

The Church's Journey: Caring For Our Military Members and Their Families

By Lynn Cox

The stories are many and varied. They come from far back in history to present. Some have been told. Some stay buried deep in hearts and minds. They are stories of our military members and their families and their issues and challenges that they have faced or are living with day to day. These families and/or military men and women live in your neighborhood, attend your local school, shop at your local grocery, and attend your church.....or maybe don't attend your church. In many cases they may travel through days and nights in silent struggles. Some may be a family or service personnel experiencing anticipatory grief, financial challenges, behavioral issues of children, injuries and disabilities that are visible or invisible,and quietly enduring varying degrees of emotional and spiritual pain.

Where are we as church communities ministering to these families? Do we even know who they are?

Some of our military families stay near their support systems (such as National Guard members called to active duty) so they may remain as part of their familiar local congregations. Some branches of the service have their personnel contained in a unit where families adapt, bond, and identify themselves in that unit but may be stationed geographically away from their hometowns. They may be looking for a temporary church home. Then there are some branches where personnel (and families) are assigned and moved independently...away from their support systems of family/relatives or communities of origin. Service personnel are often taken away from familiar logistical and emotional support needed in daily life and in most cases are subject to deployments and multiple deployments in war zones. They will return at some point to our local churches.

What about the military families in the neighborhood of your church? Check out some of the statistics:

Data from the Department of Veterans Affairs, as reported by the National BeFriender Ministry, states that sixty people are affected closely and feel the impact of every soldier who is deployed to and returns from a war zone. For soldiers themselves, routine activities seem meaningless after the experience of combat. No one comes back unaffected. Families and friends who have adjusted to the soldier's absence must now adjust to the soldier's presence. It is a time of significant transition for everyone.

We have a major health crisis. The Rand Study reports that 1 in 5 U.S. troops is experiencing major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from serving in the wars of Iraq or Afghanistan.⁽¹⁾ Other conditions resultant from war include Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Combat Operational Stress Reaction, Military Sexual Trauma and Substance Abuse. For people with brain injuries (common among our vets),

one out of two persons suffers from substance abuse. (2) And those head counts don't even take into consideration unhealed mental health and spiritual health wounds of veterans from previous wars. The Department of the Army reports that suicides are at an all time high. In fact they are the highest since such reports were kept beginning in 1980. (3) Some may be categorically under-reported and some kept at bay.

Published research on how the very young react to parents deployed, details that 1 in 5 preschoolers display troubling emotional or behavioral signs. (4) A report from the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs states that nationally we have over half a million children under the age of five waiting for their active duty parents to come home....the most since WWII. (5) Military dependent children of all ages now number over 2 million. (6) Child abuse and neglect have been documented as 42% higher during times when a soldier-parent was deployed. (7)

There are issues of domestic violence. A growing number of active duty Army and Marine soldiers have divorced their spouses.

Jobs may be hard to find or keep. The Department of Veterans Affairs reports that 18% of veterans recently back from tours of duty are unemployed and of those employed since leaving the military, 25% earn less than \$21,840 a year. (8) Emotional stress and changes in structure/routines (such as being used to giving orders or receiving them) has resulted in job losses and a huge increase of vets that are homeless. Duane Kruger, co-director of Anoka County Minnesota's Veteran's Service Office, states that nationally there are an estimated half-million homeless veterans. Of every ten homeless veterans under 45, one is a woman. (9)

The statistics go on and on.

What are some of their stories?

One story tells of a military family re-located to an assigned town searching for a church home. They wanted to fit into/feel part of the life of a local church community. The welcome was superficially friendly....greetings were a quick "Hi, glad to see you" but then those who were greeting quickly turned away to talk to their old friends. No one wanted to learn more about them and invest in a temporary church member.

Another story speaks to the difficulty of a teen becoming accepted in an already existing "tight friendship groups." Sitting as a teen group in pews for worship there was room for all the group except for one. The "new teen" ended up sitting in the row behind -alone. Did the kids intend to hurt the teen? No, they weren't being mean: they grew up together, had gone to school together. They never intentionally thought to include the teen. The teen's unheard cry was... "Oh please, just don't be friendly...please accept me as a friend. My family has moved 9 times in my 14 years. It is very hard for someone to want to be my friend because I will be moving again in a just a year when my Dad gets assigned to a different military base."

In a neighborhood church there was a special activity event, and all of a sudden a mother of a deployed daughter burst into tears and quietly slipped out the door. Life was moving on at full tilt for others, but she had a sudden flash of worry for her daughter's safety in a war zone and didn't feel comfortable in the midst of a "rah rah" activity.

What are some of their issues and needs and what can churches do for support to military families?

