When veterans come home

This article examines biblical/theological perspectives related to veterans with combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). After a review of the basic symptoms of combat-related PTSD, the authors suggest that for some veterans, their bio/psycho/social symptoms could reveal a deeper existential crisis in which veterans are struggling to incorporate the experiences of combat with previous understandings of God, self, and others. The article concludes with specific suggestions to help clergy and church members offer positive support for returning veterans.

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Photos for this article were taken by Melissa Jackson, BSW student and a photojournalism minor at Baylor.

On the Sunday before the Fourth of July, Mark, a U.S. Marine returning from deployment to Iraq, walks into the sanctuary of the church where he has worshipped since childhood. He slides into a seat on the end of the pew in the back, far from the third-row seat he once occupied as an active member of the church's youth group. As people begin to crowd in, Mark starts feeling uncomfortable. Once very outgoing, Mark wonders why he is feeling so reserved and anxious around people he has known his whole life. He nearly jumps out of his skin when Mr. Timmerman, his seventh-grade Sunday school teacher, grabs him on the shoulder and welcomes him home. In Iraq, Mark learned that being alert could save lives. At home safely away from combat, however, he continues to anticipate and react as if danger were around every corner.

Because of the upcoming holiday, the service begins by recognizing the veterans in the congregation. Mark's name is called and he receives an enthusiastic round of applause. During the pastor's sermon, Mark's thoughts wander back to Iraq. He vividly recalls the Improvised Explosive Device (IED), or roadside bomb, attack that killed two of his friends and the fire fight in which he was forced to kill a teenage insurgent. He is certain that these and other memories will be with him for the rest of his life, and he fears that though he has left Iraq, he will never truly

be able to come home.

As he leaves the service, Mark reflects on the teachings of the day, and on his faith as a whole. He remembers a time before the war, when scriptures such as "All things work together for the good to those who love God" and "You shall not kill" were simple and comforting tenets of his personal faith. His experiences in combat, however, have altered how he sees the world. Now things seem chaotic and unmerciful. He has seen and done things that even make him question God's presence. Although he respects members of the church and appreciates their recognition during the service, he wonders if they could explain or understand the violence he has witnessed and inflicted.

With troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, churches are likely to encounter a growing number of people with issues similar to Mark's. Though they have survived combat, thousands of servicemen and women are faced with the difficult challenge of transitioning from an environment of instability and danger to the previous lives they lived in their communities and congregations. Some will successfully return to their former lives, beginning new chapters apart from the horrible experiences of war. For many others, however, the scarring effects of combat will continue in the form of PTSD. Along with the physical, social, and psychological effects of PTSD, some veterans could experience spiritual and existential crises that will challenge their previous understandings of the world. How will we, as clergy and laypersons, reach out to our fellow believers to offer holistic healing and an open mind as they seek to understand their experiences?

How will we, as clergy and laypersons, reach out to our fellow believers to offer holistic healing and an open mind as they seek to understand their experiences?

The purpose of this article is to explore biblical and theological perspectives related to the experience of PTSD. After a review of the basic symptoms of combat-related PTSD, the authors posit that for many veterans, their bio/psycho/social symptoms may reveal a deeper existential crisis in which veterans struggle to incorporate the experience of combat with their previous understandings of God, self, and others. The article concludes with specific suggestions to help clergy and church members offer positive support for returning veterans.

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT PTSD SYMPTOMS

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder occurs after a person experiences or witnesses an event (or events) which involves death or serious physical injury (or the threat of death or injury), a day-to-day reality in the lives of deployed military personnel (DSM-TR, 2000). People suffering with PTSD are often haunted by intrusive thoughts or nightmares that involve a distressing re-experiencing of traumatic events. Normal stimuli, such as seeing discarded objects on the side of the road, could bring on upsetting recollections for Iraq veterans wounded in an IED attack (DSM-TR, 2000). PTSD is manifested in the avoidance of any stimulus that reminds people of the traumatic event. Furthermore, people with PTSD may have a persistent sense of hyper-arousal, leading to feelings of always being on guard and seeing danger around every corner (DSM-TR, 2000).

