

Veterans Benefit from Seeking Spiritual Care From Pastors

Chaplain (Captain) Steve Timm is a pastor at United Lutheran in Red Wing and brigade chaplain for the 84th Troop Command of the Minnesota Army National Guard (MNG). Last month, he shared his first-hand knowledge of the challenge of war and returning home. In 2006-07, he was deployed near the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq. He has also mobilized in other MNG efforts. His awards include the Bronze Star, the Army Commendation Medal, the Humanitarian Service Medal, and many others. Timm lives in Red Wing with his three daughters.

His presentation is part of a year-old program at Oak Knoll Lutheran Church, Minnetonka, intended to inform the congregation of the needs of service members and their families—both when deployed and when re-integrating.

Retired Pastor Jim Almquist helps to organize this specialized ministry at Oak Knoll Lutheran. He explains that the congregation reaches out to individuals in the military (now nine people) who may not be members of the church but for whom someone at the church has requested prayers. Almquist emphasizes building rapport with deployed service members. "It's important to understand that when these people come home, they've been in such an intense environment," he notes. The transition to civilian life includes missing their comrades who were so important to them and the feeling that they were doing something really worthwhile, "not like going to the grocery store and picking up cereal. There is such a contrast between military and civilian life," explains Almquist.

Timm wishes that his MNG "flock" would engage more with their local pastors. Some continue to seek him out years after their mutual deployments instead of connecting with local churches. He believes that many would benefit from seeking spiritual care from their pastors post-deployment.

"I know that when I came back there were some things that I didn't want to talk about with everybody. There's part of the story that I didn't get to tell everybody, but that bothered me," says Timm.

Timm continues: "We need to understand that there is a spiritual impact of going to war. Pastoral care is important for a Christian who is returning from the war who has been in combat or just been away from family for that long."

Moral injury is a common issue. Timm assisted critical event debriefings in which service members talk together in the immediate aftermath of potentially traumatic incidents. "Some of the most difficult ones were not where the soldiers were themselves the victims but where they were the aggressors. We had a humvee full of guys who opened fire on a guy in a truck. While they followed the rules of engagement, it turned out that the guy did not have a weapon." The service members questioned whether they did the right thing. After that critical event debrief was concluded, a couple MNG stayed to engage in the ritual of confession and forgiveness that Timm offered. The ritual is his most effective tool for helping them feel restored. "An individual does not have to carry the burden of that guilt because there is a power greater than me that can help."

He notes that his former 1st Brigade combat team just re-deployed to Iraq. "It's definitely harder the second time around. It's much more of a challenge to head back. Whatever moral injuries you had and whatever bad experience you had, you know they're coming. You don't have any of the wall of ignorance to shield you," says Timm.