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BEYOND THE YELLOW RIBBON: HOW CHURCHES CAN HELP SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES READJUST AFTER COMBAT
by John Morris

The road home from war is longer, steeper and often more challenging than the road to war for most soldiers and their families. After the joyful, long anticipated reunions there is a difficult period of transition, readjustment, and hard work ahead for every soldier and their family. The church can be a helpful partner in the process.

Recent studies reviewed in the June 2004 *New England Journal of Medicine* reveal that as many as 18% of returning combat veterans struggle with significant mental health issues upon returning home. Department of Defense medical authorities now state that as many as 30% of returning Army Reserve and Guard members struggle with significant mental health issues four to six months after returning from combat. These studies highlight the need for the church to be a partner in the complex readjustment

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process of returning soldiers and their families.

The first place for the church to start, in becoming a helpful partner in the readjustment process, is to gain an understanding of what faces the soldier and his family when they reunite. Both parties have been through odysseys of their own. Both have been stretched, challenged, overwhelmed and pushed to the limits of their endurance.

The families have learned to fill the void left by the soldier. New roles have been assumed and sometimes mastered. New rules have taken effect. Money has been managed by the family without the soldier's direct input. New skills have been gained, experiences had and friendships made. The soldier is returning to the same family but a newer model. The soldier's role in the family may have changed and the family may not even be aware of it.

The soldier is returning from a life of danger to a life of uncertainty. In combat the military guided and provided. In civilian life the soldier will have to live by a complex code. In combat the soldier bonded with a few, in civilian life the soldier will be expected to interact with a myriad of networks of people; family, friends, co-workers, relatives, etc... In combat the soldier was "safe" within the confines of the forward operating base and the company, squad or team. At home the soldier will often feel vulnerable, not sure where he/she is "safe and secure".

The soldier will experience alienation because of the unique experiences (both good and bad) of combat and the inability to adequately express those experiences to those who haven't been there. The soldier may feel that friends and co-workers have "leapt ahead" while he/she was "frozen in time". Others have gone to school, married, been promoted, learned new skills and advanced in their careers and the soldier is faced with trying to "catch up" in a world that the combat veteran may feel he/she is out of synch with.

All of this adds up to offering the church a very unique ministry in helping combat veterans and their families. With understanding comes the opportunity to minister. I suggest the following steps for any church that wants to help combat veterans and their families.

1. Make yourself a "military-friendly" church. That doesn't mean that you have to support the U.S. foreign policy or promote war. It does mean that you are willing to see members of the military as you see any other distressed population in your parish. Members of the military have volunteered for a very difficult avenue of service and their families share in the sacrifice. Jesus ministered to soldiers and His Church has the opportunity to do the same.

A "military-friendly" church acknowledges, publicly, in church publications and from the lectern, that members of the church are in the military and their service is appreciated by the church. Some churches have prayer teams specifically for the purpose of praying for the military. Other churches list the names of those serving in the military in their Sunday bulletins. Some churches have pictures of those serving in the military on a display board in the Fellowship Hall or lobby. Many churches project the pictures of those serving overseas on a screen in the sanctuary before and/or after services, to raise awareness.

2. Reach out to military families. Treat the military family of a soldier serving in combat as you would any family in crisis. Many of the skills learned in ministering to families who have been through a significant crisis apply to a military family during a combat deployment. A gentle ministry of presence that let's the family know that the church wants to walk with them through the long days and nights of separation will be greatly appreciated. A periodic phone call from a pastor, elder, deacon or Stephen Minister to offer support and a listening ear is helpful. Practical helps from offering to change the oil on family cars to helping with yard work, all combine to help the family with the crushing responsibilities

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they face when their soldier is gone.

Youth pastors and children's ministers can have a very wonderful ministry reaching out to the children of service members. The children struggle with the trauma of separation from their loved one and the stress of being home "alone". A caring, consistent outreach to them will be a great source of comfort to the children, the soldier and their spouse.

3. Reach out to the deployed soldier. There is nothing like getting snail mail from home. If the church mails the bulletin weekly, she will be doing a wonderful service. If the pastor sends a handwritten note, it is fresh water in the desert, literally. If the Sunday School, the Men's Group, the Women's Bible Study and other groups in the church take turns sending a care package and note the soldier will feel they are loved, valued and not forgotten.

4. When the soldier comes home, welcome them home. A simple acknowledgement in the church bulletin or newsletter is wonderful. With the consent of the soldier and his/her family, a public welcome home, with an announcement from the lectern on Sunday morning is helpful. The offer to baby sit the children so a couple can go out, several weeks after the soldier returns, would be a great practical help.

By welcoming the soldier home and acknowledging the sacrifice their family has made the Church will validate their shared struggle and affirm their service.

5. Support beyond the yellow ribbon. If the church thinks of the service member and their family as people who have just survived a fire it will guide efforts to help for the long haul. A soldier who has been to combat, and their family, has endured a fire, the fire of war. It will take a long time for the family and soldier to rebuild their lives after the fire of war. They will never be the same and nothing will be as it was. With the help of the church, over the long process of reintegration the family can grow into a new normal.

Don't overwhelm the soldier and his/her family with attention, but at the same time don't ignore them. Give them the same pastoral care you 'd give fire victims; a ministry of presence, meet practical needs and be agents of grace and healing.

This may take many practical forms from bringing over a favorite meal once a week for several months after the soldier returns, to offering day care so the couple can rebuild their marriage, to paying for the couple to attend a marriage retreat, to providing counseling if the family needs help.

6. Listen, support, absolve and don't condemn. One of the tragic legacies of the American experience in Viet Nam is that our society either ignored or condemned the military service members who fought in that war. Societal shame is a powerful tool and it broke the spirits of countless Viet Nam veterans.

The Church of Jesus Christ can do better without feeling that we are compromising our moral standards. Soldiers need a place where they can share the experiences of war that may trouble them. They need a safe place where they can do theological inquiry which is so necessary for anyone who has suffered trauma. They need a place where they can question, grow, and gain the strength needed to grow through their combat experience and on into the person God is calling them to be. A church that will provide a listening ear, a place for confession and a heart of compassion will become a healing haven for soldiers and their families.

7. Be alert for signs of distress. Because a soldier and his or her family show up for Sunday worship regularly doesn't mean everything is going well with their reintegration. Check in with them periodically

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and watch for signs of distress. Depression, hyper vigilance, withdrawal, inability to hold a job, anger issues and discomfort with being in crowds are common signs of stress in combat veterans. Children often are the first to reflect the stress that is happening at home. Pay attention to what they are saying and doing. By expressing concern and opening the door for support the church is offering the combat veteran the opportunity to receive help, healing and hope.

Every month soldiers are returning home from combat. The local church that opens its doors to combat veterans will be offering a much needed ministry to a population often overlooked in terms of ministry. Yellow ribbons are nice and much appreciated. Love, support and a "cup of cold water", however, is the incarnational gift of Christ, through His Church, to the combat veteran and family