

WELCOME THEM HOME— HELP THEM HEAL

Pastoral care and ministry with service members returning from war

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Welcome Them Home—Help Them Heal is a “pay-it-forward” pastoral ministry of Elim Lutheran Church of Blackhoof, 2077 County Road 6, Barnum MN 55707.

Every \$10 you send us will underwrite the publication and distribution of your book PLUS another copy—further extending this ministry of spiritual support to service members returning from war.

Thanks and blessings!

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John Sippola, Amy Blumenshine, Donald A. Tubesing, and Valerie Yancey

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Welcome Them Home—Help Them Heal was produced with a grant
from Wheat Ridge Ministries.

The book is also available as an e-book at
www.welcomethemhomebook.com.

Edited by: Susan Rubendall
Graphic Artist: Joy Morgan Dey

Printed in the USA

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009925420
ISBN: 978-1-57025-246-4

If you need multiple copies of *Welcome Them Home—Help Them Heal* for your
ministry to veterans and their families, contact the publisher:

Whole Person Associates, Inc

210 W Michigan St
Duluth MN 55802

800-247-6789

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Dedication & Acknowledgments

This resource book is dedicated to veterans and to their loved ones. They have already sacrificed much and will continue to face the hidden wounds of war long after they return home.

Today we understand better than ever the causes and treatments for many of the medical and mental health conditions afflicting returning veterans. Knowledge alone is not enough. We need to expand the scope of available helping resources for veterans and their families.

The horrors and evils of war experienced by young men and women cause deep wounds to the spirit, conscience, and soul. These wounds often go unrecognized and unattended. Caregivers in communities of faith can make a meaningful difference!

This book was written to equip the growing number of pastors, parish nurses, counselors, and caregivers in churches across the country to support and advocate for veterans and their loved ones. Spiritual recovery after war best takes place in the context of caring, supportive communities of faith that share the news of God's good grace and reconciliation.

We hope this volume will expand your knowledge of how to provide physical, mental, and spiritual care for veterans and spark in you a spirit of willingness and hope.

We have created a website to provide support for caregivers and churches in their work with returning veterans and families. We welcome your emailed questions and comments at **www.welcomethemhomebook.com**. A group of pastoral counselors and therapists who have experience working with veterans is available to help you in your work. Join the conversation. Let us know what your church is doing so that we all can learn from and help each other.

We express our gratitude to those who have given of their time and energy to produce this resource: the group of Vietnam veterans who gathered in Duluth, Minnesota, to share their experiences for the sole purpose of helping recent veterans facing similar challenges; the Iraq/Afghanistan veterans and family members we interviewed and whose stories dot these pages; Kelly Erickson, service member spouse, who helped us create the referral list; and the veterans and members of Elim Lutheran Church of Blackhoof in Barnum, Minnesota who supported this project from the beginning. But, most of all, we offer our heart-felt gratitude to the many veterans who have sacrificed themselves, their families, and their futures in service to their country. Their gifts of courage, persistence, integrity, and service call us to respond in kind.

Special thanks to

Wheat Ridge Ministries

for the Congregational Health and Hope Grant in support of this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

America Faces a Crisis of Care—5

CHAPTER 1

The Nature and Challenge of the Iraq/Afghanistan War—11 *Understanding the Big Picture*

CHAPTER 2

Making the Transition from Soldier to Citizen—19 *Understanding Re-entry Challenges*

CHAPTER 3

The Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Wounds of War—29 *Understanding the Whole Person Perspective*

CHAPTER 4

The Church's Role #1—49 *Basic Principles for Reaching Out*

CHAPTER 5

The Church's Role #2—61 *Create a Healing Environment*

CHAPTER 6

The Church's Role #3—79 *Provide Healing Rituals Throughout the Church Year* **Afterword—90**

APPENDIX A

Making a Referral: Veteran's Administration and Community Resources for Veterans—93

APPENDIX B

Parish Nurse Screening Tools for PTSD, Depression, and Traumatic Brain Injury—99

APPENDIX C

Wounds of War Assessment—103

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

Our veterans* are coming home. We are called to help them heal.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not yet over, but our veterans are coming home.

Some have completed their military duty.

More will return to Iraq or Afghanistan for another tour.

4,865 have died as of March 2009 and will not return home alive.

32,000 have sustained war injuries, and **20,000** are returning with Purple Hearts.

500,000 carry within them deep, invisible, emotional wounds—unknowable to others, often unknown even to themselves.

Many have lived through life-altering spiritual trauma and will find the quest for peace and reconciliation more difficult than fighting the war.

Too many will commit suicide in the coming years—probably more than the numbers killed in battle.

All—yes ALL—returning service members will experience the challenge of re-entry as they leave the war zone behind and begin to put their lives back together.

When they come home, excitement is in the air! . . . at first.

Anyone who has seen a typical welcome home event understands the public expressions of joy and relief felt by family members. Young children sit on relatives' shoulders to catch a first glimpse of their father or mother. Parents breathe a palpable sigh of relief when they see their son or daughter march onto the tarmac,

**In this book we use veterans, service members, and soldiers as generic terms. We refer to specific branches (marines, reservists, etc.) only in relation to specific studies. To reflect the growing prominence of women in the military we have tried to strike a balance on the use of gendered pronouns.*



Nationwide, more than 96,000 National Guard members and reservists have completed health reassessments since October 2006, and 49 percent reported health problems unrelated to combat wounds.

—U.S. Defense Department Associated Press article in the *Duluth News Tribune*, “Returning Soldiers Come Up Short,” Wednesday, November 28, 2007.

armory, or gym floor. Prayers have been answered, and everyone anticipates that life together can begin once again. Over a few months and with hard work, many veterans and their family members do find a new “normal.”

