

Veterans Testify to Sense of Guilt

Hundreds of recent veterans from across the nation gathered recently outside Washington, D.C., to hear each other's stories and share them with their country. One soldier explained that his role in testifying was to "help put the 'soul' back in soldier." Another purpose, said organizer and former Army medic Perry O'Brien, was to help with the personal spiritual journey of healing for those involved. Another explicit

purpose, however, was to end the war in Iraq.

The Winter Soldier hearings brought together veterans who became committed to end the war as a result of their experiences in that war. Archives and video of their testimony can be seen at www.ivaw.org/wintersoldier.

The church's outreach to veterans should include all veterans, recognizing that each Christian is responsible for following her/his conscience as best they can discern it. Understandably, people in the military will have different experiences which may lead them to different conclusions. People who wish to minister with veterans and their families can learn about some of the moral dilemmas experienced by some military by reviewing the Winter Soldier testimony.

Said O'Brien, "We're told that what we do is secretive, that the civilian psyche can't handle the reality of war. It causes a lot of guilt because soldiers are actually asked to carry their guilt around with them all of their lives. [In testifying] we feel as though we're unburdening ourselves of a bunch of guilt."

According to O'Brien, one of the problems veterans have re-adjusting to civilian life after war is the public perception. "For a lot of us returning from overseas, there is this huge disconnect that we experience between the way that civilians imagine war, what they thought that we experienced, and the harsher, more difficult realities of war that we really experienced."

He also addressed as a problem the "mythology of the bad apple as war criminal, instead of the war itself as criminal." Americans generally believe that horrific incidents like those in Haditha, Fallujah and Abu Ghraib were caused by individual "bad soldiers." "The average soldier on the ground understands that this is much more widespread," O'Brien said. "It's the reality of occupation."

Sometimes struggling to talk, veterans reported their personal experiences and ongoing emotional pain related to the killing of civilians, the destruction of their houses and farms, the mishandling of Iraqi dead, the use of illegal weapons and the dehumanization of the "enemy."

The organizers said that all testifiers had cleared a verification process in which their stories were fact-checked by a team of combat veterans and journalists from the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Quotes by Perry O'Brien are from an online interview conducted by Matt Renneer with TruthOut.org.



Two International Conferences Held in Minneapolis This July

Trinity Lutheran Congregation in Minneapolis is hosting the Evangelical Mekane Yesus Lutherans Fellowship in North America from July 8 to 13. On July 10, at 6 p.m., all are welcome to join in fellowship and worship for "Missionary Day."

The annual International Oromo Evangelical Churches Spiritual Conference on Mission and Ministry will convene in Minneapolis from July 24-27. Over 1,000 people from various nations and around the country are expected to attend. This conference is hosted by Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minnesota. On Friday, July 25, from 3 to 5 p.m., there will be a special English service to which all are invited. Dr. Stephen Bouman, executive director of Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission in the ELCA, will be preaching. Bishop Johnson will be there as a special guest. In addition, Dr. Gemechis Buba, director for African Nationals Ministries of the ELCA, will speak about the historical background of the Oromo churches in diaspora. Dinner will follow the service.

Both of these events are free and open to the public. Those congregations which would like to support these conferences can send checks made payable to the Minneapolis Area Synod (write "Ethiopian Conference" in the memo line), 122 W Franklin Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55404.

Volunteers are also needed for day care at Our Redeemer Oromo during the event. If you have any questions, or would like more information, contact Robera Battal in the synod office at 612-230-3317.