was "frozen in time." They have gone to school, married, been promoted, learned new skills and advanced in their careers ... leaving the veteran trying to "catch up" in a civilian world he/she now feels out of synch with.

THIS MEANS faith communities have a unique opportunity to help combat veterans and their families. *Consider the following steps* to help soldiers and combat veterans and their families:

1. Make your community "military-friendly". You don't need to support U.S. foreign policy or promote war to see members of the military or veterans as you see any other stressed population in your parish. Soldiers have volunteered for a very difficult service, and their families share in that sacrifice. In the Christian tradition, Jesus ministered to soldiers – His church should do the same.

A "military-friendly" faith community publicly acknowledges members who are serving and who have served in the military, and that their service is appreciated. Ideas: pray for the military, list the names of those serving in the service bulletin, post pictures of those serving on a display board, project their pictures before and/or after services, support events that honor veterans.

2. Reach out to military families. They may be in a crisis. Demonstrate your desire to walk with them through the separation. A periodic phone call offering support and a listening ear is helpful.

There are many practical ways to encourage families while their soldier is gone such as offering an oil change on the family car and doing yard work.

Youth pastors and children's ministers can especially touch the children of service members who struggle with the trauma of separation stress. A caring, consistent outreach to them will be a great source of comfort not only to the child and family, but to their soldier.

3. Reach out to the deployed soldier. Encouraging snail mail from home can include the weekly service bulletin, even a handwritten pastoral note. Education classes, men's and women's and other groups can take turns sending care packages and notes – helping their soldiers feel loved, valued, and not forgotten.

4. Welcome the soldier home. With consent, publicly acknowledge the soldier's return throughout the congregation. Doing this will acknowledge the family's sacrifice as well as affirm the soldier's service. Then, offers of child care during several weeks after the soldier's return would be of great practical help, and encouragement.

5. Support beyond the homecoming. If the congregation thinks of the service member and his/her family as people who just survived a fire, this will guide efforts to help over the long haul. After all, a soldier who has been in combat, and his/her family, have endured a fire – the fire of war. It may well take a long time for them to rebuild their lives. In reality, they never will be the same; nothing will be quite as it was. Yet, with the help of their faith community throughout the long process of reintegration, the veteran family with his/her family can grow into a new normal.

Don't overwhelm the soldier or new veteran and his/her family with attention ... but don't ignore them. Give the pastoral care you'd give any victims: your presence and meeting practical needs such as providing a favorite meal once a week for several weeks after the soldier returns, or offering day care so the couple can rebuild their marriage, or paying for the couple to attend a marriage retreat. Be agents of grace and healing – especially sensitive for spiritual needs, and available to provide counsel or referral if the family needs help.

6. Listen, support, absolve – without condemning. One of the tragic legacies of Viet Nam is that our society either ignored or condemned military service members who fought in that war. Sadly, many faith communities shared in this. Societal shame is a powerful tool; church ignorance smacks of shame and is even more powerful – it broke the spirits of countless Viet Nam veterans.

During and after this war, faith communities must do better, and can – without compromising their moral standards. Soldiers need a place where they can share troubling war experiences and do theological inquiry – which is often necessary for anyone who has experienced and suffered traumatic evil. The veterans' own faith group should be the place where they can question openly – then, through compassion and perhaps answers, grow and gain the strength needed to become the persons God is calling them to be. Veterans need a listening ear, a place for confession, a heart of compassion – a pastor willing to engage. America's faith communities can be a healing haven for soldiers, veterans, and their families.

7. Be alert for signs of distress. Just because a soldier and his or her family show up regularly for weekly worship doesn't mean everything is going well with their reintegration. Faith communities are unique from other helping agencies in that their pastor has inherent permission to check in with the veteran and family periodically ... and can note signs of distress. Depression, hyper-vigilance, withdrawal, inability to hold a job, anger issues, and discomfort with being in crowds are common signs of stress in combat veterans. Children are often the first to reflect stress at home – pay attention to what they are saying and doing. Through demonstrated pastoral concern, faith communities are perhaps best able to offer a veteran a real opportunity to receive help, healing, and hope. Non-combat-experience clergy can still engage pastorally, and offer wise referrals (i.e. VA).

Soldiers are continually returning home from combat. The local congregation that effectively ministers to this growing population can anticipate receiving God's blessing as they extend God's blessing. Yellow ribbons and patriotism are nice and much appreciated – but the true incarnational gift most appreciated by the combat veteran and his/her family is applied love (respect and care) and the growth of their own faith.