Behind the jubilant homecoming celebrations, however, many returning veterans hide invisible wounds.

Upon returning home, many veterans face the biggest challenge of their lifetime and begin fighting a personal, hidden war in earnest. Often well concealed at first, for many the signs and symptoms of post-war trauma and stress—depression, anxiety, domestic problems, substance abuse, isolation, suicide, and homelessness—eventually appear. According to the U.S. Defense Department, of the 96,000 National Guard members and reservists who have completed health reassessments since October 2006, half have reported health problems unrelated to combat wounds.¹

Providing attentive care in the first few months after a veteran returns home is important for several reasons. First, early detection usually results in more effective treatment and better outcomes. Second, early treatment can prevent a cascade of interrelated problems stemming from unaddressed physical, emotional, and spiritual post-war trauma and distress. Loved ones, friends, and close work associates are often the first to notice emerging problems and also become the key people through whom difficulties are initially addressed.

America faces a crisis of care.

Service members and their families face deep spiritual crises not generally in public view. Sufficient resources have not been committed to help returning veterans recover from the traumas of war. To be sure, many good programs are already in place and actively serving returning veterans. Existing governmental programs, however, are stressed to the limit. Adequate numbers of programs, policies, and personnel are not available to meet current needs—and the largest surge of returning veterans has not yet peaked. America, having put forth its best to fight these wars, must now match that effort in helping our sons and daughters heal.

“For 33 years we knew something was wrong. But, we didn’t really have a clue. And then he finally got help . . . for PTSD. He still has it. But now we understand.”

—Mary Jo,
Spouse of a Vietnam veteran

Pastors and churches are called to step forward and respond to this crisis.

Churches are uniquely positioned to help. Many church members have family members and friends who have been personally affected by the conflicts in the Middle East. Although returning veterans are among the demographic least likely to attend church, many have loved ones who attend regularly. With coaching and support, caregivers (pastors, parish nurses, congregation members, loved ones, friends) can be empowered to render an invaluable service to returning veterans. Because the issues are complex, caregivers need education and information to become helpful partners in the readjustment process.

Multiple deployments add significant complications to the process of re-adjustment: delayed grief, more difficulty “coming down,” and delayed help for PTSD.

This handbook is intended to help church leaders and members

Identify common post-deployment/re-deployment difficulties

- Discuss the challenges facing returning veterans and their families.
- Recognize common deployment-related symptoms and reactions: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, combat stress, and moral and spiritual distress.

Develop skills for helping veterans and their families

- Use attentiveness and active listening skills for inviting veterans to tell their stories.
- Learn what to say and what not to say to recently returned veterans.
- Know when and how to make an effective professional referral.
- Walk with veterans in ways that build trust, the most important prerequisite for healing.
- Describe the dynamics of spiritual recovery from war-related trauma.

***“In a crowd . . . it’s been
35 years and I can just
now sit around people.”***

—Larry, Vietnam veteran

Make referrals and advocate for soldiers within current military systems

- Become acquainted with the Veterans Administration (VA) benefits and programs.
- Learn how to get contact information for VA, state, and local resources to share with veterans and their family members.

Take positive action steps

- Set up *Circles of Care* within churches.
- Promote a congregational climate for healing.
- Provide assistance to veterans during and after the referral process.
- Use the rich resources within our faith tradition to promote spiritual recovery.
- Join with veterans and their families in our mutually shared, life-long quest for internal peace, reconciliation and recovery from war-related trauma.

KEY POINT

Remember, one size doesn’t fit all. Treat soldiers and their families with the same personalized care as you would any family going through a major adjustment or crisis. But now, stir in what you learn here to help you better support and serve soldiers and families.

THANK YOU to those churches that, regardless of members’ personal political opinions about this war, have already gone the extra mile to address the needs of the service members and families who carry the burdens and hardships of this difficult conflict. Your prayers and attentive care give comfort to military families and promote a public awareness that helps reduce the isolation many veterans feel.

There is still more we can do! Unfortunately, not long after soldiers are welcomed back home, they are all too often removed from prayer lists and their ongoing needs are forgotten. What people may not know is that most casualties of war occur long after veterans come home. We invite your continued care for veterans throughout their most challenging time—the arduous return to a peaceful life.

Well-informed and skilled church leaders and members can provide an added dimension of care for service members returning to a system woefully lacking in resources and vision. If hundreds of congregations each pay attention to at least one service member

and his or her family, we will greatly reduce the casualties in the “war after the war.” We invite you to prayerfully consider this call to a long-term ministry of care.

Our veterans have mustered incredible endurance, resourcefulness, teamwork, and bravery to meet the challenges of deployment. As Iraq/Afghanistan troops face the challenges of re-entry, their churches, communities, and country have an opportunity and a responsibility to respond in ways that will positively impact service members, their families, and society. But knowledge is not enough. Churches need leadership, compassion, and commitment to become active partners in the transition process.

Welcome them home and help them heal.

This reference handbook, produced especially for clergy, parish nurses, and church ministry teams, is designed to give you the information and the skills to make a positive difference in the lives of our returning service members and their families for years to come. Study the information thoroughly and keep this reference handy as you partner with veterans and their family members in the healing process. We offer it to you in support of your ministry, as you join with people of faith across the country preparing to welcome them home and help them heal.

JS, AB, DT, VY
May 2009

“The sound of the drums in the contemporary service sometimes drives me batty. They trigger a startle response and I am much more at ease in the traditional service accompanied by piano or organ.”

—Fred, WWII veteran
There are many like Fred, who, years later, still suffer from PTSD.