



Care with Veterans and their Families: Groundwork for Response

Designed by Chaplain Zachary Moon

The intention of this workshop...

We are all aware of parts of the experience of military service, either from our own experience, that of our families or friends, or perhaps just from what we've learned from the media coverage. Terminology like "PTSD" and "Moral Injury" are beginning to have greater visibility in American society. This attention is valuable in that it may move us to action, but it does not fully recognize and comprehend the human experience of deployment and homecoming.

Most veterans, whether they are struggling or not, do not identify primarily as "traumatized" or "injured." We have all been through challenges in our lives that have an impact on us, but do not fully define us. Those struggles are not the totality of who we are. And so if we wish to be in relationship with veterans, those popular terms are probably not the place to begin. Instead let's make space for veterans and their families to share their stories in their own language and in their own way.

The Church is meant to be a place of hospitality for all God's children. And that's a challenge sometimes, particularly when we are met with folks we don't agree with or don't understand easily. But our potential discomfort doesn't alleviate the responsibility we have to welcome the stranger in our midst. In order to truly be welcoming, we must be willing to hang in there a little longer, listen a little deeper, and risk reaching out.

The Church is not only meant to be a place of reception, but also a place of mission. The Church is called to serve the world. If you begin anywhere in your thinking about those in the military, imagine that all of them were drawn at least in part to the notion of service. For most veterans, service is the center of their experience in the military. And it is the opportunity to continue to serve that many veterans are looking for when they return home. What if your church was a place where veterans could find that next opportunity to serve as a part of a community?

It is not the intention of this workshop to make the church into a clinic or for us to be mental health professionals. Those organizations and resources already exist. We need to become more receptive members of a community of faith: to be better listeners, to be more attuned to the spiritual dimensions of military service, combat, and homecoming, and to be more prepared to respond compassionately and courageously.

This workshop is a time of personal and group reflection. In other words, this is about you and those gathered here. The work of relationship isn't about gathering lots of bits of information

about the person you want to meet; it begins with looking at ourselves and then meeting that person for who they are. When we better understand who we are, we will be better listeners and better communicators. And that's what we need to build relationships.

Introduction [15 minutes]

My name is {facilitator, introduce her/himself}. Today we have the opportunity to reflect on our role in welcoming and integrating military service members and their families into our church fellowship. Some of us may be veterans ourselves and know this experience very directly, and others of us may be encountering these issues for the first time. All of us have a part to play in this important work of community.

{Offer an opening prayer}

Let's introduce ourselves to each other with our name and by each responding briefly to the question: What is my biographical relationship with the military?

{Given the allotted time, if you have a large group, it may make sense to split the group into subgroups}

In any group, there will be many different background and perspectives. This kind of difference can be a great opportunity to learn, and it is important to have personal awareness of the experience we each bring with us.

Personal Reflection [15 minutes]

{Disseminate paper and pens/pencils}

This work begins with each one of us, so it is our responsibility to clarify our personal background and beliefs. In order to do this, please consider these three questions in written reflection as concisely as possible. We will have 10 minutes for this reflection.

- What are my thoughts and feelings about war?
- What do I believe about God's role in human suffering?

It is important to reflect on these questions, because our particular backgrounds and beliefs impact how we respond to these issues. If we aren't connected with our own experience, we will have a difficult time connecting with another's experience. Further reflection may be important. If our hope and intention is to authentically engage with veterans and their families, we need to be thoughtful about how our beliefs may be resources and/or barriers to relationship.

Hearing another person's story is sacred work. It involves trust. That person is taking a risk to tell you and you are taking a risk to stay open and listen. There is no question that military service changes those who serve and those who love them. However, no two veterans have had an identical experience. Speaking in blanket terms and generalities is a misstep and may betray the trust that has been extended to us.

What a veteran will want to share of his/her experience will vary greatly. Like any of us, there are stories that we share with others easily and there are stories that we may never share even

with our most trusted loved ones. Trust is usually the most significant factor in what and how we share. We honor another's trust when we listen with compassion and are slow to judgment. The great poet Rumi stated: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there." This is the spirit that is necessary to nurture authentic relationships.

Scenario Reflection [15 minutes]

{Disseminate printed copies of the below scenarios. There should be an even number of persons reflecting on each scenario. Adjust based on the size of whole group.}

Does each person have a scenario?

These are composite portraits that are based on real experiences. Read through the paragraph on your paper.

...

What stood out to you? Underline that word or phrase.

...

Now read through it again, this time circle the spiritual needs that you identify in the scenario and put a square around spiritual strengths that you identify.

...

Now read through it once more, paying particular attention to points of connection with your own story and spiritual journey. Have you experienced some of these same spiritual needs at one time or another? Are any of the strengths you identified, strengths that you see in yourself?