The symptoms of PTSD and the course of the disorder may vary from one veteran to another. A heterogeneous cycle of severity and remission spanning several years after the traumatic experiences of combat can occur (Grieger, *et al.*, 2006; Owens, Baker, Kasckow, Ciesla, & Mohamed, 2005). On one hand, studies indicate that approximately one in eight wounded Iraq and Afghanistan veterans screened positive for PTSD in the months following their return from combat (Grieger, *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, Koenen, Stellman, Stellman, & Sommer (2003) found an ebb and flow of symptoms in Vietnam veterans over 20 years. Furthermore, one study found that in some cases, veterans did not present with PTSD symptoms until 50 years after the trauma (Owens, *et al.*, 2005). It appears that while churches

should be aware of the effects of PTSD on the most recent combat veterans, fellow believers must be sensitive to the experiences of veterans of all generations.

Treatment

For many veterans, seeking treatment for PTSD may be the most difficult part of getting help. Already prone to avoidant behavior, veterans may shy away from treatment for fear of being seen as "crazy" or weak (Friedman, 2006). Once treatment is sought, however, several options are available. Evidence suggests antidepressant medication such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) can be effective in reducing adverse symptoms in veterans to differing degrees (McCrone, Knapp, & Cawkill, 2003; Monson, Schnurr, Stevens, & Guthrie, 2006; Russell, 2006). Apart from specific interventions from professional clinicians, social support, community involvement, and spirituality can help veterans improve their functioning and prevent them from experiencing adverse symptoms of PTSD (Friedman, 2006).

Combat-related PTSD

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder occurs in the general population as well as among combat veterans. Victims of sexual or physical abuse, violent crime, car accidents, and other serious negative life events are at risk for developing PTSD. Approximately 6.8% of the general population will experience PTSD some time during their life. Comparatively, the lifetime prevalence of PTSD among veterans is 27.3% (Slone, 2006). Furthermore, the traumatic experiences of veterans may differ from other populations in a significant way. Combat veterans experience PTSD as both victims and executors of traumatic events. In other words, many veterans bear the burden of attacking, maiming, and killing people in war. This aspect of their trauma further complicates issues of forgiveness and guilt related to their experiences (Grossman, 1995; Singer, 2004; Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, & Beckham, 2004).

Combat-related PTSD as existential crisis

Traumatic experiences can affect the spiritual well being of veterans. For example, when veterans were asked to write about their trauma, 80% framed their experiences using religious language (Exline, Smyth, Gregory, Hockemeyer, & Tulloch, 2005). The authors reported both positive and negative references to religion and spirituality related to the trauma. For example, positive religious references included believing that God provided deliverance from death or that trauma can strengthen a veteran's spirituality. Negative references included a belief that faith had a negative effect on coping with trauma, or feelings of unresolved anger toward God (Exline, *et al.*, 2005). Although several studies have identified the effects of PTSD on spirituality (and vice versa), more research is needed to understand the nature of the relationship between spiritual or religious beliefs and PTSD (Barton & LaPierre, 1999; Connor, Davidson, & Lee, 2003; Decker, 1995).

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For present purposes, we will define spirituality as an individual's foundational set of beliefs regarding the structure and order of the world and define religion as the specific development and expression of these foundational beliefs. Spirituality and religion, therefore, are both separate and interrelated, working together to allow persons to find purpose through the recognition of both the immanence and transcendence of the in the world (Barton & LaPierre, 1999; Connor, *et al.*, 2003; Decker, 1995).

A person's spirituality, culture, relationships, personality, and individual experiences work together to form a distinct, but evolving worldview. As Smith (2004) states, "Cultural and religious values must be understood as separate constructs and as interaction variables that continually influence one another" (p. 238). Stated differently, discussion of religion and cul-

ture should occur together with other aspects of a person's identity. Smith goes on to suggest that even an elementary understanding of the world's religions demonstrates their holistic nature and intent. Each religion advocates a value system that is to influence interpersonal relationships, diet, finances, and sex, as well as transcendent views of death and the afterlife. No matter how pious, individuals reveal their religious/cultural worldview in a myriad of ways on a daily basis.

Given the interconnectedness of culture, religion, and worldview in the formation of personal identity, spirituality could be seen as a complex interaction between thought and action. While religious and spiritual experiences are deeply emotional for some, others may ultimately see spirituality as a construct of foundational cognitions. How people think about the purpose of life, the stability of the world, and the future are all parts of spirituality. When treating veterans with PTSD, clinicians often employ cognitive/behavioral therapy (CBT) to explore and eliminate erroneous beliefs, such as seeing the world as an imminently dangerous place (Friedman, 2006). CBT is effective largely because it encourages people to reconstruct the cognitive foundations that have been shaken and altered by traumatic experiences. For some veterans, a re-evaluation of foundational thoughts about the nature of God may be helpful in incorporating experienced trauma with previously held beliefs.

