



# United Methodist Endorsing Agency

General Board of Higher Education & Ministry Division of Ordained Ministry

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## Congregational Care for Deployed Service Members and Their Families

*How can congregations faithfully serve those in the armed forces, their families, and the religious professionals who care for them, especially those deployed overseas? Every congregation can make a difference. Here are some possibilities.*

- 1. Educate civilian congregants about military deployments** using multiple approaches (pulpit, newsletter, adult forum classes). The best time to start this is well in advance of need. Key points will include the support typically available to family members from military sources, such as family days, readiness group meetings, and Returning Warrior Weekends. Military spouses often miss important events due to problems with transportation and childcare. These are problems might have been resolved, had other congregants anticipated them ahead of time. Be sensitive to titles (and capitalization): Soldiers serve in the U.S. Army, sailors in the U.S. Navy, marines in the U.S. Marine Corps, airmen in the U.S. Air Force, and guardians in the U.S. Coast Guard.
- 2. Commit to keep the names of service and family members before the congregation for intercession on a regular basis.** Develop a list of service members related to the congregation who are serving. Make a prayer list for them and for their family members, and keep it current. Provide scholarships for service members' children to attend camps, summer learning opportunities, youth activities, and other events. Offer child-care support for families.
- 3. Mark service members' departure and return with congregational ceremonies.** A service is available on the UMEA website, "An Order for Blessing Service Members Deploying to War" <http://bit.ly/2eoBtmK> and "An Order for Welcoming Service Members Returning from War" <http://bit.ly/2fiD2jS>. These do not need to be elaborate or lengthy. They do have to be planned and coordinated, and must have enough flexibility accommodate sudden schedule changes. Whenever possible, attend farewell and welcome-home events sponsored by military units. See members off and/or greet them at airports when that option is available.
- 4. Be proactive and persistent in reaching out to service members' families.** Anything that reduces stress on the family ultimately reduces stress on the deployed service member. Ask FIRST how family members are doing in the service member's absence, THEN about the deployed child, spouse, or parent. Follow through to meet whatever needs that families are willing to share (e.g., for home maintenance), and be open to meeting needs of deployed members. Churches have sent phone cards, clothes,

toiletries, toys for children, DVDs, and several hundred pounds of jelly beans in response to service member requests.

5. **Be sensitive to the emotional issues of military separations.** The emotions experienced by spouses and family members of deployed soldiers are similar to those in the grief process encountered at the death of a loved one. Denial, frustration, anger, and depression are the initial feelings expressed. Within a few months most spouses realize they will survive in spite of the challenges they face. For those individuals who continue to struggle, the church needs to patiently encourage and to continue to find ways to show concern and love. In some instances, professional help may be necessary.
6. **Begin regular support group meeting.** If the congregation has several deployed members, it may be helpful to allow spouses time and a place to share their frustrations and successes with each other. At those meetings there should always be time to acknowledge how God is working in the members' lives. Use professionally developed materials, where available. Be sure to support these meetings with top-quality child care.
7. **Provide practical support to families of deployed military personnel.** Ideas include moving the lawn, shoveling snow, household projects, auto repair, child care. Pay particular attention to the day-to-day needs of families with infants and small children. Single parents can become overwhelmed by multiple demands and concerns. Reassurance and affirmation from caring people is a true gift.
8. **Keep those in the congregation who are connected to the military on the mailing list.** Never remove a service member from the rolls while they are on active duty, except at the member's request. Brief notes of support and affirmation from the clergy can mean a lot. Encouraging the service member to find a spiritual home in their current location is also fine. Read and write on members' Facebook pages. Send e-mail and snail mail. Include subscriptions to devotional materials when possible. Remember that U.S. Mail - especially packages – can take a long time to reach remote locations, so plan birthday and holiday gifts and greetings accordingly. Be aware of items that are prohibited to service members.
9. **You may wish to designate a paid or volunteer staff position for ministry to deployed service members.** The staff member will have a list of resources and information include the military persons' names, unit designations, and military addresses; deploying units' point of contact, who can provide access support and benefits offered to military families; the names of the nearest military community resource agencies; and the nearest active duty chaplains office.
10. **Identify and employ local mentors and resource people.** Partner with other congregations. Don't overlook local veteran's organizations and "para-congregational" groups like Stephen Ministries. Make sure that volunteers are trustworthy and that their knowledge is current and relevant. Consider special offerings to organizations which provide care and support for our chaplains and their families. This includes retreats for those who have been in combat, continuing education, and immediate pastoral assistance in times of crisis.