...

Whole Group Discussion [40 minutes]

- Start with Scenario #1, ask one of the responders to read it to the whole group
- Then, begin with responders that reflected on that scenario and brainstorm spiritual needs that were identified
- Repeat with Scenario #2, #3, #4, and #5
 - {Use different colored markers if possible so that needs that appear in more than one scenario can be more clearly documented}
- When needs have been listed for each scenario, open the discussion with these questions:
 - *How could you as an individual respond to a person experiencing these spiritual needs?*
 - *How could your local congregation respond?*

Conclusion

Thank you for your participation and attentive engagement of this important work. We've had some rich conversations today, and it's just a beginning. We have just a few minutes remaining, but I would invite anyone who would like to share: What are your takeaways? What are your new questions? What are our next steps?

{Offer a closing prayer}

MATERIALS

Paper for note-taking during two written reflection exercises

Pens/Pencils for written exercises

Flip chart or dry erase board for group discussion note-taking

Markers, ideally in five different colors

Printed copies of five scenarios

SCENARIOS

1. **Valerie:** It's been two months since my husband was moved back stateside and began rehabbing at the VA. Every morning I bring him the newspaper, which he scours for news about his unit. It's our ritual. Some days he is glad to see me, and some days he seems like he wouldn't want to see anyone. On those days he doesn't talk much at all, or he says mean things. We fell for each other in high school and before he shipped out we went to the courthouse. His head was full of dreams then, and he could make me believe any one of his big ideas. After the first deployment, his vision had narrowed and he said we had to be realistic. When orders for the next deployment arrived, he seemed relieved. Isn't that strange. He had come back safe the first time, so I didn't think much of it. But now, it is just one doctor after another, one specialist after another. I know those dreams are gone. But where do we go from here? After the Purple Heart ceremony. After it's just outpatient appointments every week. I read my friends' posts on Facebook, about parties and shopping and trips. He doesn't want to go outside most days, even when the sun is shining. Sometimes I think I have lost him forever. And sometimes I think I have lost myself.

2. **Brian:** Why don't sons listen to their fathers? His mother sent him to me, she thought that because I had been there, I could change his mind. But what kind of hypocrite would I be? I volunteered just like he did. Looking back it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, why I did it, but at the time, it seemed like the thing to do. I told him the military is basically a lot of hassle, not much reward in it. He said wasn't looking for prestige and he wanted to serve his country and he didn't want others to defend his country without him. Silly idealism, sure, but that thinking doesn't listen to an old guy's wisdom to the contrary. So I wait for his calls. They don't come often enough. And the time between them seems like an eternity. His mother was furious; still is I guess. She thinks I could have done something, should have done something. I wish I could have. I wish I had that kind of power. I don't like him being over there. I don't like it, but I understand it.

3. **Taylor:** My sister and I were adopted when I was six. We had been moved around, different foster homes. I joined the military as soon as I was old enough. I hadn't been so good at school, but the recruiters told me how I could develop good skills and would be set for a job when I completed my tour of duty. I got some good training, I guess, but that training doesn't come with a bunch of certificates that are transferable in the work world back here. I guess what I miss most is the unit I served with, the feeling of being a part of something meaningful. Some of them are still in the service. But a bunch of us got phased out with the cutbacks. Most of us didn't want out. What did we have waiting back home? The military taught me to be mission ready, to be disciplined and focused. I just don't know what my mission is now.

4. **Chris:** I don't know why I was there. What did I think I could accomplish? Doc knew, and you could see it in his eyes. He was always right there in the worst of it. Always in the midst of the aftermath. That day, the worst of it was just the beginning. Just after we got to the scene, got to our wounded, the second blast came. Doc was the deepest in and the closest to the blast. How many had he saved? And I could not stop the bleeding. That was all I wanted in that moment, even more than saving him, I wanted the blood to stop pouring from his body. And his life just soaked the dirt and ash. They tell me I need to get treatment. I tell them I just need to clear my head and get back in the fight. How can I make this right from here? They sent me home, but I need to be there.

5. **Rex:** When I got drafted and went to Vietnam it was hell, but you can't dwell on the past or you'll just be stuck there forever. It wasn't like life was so great before that. I don't like talking about this stuff; it just dredges up memories that are better left buried. When I see all this in the news about PTSD, it pisses me off. There wasn't anyone when I got home to hold my hand. They told me that I had anger issues and I should go to classes. That's what the VA was offering. So I never went back. I dealt with it the way I knew how. It wasn't pretty, but I was trained that when I face a wall that I should go over it, around it, or through it – not get some doctor to give me disability. I've burned a lot bridges in my life, but I'm not going to waste my time pandering to stupid people who don't understand me.