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Ministries pave a spiritual path to help veterans with PTSD

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Special for USA TODAY

Hopelessness haunted Tim Pollock for years after an [Iraqi insurgent](#) blew off half his skull during a reconnaissance operation in 2004. Back home in Columbiana, Ohio, the retired Army infantryman drank hard, bought a gun and considered suicide.

But today Pollock, 30, has a renewed sense of purpose despite his seizures and other war-related disabilities. He visits soldiers in hospitals. He coaches veterans who struggle as he does with agitation, anxiety and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And he's studying for ministry.

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"I'll always have post-traumatic stress, but I'm learning through God how to control that," says Pollock, who leads a veteran support group through Point Man International Ministries, an independent non-profit. "I'm learning how to change my feelings of anger into feelings of love and help people with their problems."

As soldiers return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, congregations are discovering how spirituality can help veterans afflicted with postwar stress. But many pastors remain unsure how to help when veterans contend with chronic nightmares, outbursts and panic attacks.

An army of helpers

Several ministries are trying.

- Since 2007, Campus [Crusade](#) for Christ's Military Ministry has helped about 100 local churches launch or expand programs addressing spiritual needs that accompany PTSD.

- Point Man support groups, led by veterans and supported by local congregations, have grown from 219 in 2007 to 250 today. Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans now make up 20% of attendees, up from just 1% in 2007, says Point Man president Dana Morgan.

- Other groups have launched grassroots efforts, such as the Coming Home Collaborative, a 3-year-old network of Minneapolis-area Lutheran congregations.

Propelling outreach efforts is a mounting need. Nearly 20% of service members who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan report symptoms of PTSD or major depression, yet fewer than half seek treatment, a Rand Corp. study found last year. Women with the disorder often go undiagnosed, in part because they're wrongly presumed to be less susceptible in non-combat roles, said a report in July from the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

PTSD poses challenges even for well-intentioned congregations because it is often hidden. A veteran with the disorder may appear fine in worship, but at home he may obsess about security, struggle to sleep, panic at loud noises or become easily enraged. Such symptoms manifest in certain trauma survivors, including some who have experienced the horrors of war up close, says Matthew Friedman of the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Department of Veteran Affairs.

For some congregations, PTSD ministries are largely about raising awareness. At Calvary United Methodist [Church in](#) Colorado Springs, where most members have a military connection, leaders have been trained to spot symptoms and refer those affected, especially family members, to counselors. But Calvary, like others, is still finding its way in this "new avenue that we're not very familiar with," says senior pastor Khan McClellan.

Confronting PTSD "is still something of a struggle for faith communities," who might fear mental illness or assume the military should be handling it, McClellan says. "As much as we're exposed to it in Colorado Springs, we have a long way to go in terms of meeting this need."

Other congregations are tackling what they see as the disorder's spiritual dimension. Skyway Church in Goodyear, Ariz., launched a support group last year for veterans and one for family members. John Blehm, a Vietnam veteran and PTSD patient who leads the support group, says military clinicians "do not address the spiritual wounds of our troops."

"Many will feel guilty for the inhumane things they have done in order to survive in war," Blehm says. "Once they understand they are not alone and can be forgiven, then healing begins."

Cautious steps forward

Friedman says clergy can help facilitate connections among veterans or address spiritual dimensions, such as guilt or reconciliation. "People really don't like to go to a psychiatric clinic unless they have to," Friedman says.

James Knudsen, a Vietnam veteran and PTSD patient in Marion, Iowa, says local efforts to get churches to start support groups for veterans have largely "fallen on deaf ears."

As churches test these new waters, they may just need to jump in and take one step at a time — and veterans may need to do the same.

"We emphasize that everybody else can forgive you, and now it's your turn to forgive yourself because God already has," Morgan says. "And then we go from there."

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