- 11. Consider adopting a chaplain/chaplain's assistant.** (The military calls this pairing a ministry team.) Partnering with a ministry team might include such things as: (a) a commitment to pray for the ministry, and for team members' families; (b) contact to see what needs the unit being served may have that the church may assist in meeting; (c) sending birthday cards, notes of encouragement, congratulations on promotions, etc., to team members; (d) distributing devotionals (e.g., Upper Room, Prayer for Courage, etc.); (e) host ministry team members upon return from deployment to have them share their stories and ministries in worship and fellowship settings.
- 12. Be aware that the deployment cycle includes a long post-deployment reintegration period.** This time is often very difficult for service members and families. Typical stressors include sorting through personal and family system changes that occur during the course of a deployment, emerging medical issues, the need to forgive and be forgiven and returning members' ambivalence about separating from friendships forged under difficult conditions. Reservists and those who leave the military upon return from deployment may face difficulty in finding work and/or setbacks in accessing VA educational or medical benefits.
- 13. Be patient and persistent.** Many veterans who have been exposed to the horrible atrocities of combat are highly resistant to seeking mental health care due to the stigma often associated with such care in military culture. It takes time to develop trust with veterans. It can be frustrating to prove oneself. Yet if veterans trust anyone, it will be their pastors. Be ready, patient and persistent in earning that trust.
- 14. Likeminded listeners.** Veterans NEED to talk. They prefer talking with other veterans because they don't have to explain so much, and their confessions are accepted, affirmed, and recognized. A small Bible study group made up entirely of veterans can be a good place to start. Including veterans from previous conflicts (e.g., Vietnam) is permissible; they too, have had to live with combat memories for a long time. In fact, their presence and wisdom may be comforting. Consider offering a weekend retreat instead of a weekly format. When a week goes by between sessions, one may have to start all over again helping participants get comfortable enough to talk, and it's more likely they will drop out after a session or two.
- 15. Create a Circle of Care.** Circle of Care is a small group within the church that is committed to providing care for veterans and their loved ones. Often times, veterans who suffer from the invisible wounds of war benefit from a trusted group of people. This group provides a nucleus of setting within the larger faith community. Invite veterans and their families to be part of a Circle of Care. Asking them to identify two or three people they trust to be in the circle strengthens the bond. Keep contacts manageable; have them designate a primary contact person who checks in with them at mutually agreed upon intervals. If the congregation has a parish nurse, it is recommended that the nurse be an advisor to the Circle of Care.
- 16. Above all, don't lose interest.** Polls indicate the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are much less interesting to the nation than the state of the economy. About two million U.S. military personnel have been deployed since October 2001. When we add their families to the picture, the impact is significant. We want to support them!

## Resources

Minnesota National Guard Web site, <http://www.minnesotanationalguard.org/btyr/>

*Beyond the Yellow Ribbon*, Thompson & Wetterstrom, Abingdon Press

*While They Are at War*, Henderson, Mariner Books

*War and the Soul*, Tick, Quest Books

*Welcome Them Home, Help them Heal*, by Chaplain John Sippola

*God Understands Series* by the American Bible Society (Website)

<http://godunderstands.americanbible.org/sites/default/files/god-understands-chaplain-user-guide.pdf>

*Soul Care Initiative*, <http://www.soulcareinitiative.org/>

*Material compiled by: Bruce Fenner, Tom Carter, Robert Phillips, Stephen Wall-Smith, Dick Millspaugh, United Methodist clergy and Jane Donovan, "Ministry with Veterans," Leading Ideas enewsletter, May 23, 2012. This is a working document. Please share your suggestions and success stories. Send to [umea@gbhem.org](mailto:umea@gbhem.org)*

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