



The wounds of war

Helping returning veterans and their families heal from the stresses of deployment is a vital ministry.

A new and updated version of the June 2011 article

BY EMILY ENDERS ODOM

Men and women in today's military are returning home carrying painful memories of their experiences in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A significant number are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"When you're in a combat situation, the alarm bells are always going off and the fight-flight-freeze response is in overdrive," says Laura Atwood, a clinical case manager at the Robley Rex Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center in Louisville,

Kentucky. "Then you get back home and the problem is your nervous system hasn't calmed down yet. The alarms are still going off, but there's no fire."

Atwood explains that post-traumatic stress is "a normal response to abnormal events and only becomes an issue or disorder if, after a period of time, with or without treatment, the symptoms or ways of coping become inappropriate in a soldier's current context."

According to Atwood, the diagnosis of PTSD is well documented

throughout recent history. But because the disorder has gained increased exposure through frequent news headlines and stories—a *New York Times* article of August 12, 2012, called traumatic brain injury and PTSD "the signature wounds of the Iraq and Afghan wars"—civilians, including church members, can sometimes make incorrect assumptions about a veteran's condition.

"Every veteran will have post-traumatic stress," says Kevin Wainwright, a US Army chaplain stationed at Fort Wainwright in

they were peacetime deployments. Today's kids have the stress of not only missing Mom and Dad when they are deployed but also worrying about the potential for injury or death of a parent."

Greenslit holds an MDiv degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and is married to Lawrence P. Greenslit, an active duty Navy chaplain with 27 years of military service. She understands that spirituality and faith also play a critical role in resiliency training and that this is something churches can help provide.

What churches can do

Crystal Woodard, a licensed clinical social worker at the Robley Rex VA Medical Center, says that a church doesn't have to be near a military base to provide ministry and basic services to veterans.

"There are veterans in every church," Woodard says, thinking of the many Vietnam, Korea, and World War II vets who sit in our pews every Sunday. "A church that's looking to start a program can begin with its own veterans, who really have a wonderful way of reaching out to other vets. They speak the same language and know the culture."

Woodard says that because many veterans volunteer not only in their churches but also at their local VA hospitals, they are excellent resources in identifying the basic needs of veterans, such as food, clothing, transportation, and shelter. Churches can call their VA's voluntary services department if they'd like to help meet some of these needs.

"We've encouraged churches to host veterans' breakfasts or gatherings," Brogan says. "Vets talk pretty openly with each other but are often apprehensive about sharing their experiences with a broader audience who may just not understand. It turns out that for most vets, telling

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and retelling their stories in a safe setting is immensely healing."

A simple, loving gesture made a difference for Army chaplain Saul Cardona during an 18-month "unaccompanied tour" (without family members) in Korea. "I received a letter from a Sunday school class at a time when I was very lonely," he says. "It cheered me up a lot and helped me to deal with the separation." That love was magnified when the men's chorus of Guilford Park Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, sent complimentary copies of its CD, *Singing Our Faith*, to Brogan's office to distribute to active duty military chaplains.

At First Church, Fayetteville, Larry Toney works with a team of members dedicated to reaching out to military families. The church sponsors a "Celebrate Freedom" event on the Sunday closest to July 4 and a "Military Appreciation Night" around Veterans Day, at which a catered meal is offered free of charge to military families, with a nominal charge for church members. The church also offers a variety of classes, retreats, and marriage programs for military couples.

First Church has placed an ad in a local telephone directory which mentions—in addition to usual offerings such as worship services, ministries to families, and music ministry—that the church provides support for those with PTSD or moral injuries.

Living the resurrection

"We have to become a church living the resurrection," says Brenson P. Bishop, a board-certified chaplain

and retired US Army Reserve chaplain (colonel) who serves the Robley Rex VA Medical Center. Bishop says that although a lot of veterans think they're "done," they have the possibility of being raised by the Holy Spirit so that they, like Christ, can come out of the grave new, different, and stronger than they were when they went in, even though still bearing scars.

"I like people to start their veterans' ministry with this important question for pastoral care," he says. "How do I honor all that I've lived, learned, and lost, by how I live this day forward?" The church can't give them the answer; the church walks with them as they find the answer."

Resources for worship and services of healing

Two worship guides and liturgies for congregations wishing to offer healing and restoration to their returning veterans—and to themselves—are now available at pcusa.org/today. Brenson Bishop would love to hear how you use them: brenson.bishop@va.gov.

- » Ritual of foot washing and reconciliation: Prepared by pastor Raymond Hayes and retired military chaplain Brenson Bishop, this service is a rite of passage from the past into the present.
- » Ceremony of restoration: Prepared by chaplains Bonita Barnes and James Ryan, this liturgy provides a thorough how-to guide for a veterans' worship service.

