

❖ ECRH Notes ❖

Ecumenical Center for Religion and Health, San Antonio, TX

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When They Come Home: Ministry with Military Personnel and Their Families

The reports in the newspapers and on radio and television are that the United States has accomplished the first stage of its mission in Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government. It is likely that many of the soldiers will return to their homes at some future date. What will they bring back with them? What will they need from us?

Many will bring back feelings of elation, victory, and of difficult tasks expertly and mightily accomplished. Many will have lived together with a close-knit team who worked effectively together and were mutually supportive.

Some will have experienced the awesome might of superior fire-power. There may be victory parades and joyful homecomings. While this is happening, we might think of those who did not come home alive, or who return with serious physical and emotional injuries, and what their families may be experiencing. How can we be in ministry with these families?

The returning service men and women may also bring back memories and experiences that they will have a hard time integrating into their lives in America. Each person will have his or her own unique experiences and memories and each one will manage these in different ways. For some this war experience may be an energizer for their life and work once they return, a

powerful experience that helped them demonstrate to themselves confidence and competence. Some may have a feeling that they did something very worthwhile, and did it well.

Some returning personnel will have killed people in Iraq, will have seen their comrades killed or wounded, will have been fired upon. Some will have dropped bombs on targets, and some of those bombs might have hit civilians. Some will have lived for extended periods of time in intense fear and anxiety while in very dangerous situations. Some may feel that they did not do a good job.

Some are likely to experience "post traumatic stress disorder" which can include:

- flashbacks of disturbing memories
- guilt
- anxiety
- depression
- decreased ability to concentrate
- feelings of insecurity

There is considerable disagreement both in the United States and around the world about the purpose and appropriateness of this war. Some major religious groups have spoken eloquently against the war. It may be difficult for the returning men and women and their families to understand this disagreement, and they may take it personally. Some of the returning soldiers may even share opinions against the war.

This can produce conflicted feelings, feelings of isolation and confusion.

Upon returning home, there is the initial homecoming and then the process of assimilation. Assimilation is the bringing together of the experiences of the those who returned

For help or more information

Contact any of the Ecumenical Center's Counseling staff at (210) 616-0885, if you, your family, friends or associates need help during this time. Staff counselors are available for consultation or counseling for individuals, couples, families and workplaces. Fee subsidy is available.

Counseling Staff

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Dear Friends,

As we welcome back the thousands of people who have been deployed for so many months it is appropriate that we give special attention to how we, as a faith community, welcome them home. We have all changed and there are changes yet to come. We remember that many are still deployed, still serving in incredibly difficult and sometimes hostile places. Keeping our 36 year tradition of service and caring we offer this information to you and ask that you share it with others.

Paul A. Parks, D.Min., Executive Director

(continued from page 1)

and the home folks who carried on vocations and family life. Conflicts can develop over such feelings as, "I'm glad you're back, but all the focus is on you and your experiences. I [raised a child – managed a child's illness – ran a business – went to school – managed family issues – etc.] while you were gone, and there is no interest in what I did."

Faith communities (mosques, synagogues and churches) can plan ministries to respond to these experiences.

One ministry activity might be structured **opportunities to tell stories**. Some guidance in the appropriate telling of stories will be helpful. In a congregational setting, the gory details are not necessary, and any information that compromises national security or the confidentiality of others should be edited. The goal is to share the experience, to tell about the experience in such a way that the individual does not feel isolated from congregation and family. It might help to have some congregational members who stayed home tell their stories, about managing without husband or wife, about watching the war on television, etc.

A story-telling family-night dinner, a bulletin board with pictures, drawings and maps, and newsletter articles are ways to provide the opportunities to tell stories.

Worship services can include celebrations, intercessions, and challenges. Celebrations might be of a successful mission, of safe return, of

gratefulness for persons who risked life and health to protect freedom, and those here who prayed for them.

Intercessions can be said for those who did not return safely, for families who lost loved ones, for Iraqi citizens whose bodies, families, or homes were injured or destroyed, for nations struggling with poverty, oppression, and renewal, for guidance of our national and world leaders in the critical decisions they make, for the wise use of power and the protection from arrogance and pride. Challenges are the call of God to mission, as best we understand it. It might be to create peace in our homes and communities, to become involved in projects and causes that enhance life and community, to be politically involved in influencing our leaders, and to contribute to mission activities in Iraq.

Sermons, newsletter articles, and other communiqués can help people accept a variety of feelings (as mixed feelings about being back together, anger for being left, depression now that the challenge of war is over, etc.), help promote the acceptance of differing opinions (as for or against the war), and encourage the strengthening of family and community relationships.

Some **pastoral visitation** of persons and families affected by the war, between three and six months after return, might be helpful in surfacing the more complex feelings and relationship issues that arise after the relief and thrill of the homecoming have worn off. This is the time that post-traumatic stress symptoms might surface. It is particularly important to

notice when a person or a family stop attending faith community events. Often this change in attendance is a signal that a problem has surfaced, and pastoral attention may be valuable and healing.

Some faith communities will experience agreement among their members about the war, but others may experience considerable disagreement. Disagreement is an opportunity to provide **structured experiences of talking together** toward mutual understanding rather than condemnation, efforts to convince someone that he or she is wrong, or division within the community. Such structured experiences of talking together enable people to value differences and learn to use conflict to deepen intimacy within the community. It is a peace-making opportunity! (These structured experiences require trained and experienced leadership.)

While focusing on those directly affected by the war, it is important to be aware of others who have needs. There may be media personnel or relief workers who were in the war zone, and there will be others who leave home now to participate in the rehabilitation efforts within the war-torn areas.

Nearby or within the faith community there may be people of various national backgrounds who feel unsafe, who experience prejudice, suspicion or persecution because of their religion, skin color, or cultural heritage. There is also the need to pay careful attention to the self-care of ministers, both clergy and lay, who spend extra energy ministering to those affected by war.

Ecumenical Center for Religion and Health

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