

Synod Responds to Needs of Returning Veterans and Their Families

On the third anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, parishioners attending an adult forum at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, learned of the significant psychological and spiritual problems which returning soldiers are facing. Because of their service in Iraq, many soldiers suffer from depression, outbursts of anger, nightmares, difficulty concentrating, and self-isolation. Many drive recklessly, have relationship problems, and tend to carry weapons because they feel unsafe. For some, these issues will be lifelong.

The presenter asked, "Now that you know about this, what do you think we should do?" Those gathered determined that a resolution should be brought before the synod assembly in April 2006.

At the assembly, before acting, voting members heard spontaneous and moving testimony. Two men walked to the microphone to speak in favor of the motion. One told of the lifelong suffering in his family due to the psychological wounding of their uncle in World War II. Most poignantly, a Vietnam veteran spoke about his own long-term post-traumatic stress disorder problems. He was happy to report that eight years ago he began treatment and the continuing weekly sessions have helped him greatly—although he is officially disabled.

The voting members unanimously decided to educate synod members on the needs of returning veterans. As part of the resolution, the bishop will be asking Minneapolis Area Synod congregations to "start seeing" Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their extended families. The hope is that each congregation will become aware of congregants who are impacted by the foreign military service of a family member.

In September 2006, each congregation will be asked to report the number of "concerned congregants" to the bishop's office as part of planning for appropriate pastoral care.

Counseling Professionals Collect Trauma Data

A collaborative of helping professionals affiliated with Our Saviour's Lutheran Church and Walk-In Counseling Center have produced a booklet that summarizes their findings regarding the concerns of returning veterans and their families.

A study of veterans published in a professional journal showed that of the returned veterans who tested as most needing treatment, 60% had not sought help within a year of their return. That same study (of 223,000 soldiers) reported that over a third of returned soldiers have sought psychological treatment since their deployment.

Another study showed that 87% of a Marine unit knew someone who had been seriously injured or hurt, 57% had handled or uncovered human remains, and 28% reported being responsible for the death of a noncombatant. Killing civilians, handling human remains, and friendship with someone who is seriously injured or killed are among the significant factors contributing to later psychological problems.

Unfortunately, the impact of catastrophic war trauma often leads to behaviors (for example, anger outbursts, substance abuse, emotional withdrawal) that tend to alienate veterans from the circle of care of their congregations and families. In the sway of post-traumatic stress disorder, veterans are typically psychologically unable to recognize that they need help. The hope is that their circles of care, while still intact, can help veterans get the help they need to avoid lifelong disability.

Peacemaking Skills Focus of Joint Synod Event

by Donna Pususta Neste

The Joint Peace with Justice Committee of the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Area Synods is planning a lively and intensive training for the purpose of building peacemaking skills, entitled "Equipping for Peacemaking," October 13 and 14 at St. Michael's Lutheran Church, Roseville. This day and a half training will be led by the highly-qualified Glen Gersmehl, director of Lutheran Peace Fellowship. Mr. Gersmehl has led more than 1000 peace workshops for churches, colleges, military units, the United Nations, and the White House. He has played an important role in a major arms-control treaty and served as a U.S. delegate to the U.N. Decade for Peace meetings in India. Lutheran clergy and leaders are encouraged to attend. For more information call Donna Neste at 612.827.5919.

Made up of representatives from both the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Area Synods, the Peace with Justice Committee has been meeting once a month for the past five years. The group plans monthly lunchtime gatherings focusing on an issue related to peace with justice, held at Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis.

Past topics include the history of the Just War Theory and its contradiction with the teachings of Jesus and the early church, the Palestine/Israeli conflict, the U.S. involvement in Colombia, how war contributes to poverty.

In addition, speakers from the committee are available to present peace issues to congregations throughout the two synods. For several years they have been active in composing resolutions for action at the synod assemblies. In April a resolution at the Minneapolis Synod Assembly called for workshops for clergy and those working with returning veterans regarding post-traumatic stress syndrome. Those workshops are now being planned by the committee.