Prior to combat, it may have been easy for a veteran to see God as a being who is both omnipotent and all loving. People who see themselves as followers of God may trust that they will find safety when faced with danger. Trauma may lead them to believe that God has betrayed their trust (Smith, 2004). For instance, a person who once believed that "All things work together for the good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28*), may face a deep sense of disillusionment and abandonment. Traumatic experiences become tangible manifestations of evil in the world that God has failed to prevent. Personally recognizing, causing, and experiencing true evil provides an enormous challenge for veterans who were taught to believe in a good, caring, and all-powerful God (Grant, 1999).

Many believe that God is a being who brings order from chaos. Belief that God created the world, bringing order out of nothingness, and setting forth values and ethics for people to live by, brings about an expectation that the world will remain a place of order. This belief in an ordered universe may create a sense of invulnerability and continuity that is shattered by traumatic events (Grant, 1999). In the face of such hardship, to make sense of the universe, veterans may rationally conclude that God can no longer be viewed as both all-powerful and completely loving and involved in the salvation of mankind. For veterans experiencing the chaotic horrors of war, the absence of God has been experienced in the most extreme manner, and such simplistic views of God may no longer be possible.

Where soldiers once viewed God as the awesome and transcendent force active in the world, they may now see traumatic events as representative of the true order. The pain of trauma may lead to the belief that chaos and evil, not God, are the superlative forces in the world (Smith, 2004). Scripture and religious teachings are good theories, but not everyone is playing by these rules, and God has failed to bring about justice in the world. This view that life really is not fair holds sweeping impli-

**All scripture references are from NIV unless otherwise noted.*

cations for personal identity, as well as issues of responsibility, guilt, and forgiveness (Smith, 2004).

Furthermore, soldiers may see themselves as responsible for traumatic experiences. Whether justified or not, when soldiers placed in primal, disordered situations feel that taking human life is necessary for survival, "an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth way of assessing their own actions and the actions of others" (Singer, 2004, p. 378) can result in a devaluing of human life. Although this kill-or-be-killed mentality may be essential in war, soldiers returning to civilian life often must deal with the dehumanizing nature of their actions – actions diametrically opposed to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, some veterans may experience mixed emotions, i.e., feeling justified in their actions, while still sensing a great need for forgiveness (Singer, 2004).

Viewing the world now as evil, unsafe, and chaotic, veterans may feel anger, resentment, and even betrayal toward or from God. Individuals may feel guilt and shame because of the anger they feel toward God and thus believe themselves unworthy or incapable of seeking a restored relationship with the Divine (Smith, 2004). Traumatized veterans are placed at a crossroads with their previous views of God being incongruent with the chaotic reality they experienced in combat. Moreover, their minds and souls cannot accept the contradictory views of the world. Therefore, they will either accept one way of viewing the world over another, or they will begin the process of finding meaning and purpose in a world that is traumatizing and chaotic (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003; Smith, 2004) – a process that often leads to spiritual growth.

Despair or existential growth

For some veterans, the existential implications of trauma could lead to the destruction of their previously held systems of faith, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair. This destruction of personal faith is often caused by an "inflexible and even rigid … mind-set about the possibilities of healing and growth in their spiritual selves" (Barton & LaPierre, 1999, p. 15). For these veterans, a black-or-white view of spiritual matters results in a distancing from spirituality and religious expression. The inability to adapt their spiritual beliefs to include trauma leads to this abandonment of faith. These feelings are often characterized by a sense of abandonment by God, leading to negative religious coping and cynical attitudes toward religion/spirituality (Barton & LaPierre, 1999; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005; Smith, 2004). Instead of being strengthened by their faith, these veterans' religion now becomes a detriment to coping with trauma and is associated with poorer quality of life, depression, and other psychological and physical symptoms (Smith, 2004).

The alternative to their despair is existential growth seen as positive religious coping and a more vital spirituality. Smith (2004) states that, "trauma can be understood as an essentially spiritual experience because it forces one to reexamine previously held values and worldviews" (p. 234). Combat veterans have personally faced the temporary nature of the present world, and through their experiences they have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of humankind's connection with the eternal (Decker, 1995). Each major world religion, including Christianity, recognizes the role of suffering in strengthening one's connection with the Divine (Shaw, *et al.*, 2005).

