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Workshop to help churches build 'military ministry'

By *Savannah Morning News*

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Summary:

SYLVIA VAZQUEZ and her husband were overflowing with pride and respect when their son Thomas Vazquez enlisted in the U.S. Army. But as Thomas prepares for his first year-long deployment to Afghanistan, Vazquez worries about how her son's faith could be tested by the experience. "One of the very important things to me, with him going into the military, was that he didn't lose focus on his spirituality," said Vazquez, who is Catholic. "I want him to know that people are praying for him and to keep God close to him."

Dana Clark Felty

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Addressing the spiritual struggles of active duty service men and women-and their families-is the mission of a new nonprofit organization called Care for the Troops.

The group is hosting a workshop on Sept. 11 to help clergy and congregational lay leaders understand both the practical and spiritual needs of those who have fought overseas.

The gathering also aims to teach faith leaders how they can create a "veteran friendly" atmosphere in their congregation.

Vazquez, who lives in Marietta, volunteers with the new group as it works to expand its network of churches throughout the state.

"A lot of people don't realize there are 18-year-olds who are having to deal with death when they've really never even seen much of life," said Vazquez. "I just feel like we need to be ready, when they come back, to be a safety net for them."

Weaving a safety net

Workshop organizer Gina Farrell believes churches have an important role to play as troops return from war.

Before opening her own family counseling practice in Rincon in 2008, Farrell worked as a marriage and family therapist at the Mary Lou Fraser Foundation for Families in Hinesville.

She estimates that 80 percent of her clients were members of the military and their families.

"Sometimes, problems don't start to develop until three, six months maybe even a year after they've returned," Farrell said.

Many told her they were more likely to talk about their struggles of readapting to life after a deployment with a chaplain or member of the clergy before turning to a mental health professional.

Farrell organized the workshop to help churches be better prepared to help.

"A lot of times, clergy have the formal training from seminary and they have training on pastoral counseling, but they may not have specific training in the signs and symptoms of trauma, traumatic brain injury or the sideways manifestations of the stress of combat," she said.

Churches are especially important to service men and women returning to rural communities, Farrell said.

Such areas may limit a veteran's access to health benefits offered by the federal government.

Rural veterans "are often without the benefit of the training and support conventionally available on military installations, training for themselves and ongoing support for their families," Farrell said.

Military ministry

The workshop uses the expertise of the Marietta-based group Care For The Troops. The nonprofit organization was founded just over a year ago by Episcopal priest, the Rev. Robert Certain.

A combat aviator in the Vietnam War, Certain was held four months as a prisoner of war. He wrote his account of the experience in his 2003 self-published book "Unchained Eagle."

Today, Certain serves as an Episcopal priest and rector of St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church in Marietta.

The Rincon workshop will be led by executive director Peter McCall and licensed marriage and family therapist, Dr. Alan N. Baroody, executive director of the Mary Lou Fraser Foundation.

Care For The Troops began in May 2009, by hosting workshops for licensed marriage and family therapists around the state to improve their understanding of the needs of military families.

"I think we've done a pretty good job of connecting with clinicians," said McCall, a 1970 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and a veteran, having served on active duty and in the Army Reserves for over nine years.

This year, the group added the goal of encouraging more congregations to build a "military ministry."

The project includes suggestions for letters to send to members in the military, services dedicated in honor of troops, how to organize assistance for practical and spiritual support and how to build awareness within the congregation of the needs of military members and their families.


Care For The Troops has received endorsements from such mainline religious groups as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Presbytery of Greater

Atlanta (PCUSA) and the Southeastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"We just want to offer a place of comfort and support and to let them know you appreciate and honor the sacrifices they've made," said Farrell. "They're the one percent who serve while the other 99 percent of us don't."

 [Vazquez family celebrates with Pfc. Thomas Vazquez prior to his departure for training.](#) [1]

 [Pfc. Thomas Vazquez](#) [2]

 [Soldiers serving in Afghanistan hold a banner and care packages sent by St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in Alpharetta. The church received the designation of "veteran friendly" from the nonprofit Care For The Troops.](#) [3]

Training for faith leaders

What: Care For The Troops workshop and luncheon

Where: St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 155 Goshen Road, Rincon

When: 9-11:30 a.m. Sept. 11

The workshop will be followed by a free luncheon. Participants are asked to RSVP by Sept. 4. For information, contact Gina Farrell at 912-665-1935 or at GrowU@planters.net [4] or visit <http://www.careforthetroops.org> [5].

Mapping

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