

Chaplains Discuss Moral Violations of War

by Amy Blumenshine, *Coming Home Collaborative*

“The truth is that war permanently changes the people who fight it. It produces tremendous moral and spiritual residue which impacts the veterans and their families,” said the Rev. Edgar W. Hatcher, retired chaplain, U.S. Air Force, Chesterfield, Mo. “The church is a powerful force in helping veterans wrestle with and reconcile the love of God with the horrors they encounter and protect us from. Most pastors are woefully unprepared for ministry in these circumstances.”

Hatcher presented at a full-day workshop at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, September 30. He, as a representative of the ELCA Bureau for Federal Chaplaincy Ministries, has been charged with training ELCA congregations nationwide to create caring and welcoming places for returning veterans and their families. This initiative began with a Minneapolis Area Synod resolution in 2006, which then was passed by the Churchwide Assembly in 2007.

The workshops are designed to prepare pastors, caregivers and others interested in providing “care and hospitality for our brothers and sisters who have been impacted by the trauma and stress of war,” said the Rev. Darrell D. Morton, assistant to the presiding bishop, Washington, D.C. “A great cadre of seemingly familiar strangers has emerged, ‘strangers’ who may be our neighbors, our loved ones, our friends, but nevertheless strangers as a result of brokenness they have experienced through the hell of war,” Morton wrote in an invitation to ELCA congregations.

Readers of veterans ministry articles in *InterActs* would be familiar with the information Hatcher provided on post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological and interpersonal problems stemming from war. He also explained the moral and spiritual impacts on war-time military personnel.

American military in Iraq and Afghanistan witness the reality of evil, he explained. The scope of the destruction of homes, livelihoods, bodies and lives can be overwhelming. Soldiers often witness intense suffering, killing and death. Their peacetime assumptions about the world come under assault as they learn to question whether the world is just and fair, whether there is value in trusting others and whether they themselves can make a difference or are worthy. They may learn to question whether the world is meaningful, doubting any order and purpose to existence.

While undergoing this assault to their assumptive worldview, the soldier may also confront moral violations.



These include the killing of innocents, the killing of children and the wanton policy that the ends justify the means. Hatcher mentioned the problem of the consensus trance that confounds a society’s ability to recognize evil. The group thinking about understanding reality can be so strong that no individual in the group can think differently or see the evil that is covered up. An example of this might be the group thinking that the child standing in front of your convoy is a terrorist and deserves to be run over. This is also an example of the moral dilemmas that soldiers confront. The stakes are life and death.

Armistice/Veterans Day is November 11. Comemoration suggestions and more information about the chaplain’s workshop can be found at www.mpls-synod.org, “Healing the Wounds of War.”

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Joint Ministerium

JANUARY 29, 9 A.M.

**House of Prayer Lutheran Church
7625 Chicago Ave. S, Richfield**

A joint ministerium for rostered leaders
in the Minneapolis Area and Saint Paul Area Synods
with Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson.

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