

Lutheran Chaplains Prepare to Help Families with Invisible Wounds of War

Minneapolis Area Synod Lutheran chaplains gathered in September to discuss how the church can be helpful to families as they deal with the invisible wounds in war of their loved ones. In this way, the synod is mustering its resources to help with the transition of returning veterans from the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. A ministerium on this subject is scheduled for January 18, 2007.

Reaching out to veterans and their families to help healing happen is a 2006 resolution/initiative for the Minneapolis Area Synod of the ELCA. It is important that pastors and congregations understand the significance of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) because a disturbingly high proportion of Minnesotan soldiers will be returning home with it—sometimes without being themselves aware of their injury.

TBI results from direct damage to brain tissue, often from blunt force trauma, such as that experienced near a blast. In prior conflicts, TBI occurred in 14 to 20 percent of surviving combat casualties. But because of the nature of the hostilities and conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, two out of three of those physically wounded there also have TBI. In addition to those who are visibly injured in a blast, many others may suffer TBI due to being in the explosion's shock wave. Extreme heat can also be a factor. Inflammation itself can damage tissue.

Sadly, soldiers also experience many head injuries in vehicles. While they are supposed to wear seatbelts, in practice many do not out of fear of being trapped and burned or blown up. Even more soldiers suffer TBI after returning home due to risk-taking behavior and traffic accidents — both typical combat operational stress reactions.

Common TBI symptoms include explosive anger, mood changes, impaired memory, and confusion. Spouses and children are more vulnerable to domestic violence. Many veterans are accustomed to carrying and using weapons.

Other common signs are depression, trouble concentrating, and a loss of problem-solving abilities. Sufferers often isolate themselves and shut down emotionally. They may be particularly sensitive to light or noise, have chronic headaches, or feel unusually tired. Changes in sleep patterns and more irritability also are typical. With TBI, the person may never regain the feeling of intimacy.

Since this brain damage can be visible via imaging, combat stress specialists recommend that soldiers with these symptoms receive a neuropsychological screening.

Hopefully, some of the TBI will heal. Counseling can help patients better accommodate their lives to their condition. Sometimes no symptoms are noticed until six or more months after the injury. While not visible to the observer, TBI is a major cause of life-long disability and death. Certain military assignments, such as patrolling roads, carry an above average risk for TBI.

Pastors attending the ministerium will receive guidance on helping congregations and families intervene to help their loved ones with TBI so that veterans can receive neuropsychological screening, life change counseling, and appropriate disability benefits. Traumatic brain injury is both invisible to the eye and often unnoticed by the sufferer. The caring community is necessary to be sure that the veteran receives appropriate help.

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It includes a series of interviews with ELCA financial and stewardship leaders, pastors and members. The program also includes a visit to St. Paul Lutheran Church, San Juan, Puerto Rico. The small congregation is “making a big impact in [its] community and around the world through cheerful giving,” Bullock said in the video.

In the video Bullock explains that “on average 91 cents of each dollar you place in the offering plate supports local ministries in and around your congregation. The remaining 9 cents supports broader missions through your synod and the ELCA churchwide organization.”

“Mission Support: Where Your Money Goes” can be viewed for free on the ELCA website. It is also available in VHS and DVD formats.

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6:30 - 8:30 p.m.
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Speaker: Pastor Heidi Neumark
Music by: Daniel's Window

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