It is commonly stated, "When someone joins the military, their family joins too." If deployment is involved, the entire family experiences the emotional roller-coaster of separation and reintegration issues—sometimes over and over. Some children are raised by grandparents as a result of deployments. The military parent has unusual work schedules, often missing important family events (anniversaries, graduations, birthdays, school concerts/events). The frequent and sometimes unpredictable change of schools for children with re-assessments may bring on the challenge of missing deadlines for enrollments, getting academic credits accepted and transferred, as well as leaving old friends and making new. Pets may have to be left behind in moves.

Spouses moving with re-assessments may find obstacles for their employment (such as finding new jobs, needing to relicense in new states for certain professions, finding childcare). Spouses take over different household jobs and family leadership during deployment which then needs to be redefined when their deployed spouse returns. There may be stress on the couple's relationship. It is a reality that the returning vet may suffer from combat stress, PTSD, or physical injuries. Families may find themselves "walking on eggshells" upon the return of a spouse or parent who has startle responses, anger outbursts, social withdrawal, or traffic and crowd anxieties.

Children in military families may carry emotional baggage far beyond their years. Shifts in recent months (longer and repeated deployments of a parent-s) are causing cumulative effects. Some children complain of insomnia or anxiety and have trouble keeping up in school. Mid-deployment visits can be notoriously rough ...in a short period of time kids are whipsawed between the euphoria of reunion and anguish of departure. Yet, many youth of military families are resilient.

One in four military kids are teenagers. A parent may have left when their son or daughter was fourteen but returns when their son or daughter has physically changed and has his/her drivers permit. A new normal is not the same as before. A teen son has said, "I want to do my own thing, hang out with my friends, but I know my Mom is struggling and I feel I shouldn't leave her at home...I should be helping her more."

The book, *Welcome Them Home Help Them Heal... Pastoral Care and Ministry with Service Members Returning From War*, summarizes:

"No two veterans have the same war experiences, nor upon returning from war do they face exactly the same re-integration challenges. Likewise, veterans heal and recover in

their own ways and along their own timelines. Caregivers who understand the healing powers of listening to one's story can offer hope."

Learning to be caring listeners is paramount...not to be interrogators for information on how a vet is feeling or doing now that they are back home but alert and open when it comes to be the time that they are ready to unload. Pat answers such as "time will heal the problem" are not helpful and only show that we don't want the discomfort of dealing with their pain. It may take years and years for some to put aside their trauma.

Military families want to fit in and feel part of their neighborhood and church community. What a vote of confidence if a church can be intentional with welcoming a new family and investing care and non-judgmental listening to their stories even if they are temporary....being treated as if they would be long term members.

Ask families what they want or need. Invite and keep the door open without pressure to participate. A particular week just might not be the right time to start something new. Maybe a family could use help with yard work, household repairs, or transportation but through such service-providing tasks consider building relationships/friendships. Some families may not want extra help for reasons of safety, vulnerability, stigma, pride, timing of help offered, or confidentiality. Ask permission to specifically list names of servicemen deployed. Be aware of the stages and issues that families go through in pre-deployment, deployment, reintegration and the long haul. Engage youth pastors, if available, to facilitate new children into activities and existing groups of children. Help the existing group of children to be intentional of including the new children

There are some very helpful websites such as www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids and literature on supporting military kids during stages of a parent's deployment, teacher intervention strategies, helping kids cope with stress at different age levels and strategies to help kids cope with stress.

Laura Bender, Command Chaplain of the USS New York providing care for crew and their families reminds us:

"It will take us training to understand the issues of military vets and their families and come up to

speed with information on such topics as post traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury.

It will take patience to refrain from giving returning vets easy answers, especially if the issues

become burdensome or overwhelming.

It will take love for them that transcends your position on war and allows you to struggle with

them through difficult spiritual and moral issues in spite of your politics.

Finally, it will take faith and hope to help them find the peace that passes all understanding so that

having returned from war, they can finally make the journey home.

As people of faith, it is our task to facilitate that journey, to make the way clear, to remove impediments, to stand with our hearts, our minds, and our doors open.”

Footnotes:

- (1) Pauline Jelinek (Associated Press). “Major Health Crisis: 1 in 5 U.S. troops report stress disorders”. Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. December 20, 2008.
- (2) “Exploring the Connection Between Brain Injury and Substance Abuse” *Independence*. (publication of Vineland National Center). Winter 2009 p.12
- (3) Erica Goode. Victims of An Internal War.” Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. August 2, 2009.
- (4) Associated Press Release. “War Deployments Make Kids More Aggressive”. Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. November 4, 2008.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Gail Rosenblum. “Troops Kids Have Their Own Struggles”. Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. November 8, 2009
- (7) Associated Press Release. Op cit.
- (8) Stephen Barr. “Veterans Return to Bleak Job Market”. Washingtonpost.com April 1, 2008.
- (9) Paul Levy. “Veterans home and homeless.” Startribune.com November 18, 2009

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