



United Methodist Endorsing Agency

General Board of Higher Education & Ministry | Division of Ordained Ministry

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Congregational Care for Deployed Service Members

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 the congregation about the needs of service members and their families when the service member is deployed. Routine assistance with childcare, transportation and tasks normally performed by the deployed service member are high on the list. Knowing that the congregation will step in to help during an emergency or unforeseen contingency will take a load off everyone's mind. Congregations can also help family members connect with additional services available from the government or other agencies. Enlist your congregation's veterans to advise and organize the efforts. When talking to the congregation about service members, be sensitive to titles. 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. 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. You can find examples at the end of this document. These ceremonies do not need to be elaborate or lengthy. They do have to be planned and coordinated. They also need to be flexible enough to 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.

For example, some churches have responded to service member requests for phone cards for themselves and their buddies; DVDs (also popular for sharing with buddies); clothing items, toiletries, and toys for children in the Area of Operations; good coffee and familiar treats from home (including hundreds of pounds of jelly beans and a gooey butter cake from St. Louis).

5. Be sensitive to the emotional issues of military separations. The emotions experienced by spouses and family members of deployed soldiers are like those in the grief process. Denial, frustration, anger, and depression are the initial feelings expressed. Within a few months most spouses realize they will survive despite 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 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 are true gifts.

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 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, 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. 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!

Sample Order for Blessing Service Members Deploying to War

The pastor calls the service member forward together with his/her family.

Pastor to congregation:

Scripture calls all Christians to pray for those in authority, to honor them and to be subject to them as they support those who do what is good, reprimand those who do wrong and provide for a just ordering of society. Those who are called to military service act as instruments of these authorities. Today we recognize _____ (Job title/rank/name) as he/she departs to serve in _____ (Theater of Operation)

The pastor may briefly describe the assignment that the military service member is departing to fulfill.

The service member may kneel or stand as the pastor and the family members/loved ones lay hands on him/her.

Pastor to service member:

_____, (First name) on behalf of this congregation, I pray God's blessing be upon you as you journey into harm's way. While you are serving in _____ (Theater of Operation) we promise to remember you in prayer, uphold you with encouraging communications and surround your loved ones, who remain at home, with a community of care and support. As you deploy in service to our country, may the Lord be the stronghold of your life. May you rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation and be constant in prayer. May the Holy Spirit guide and sustain you through every experience and may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.

Let us pray:

The pastor and the congregation pray together:

Almighty God, we commend to your love and care, _____ . (Full Name) Be with him/her now as he/she prepares to face the challenges of deployment and the uncertainties of war. Grant him/her wisdom and courage so that he/she may discharge his/her duties with integrity and faithfulness. Help him/her to endure hardship with grace and humor. Fill him/her with compassion for those who go the journey with him/her. Protect him/her from all danger, O God, and comfort him/her in moments of distress. During this time of separation, be for his/her loved ones a source of hope and strength and hasten the day when peace may finally come. Amen.

Liturgy prepared by Laura Bender, U.S. Navy, endorsed member of the New York Annual Conference, May 2007

Sample Order for Welcoming Service Members Returning from War

The pastor calls the service member forward together with his/her family.

Pastor to congregation:

In 1749, Charles Wesley wrote these words:

“And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face?
Glory and thanks to Jesus give for his almighty grace!”

It is with joy and thanksgiving that we this day welcome _____ (Job title/rank/name) as he/she returns from service in _____. (Theater of Operation)

The pastor may briefly describe the assignment that the military service member has just completed.

_____ (first name), on behalf of our congregation, I want to thank you for your service to our country and thank your family for their many sacrifices during your deployment.

The pastor may briefly describe any family events of significance that occurred during the family member’s absence (births, deaths, graduations, etc.)

Pastor to service member:

_____ (first name), you have been to war and you have survived. We recognize that there is a deeply personal cost for being a warrior that few of us will ever fully understand.

The gospels tell us about a man who had been living among the tombs, and who called himself Legion because he was haunted by so many disturbing spirits. When Jesus saw him, he had compassion on him and gave him release from his demons. As you return to us today, we want you to have the opportunity to leave behind what is past and accept for yourself the healing and comfort that God alone can provide.

The service member responds:

I have returned from war – help me continue my journey home.

The service member may kneel or stand.

Pastor to congregation:

Let us be in prayer:

The pastor and the congregation pray together:

Almighty and merciful God, we lift up to you this day our brother/sister _____ who through your great love has been returned to us. For your protection, guidance and sustaining presence while he/she was in harm's way, we give you profound thanks.

With _____ (first name), we mourn the loss of all those who did not return home and pray for all those who have been wounded in body and spirit. We pray also for their loved ones, that in you they might find a source of hope and strength.

Silence may be kept for the remembrance of names or specific individuals may be named aloud.

Remembering that even your son Jesus still had scars after he was resurrected, we pray that you will continue to uphold _____ (first name) as he/she seeks healing for the wounds that inflict the spirit of all who endure a struggle. Help him/her to let go of painful memories. Help him/her to reconnect with those who love him/her. Help him/her to know that he/she no longer needs to be quite so vigilant, for you have the watch over his/her life. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen

Pastor to service member and congregation:

In the Epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul asked, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"

And then he answered the question with these words:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Pastor to service member:

_____ (first name), in service to your country, you may have been required to act in ways that are outside our everyday experience and norms. Reflecting on these memories may be painful and discomfoting. I ask you now, in the presence of this community of faith, to offer up a silent prayer for all that you have experienced that grieves your spirit and weighs heavily on your heart.

A moment for silent prayer will be observed.

Hear now these comforting words from the Scripture:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11: 28)

A moment for silent prayer will be observed.

The service member turns and faces the congregation.

The pastor and congregation proclaim:

_____ (First name), may the peace of God be with you.

The service member responds:

And also with you.

Pastor to congregation:

Members of the household of faith, I commend to your love and care our brother/sister _____ (first name). Do all in your power to continue to uphold him/her so that one day, by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, true peace may again dawn in his/her life.

Pastor to service member and congregation:

Now may the blessing of God be with all of us as we look toward that glorious day described by the prophet Isaiah who said: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Liturgy prepared by Laura Bender, U.S. Navy, endorsed member of the New York Annual Conference.

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