

Improving Pastoral Care for Veterans

by Amy Blumenshine, Coming Home Collaborative

The ongoing initiative in the Minneapolis Area Synod to improve outcomes for returning war veterans has some new resources. Retired Chaplain Neil Hering is available to meet with groups of pastoral care providers, such as pastoral conference gatherings, who wish to improve their veterans-specific skills. Hering served as chaplain at the Minnesota Veterans' Home for almost 15 years and published on this topic in *Caring Connections: An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (<http://caringconnectionsline.org>).

He has been active with the Coming Home Collaborative which is concerned with addressing the psychological and spiritual healing of veterans, especially those currently re-integrating with their families and communities. "The important thing," says Hering, "is to not let our fears about what to say or do with veterans stop us from this ministry."

Hering is motivated in part by seeing how the violence of war has had permanent, long-lasting effects both on the veterans and veterans' families whom he served at the Minnesota Veterans' Home. For instance, one widow of a veteran told Hering how her husband would be wakened every morning before dawn by horrible memories from World War II. The veteran had been among those who first entered the concentration camps as liberators. The memories even impacted his final days, when he was very troubled and anxious. He had carried that pain with him for over 50 years.

In the recent Ken Burns documentary on World War II ("The War"), an American who was a POW held in Japan credits talks with his pastor at home for helping him to recover after his traumas. Hering urges pastors to reach out and initiate a welcome to those returning from war. Pastors should then maintain contact with the veteran in a personal way so that the veteran feels that the pastor is accessible if and when the veteran wants to talk. Hering utilizes an interactive style of teaching that addresses participant concerns and builds skills: "I think we learn best by learning from each other." E-mail Hering at hering_neil@yahoo.com.

Spiritual director Sheila Laughton offers another resource in the spiritual care of veterans and their families via "Welcome Home," an ecumenical program of the Loyola Spirituality Center. Laughton, who holds two master's degrees and spiritual direction certification, has experience as an Air Force veteran in the Gulf War herself as well as being the wife and mother of Air Force veterans. A grant makes the services of this listening ministry free to veterans and their family members. Contact Loyola at 651-641-0008, ext. 13, or e-mail Sheila@loyolaspirtualitycenter.org

Their Web site, www.loyolaspirtualitycenter.org/veteran.html, explains: "[This] is not psychotherapy or counsel-



ing but an opportunity for you and God together, to heal, to grow and to thrive. You start by listening with your companion to your own story and looking at how you are dealing with life. How we respond to life's experiences is more significant than the events themselves. When they are a result of violence or war, there may be spiritual 'injuries,' recognized or not, which make it difficult to be anything like the person we were 'before.' We may have seen or done things against our moral code. We may have questioned our belief in God or meaning in life. This is an opportunity to look at those questions and perhaps examine our coping skills without judgment. It helps to talk about traumatic experiences whether they were last month or 30 years ago. Memories can be healed. Life can be embraced. You can come home. God understands and forgives. What if the person most in need of your forgiveness is you?"

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the sign of opposites" (as Martin Luther called it). Arriving as a baby in diapers, God's Son recruited tax collectors and fishermen, social misfits and despised sinners in a rescue mission that culminated in the hidden power of the cross.

What if the shepherds had yawned, "That's interesting, some other time," and remained sitting in the night, in the dirt, in the comfort of predictable hardships and familiar enemies? Would promised joy have found them anyway?

Let's not test that speculation with our lives. *Let's go!*
Let's see what God is doing!