

Native American Veteran Issues Featured at Vets Ministry Roundtable

by Amy Blumenshine, DM, Coming Home Collaborative

“You think you’re living in one nation,” Rev. Marlene Whiterabbit Helgemo explained. “Actually, there are a number of nations here,” referring to the American Indian nations. She was speaking to the Veterans Ministry Roundtable in November. Yet, in defense of the combination of nations, the pastor of All Nations Indian Church continued, those tribal nations serve in the U.S. military at a higher percentage than any other group.

Two other speakers described the experiences of American Indian veterans at the bi-monthly gathering. Herb Sam pointed out that many First Nations troops felt they were fighting for a nation that did not care for them. His family, in particular, had suffered many losses from their history of military service.

As a traditional healer, Sam noted the wide variety among the over 600 American tribes. They use different ways of traditional healing for their veterans upon return to the community in the aftermath of war. One can generalize, however, about the importance of “hearing them” back into the community, of listening to their stories and of community acknowledgment of what they have been through. Helgemo showed a slideshow that illustrated how a tribal community gathered in mourning for days for a member killed in combat.

She also shared the story of a parishioner who was having trouble adjusting after her deployment in Iraq where she had seen horrible things as a military medic. Even though some time had passed since the former medic had returned home, the All Nations Indian Church held a special welcoming ceremony for her in their outside worship space. All present felt the healing power of the Holy as the sun beamed on a white eagle feather hanging from a tree. The tree had been recently donated, freshly planted where another tree had died.

A third speaker, Todd Dionne, discussed his experiences as a tribal veterans service officer for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs. He said it has been difficult for some veterans, years removed from military service, to prove that their current problems started during military service. He noted that years ago, World War II vets who sought help for mental health problems would have been laughed out of their county veterans service office.

The next Veterans Ministry Roundtable will be January 12.

As the holidays approach, pastoral care providers are reminded that the holidays often exacerbate re-entry issues for recent veterans. They may recall comrades-



in-arms who are still in harms way or who are dealing with discomforts. Accordingly, the recent veterans may feel alienated while everyone around them makes merry. Others may decide to “party hearty” in an attempt to compensate for opportunities missed during deployment. Many veterans are among people who struggle with drinking issues. Studies show that binge drinking increases with military service, especially among young adults. Make sure holiday gatherings are not centered on alcohol, and serve appealing alternative beverages.

To learn more about the Coming Home Collaborative, visit www.mpls-synod.org/programs/vets.

Synod Staff Changes

The synod staff welcomes Nancy Johnson to our staff. Most recently, Nancy was roster and program assistant in the Saint Paul Area Synod for six years. She joins us to help with database issues, Making a World of Difference, synod assembly and answering phones, among other duties.



We are so glad to have her as the newest addition to our staff. She can be reached at 612-230-3318 or n.johnson@mpls-synod.org.

In another staff change, Kristin Raymakers will be working with Rev. Heather Hammond on the candidacy process. Along with assisting Pat Hansen with roster and call process, she will work with Heather to raise up, prepare, certify and place public leaders in the ELCA.