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...
Alaska, “but not everybody will have post-traumatic stress disorder.”

The recent drawdown of US forces, Wainwright says, means that a lot of soldiers are exiting all branches of the military and are returning home to their local communities, seeking not only work but also a sense of meaning and belonging. “In the military, these men and women had a purpose and a mission; they had camaraderie. Now they’re coming into a civilian environment that is different: less regimented, less predictable, and where they have more autonomy. And they might be looking for help at churches.”

Churches near military bases, such as First Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina, adjacent to Fort Bragg, are in a unique position to know and address the needs of veterans, active duty soldiers, and their family members.

“A military spouse will say something to me like, ‘I’m walking on eggshells because my husband is so irritable,’” says Larry Toney, associate pastor of the Fayetteville congregation.

Toney is also the deputy joint staff chaplain in the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. He and the nearly 190 other military chaplains affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), along with a growing number of congregations, are tackling the urgent challenge of helping soldiers and their families find healing. For example, the Fayetteville church’s pastor, John W. “Jay” Coker Jr., has encouraged the congregation to call two successive military chaplains to serve as associate pastor in order to work specifically with the military community.

“I believe combat veterans may struggle with PTSD,” Toney says, “but they also struggle with something more, which can be just as debilitating: moral injury.” (See Gabriella Lettini’s article on page 32 for more on moral injury.)

Unlike the situation in previous wars, more than half of the forces deployed today are reserves or National Guard troops, observes Ed Brogan, director of the Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel (PCCMP). “That means that when they return from war zones, they head quickly into our small towns and communities. They can all too easily become isolated... Equipping local ministers, hospitals, social workers, and others to spot symptoms and mobilize help is important.”

Wainwright says that not only are these soldiers often isolated but they can also be invisible. And changing that requires developing relationships based in mutual self-disclosure and trust.

A safe place to talk about struggles

In 2010 First Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville hosted a one-day program for local Presbyterian leaders who wanted to deepen their ministry to military personnel and their families.

“We wanted to help people to understand things like why a soldier might be afraid to sit in a building full of people,” Toney explains. “We wanted to sensitize people to the fact that military spouses often have secondary PTSD as a result of being exposed to behaviors like their spouse getting up in the middle of the night, pacing around, or having an aversion to loud noises. Military spouses need a safe place to talk about their marriages and their struggles with PTSD.”

Military chaplains see firsthand the unique challenges and the stressors that frequent deployments to war zones can create for soldiers and their families.

“Most in the military remain very dedicated and purposeful but are also weary from years of war,” says Brogan, whose agency recruits, endorses, and supports ministers from four Presbyterian denominations for active and reserve duty in all branches of the military. “Our chaplains who have served less than 12 years, which is half of a career, have never known a time without war deployments. Army chaplains are spending almost one year at home after each year deployed. It does make becoming close to family much tougher. It leads to distance and to the nonmilitary spouse assuming more and more responsibility for raising children and running the household.”

Amy Greenslit understands well what Brogan describes. A licensed clinical social worker managing a site for a Navy program that provides resiliency training for families and couples, she works for FOCUS (Families OverComing Under Stress), at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia.

“I know from personal experience how difficult deployments can be for children,” Greenslit says. “Military children grieve when their parents are gone. In the days when my husband and I were raising our kids,
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 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.”

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**WHEN SOLDIERS RETURN FROM WAR ZONES, ‘THEY HEAD QUICKLY INTO OUR SMALL TOWNS AND COMMUNITIES. THEY CAN ALL TOO EASILY BECOME ISOLATED.’ —ED BROGAN**

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**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.

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The church’s symbols and rituals are also important for returning soldiers.

“I think one of the things we don’t do well as a community is welcoming our warriors home,” Laura Atwood says. “In historical times, when Native American warriors came back in from the field, the community had a whole cleansing ritual that they did with them to welcome the warriors back in and to help them symbolically take off that warrior facade and personality and reintegrate into the community. . . . We don’t have that today.”

And yet there are churches and pastors who are developing innovative liturgies that do just that—providing welcome while modeling a resurrection church. In Louisville, for example, Raymond Hayes, a Baptist minister, collaborates with Bishop to offer a ritual of foot washing and reconciliation in which they invite returning soldiers to come before the congregation and remove their combat boots. They then wash their feet, put new shoes on them, and have them walk out of the sanctuary into their new lives.

In North Little Rock, Arkansas, chaplain James Ryan, a minister in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and a member of the PCCMP, and his colleague, chaplain Bonita Barnes, have developed and regularly use a “ceremony of restoration” in which they take the patches of returning soldiers, which represent their respective combat units—along with any other symbols in need of cleansing—and pass them through a basin of water, as at baptism.

Not all rituals will be appropriate for every congregation, but according to Kevin Wainwright, “A church ought to have something that recognizes the veterans in the congregation and formally thanks them for their service.”

Even if a church is unable to launch and promote a self-sustaining support group for veterans—the most effective type of program according to Wainwright—congregations can still start small with an event such as a Fourth of July picnic or by having veterans share their stories in church.

“What most veterans fear is being forgotten, but if they see that a church genuinely cares, it’s easy to overlook any miscues or shortcomings,” says Wainwright. “The most important ‘don’t’ in ministering to veterans is ‘don’t not try.’”

Emily Enders Odom is an associate for Mission Communications for the Presbyterian Mission Agency.