Many of the characters in the Bible praised for their great faith have stories of immense trauma and loss, developing their relationship with the Divine in the face of difficult circumstances and personal doubt. From the Book of

Job to the words of Jesus during his crucifixion (Matthew 27:46), the biblical text tells of its heroes expressing feelings of abandonment by and brokenness with God in the midst of traumatic events. For veterans such as Mark at the beginning of this article, reflecting on these biblical accounts may validate and normalize their unfamiliar, troubling feelings toward God. Furthermore, the perseverance of the biblical characters in these contexts may encourage Mark and others to move forward in their faith.

The extreme psychological and physical suffering faced by veterans may provide them an opportunity to reflect on matters of spirituality that were not accessible prior to trauma (Grant, 1999). Although trauma places the identity of an individual in a precarious position, it may be a vehicle for identifying personal strength and sources of spiritual vitality that many are unaware exist or are unable to fully appreciate (Lantz & Walsh, 2007). For veterans who are helped to confront this difficult spiritual journey, their renewed and matured faith may become a valuable strength to fellow believers.

If God is both supremely good and omnipotent, then how can there be evil in the world?

Christian biblical and theological perspectives

As Christians, the search to formulate and understand one's own theology is often a lifelong quest that provides purpose and meaning. For the traumatized Christian, a re-examination of the nature of the Christian faith may be helpful.

At the center of the Christian faith are a number of paradoxical beliefs. Many tenets of Christianity such as "God is love" (1 John 4:8) are simple, though not always easily accepted, truths. Understanding God as three-in-one, or as both immanent and transcendent, however, involves holding two seemingly contradictory notions in dynamic tension. Having a faith that is formulaic and easily understood (as Christianity can be) can be comforting, but as demonstrated earlier, it can also be a source of great spiritual distress when the equation no longer adds up. In considering these dynamic tensions, the goal is not to understand or solve them (libraries are filled with such endeavors), but to journey with the Divine in a process of faith seeking understanding. It is often a comforting step in the faith journey of a believer when he or she accepts that in this life, there will be aspects of God that remain a mystery.

As mentioned above, trauma often calls into question the goodness of God. Theodicy, or the problem of evil, is one of the most-debated dynamic tensions of the Christian faith. If God is both supremely good and omnipotent, then how can there be evil in the world? Even for the person who accepts that the Christian faith includes ideas that are paradoxical in nature, this is a hard concept to accept. For the traumatized person, however, who holds to formulaic notions of faith this idea can be devastating. When faced with an evil world, a person with a black-and-white faith may become convinced that either God is less good or that God is less powerful, both deeply disturbing concepts. To accept trauma, however, it may be beneficial for a Christian veteran to begin the often painful journey of seeing God as one who "governs the world in that he brings good out of evil, whether partially in this life or fully in the eschatological new creation" (Ladd, 1993, p. 48).

Christian eschatology, or theology of the last things, is interpreted by many as the belief that God, through the return of Christ, will bring an end to evil in the world. No matter how this is envisioned by the individual believer, most Christians will agree that history is moving toward the ultimate goal of the complete rule of the Kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed the in-break of the Kingdom of God, which may be understood as "that order of perfect peace, righteousness, justice, and love that God gives to the world." (Grenz, 1994, p. 22) Jesus taught the ethics of the new kingdom (i.e., Matthew 5-7) throughout his ministry, but the New Testament also teaches that what began in Christ has not yet been fully fulfilled. This "already/not yet" theology is key in understanding the continuing

struggle between the values of the Kingdom of God and the presence of evil in the world. The Kingdom of God has already been instituted, but its promises have not yet been completely fulfilled. As the theologian, Stanley Grenz (1994) states:

> The Kingdom of God is both present and future… . We can experience the Divine reign in a partial yet real sense prior to the great eschatological day… . In the meantime, the vision of that great future day provides both the motivation and the blueprint for Christian service (476-477).

Seeing the Kingdom of God as "already/not yet" may allow veterans coping with trauma to accept the goodness and presence of God, as well as the evil and chaotic realities of the present. Hope is provided in that the journey of salvation history will end with a realization of Kingdom ethics, where war is no longer a possibility.

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The "already/not yet" dimension of Christianity also exists in the spiritual lives of individuals. Though a person may be committed to the principles of the Kingdom of God, aspects of his or her identity may remain connected to the evil/chaotic reality of the world. In Romans 7, Paul speaks of the struggle between the desire to do good notwithstanding the evil reality of one's personal actions. Veterans who have killed in combat may have done so with deep intentions of doing good (saving the lives of fellow soldiers, defending freedom, etc.), but may also be faced with the guilt involved with taking a human life. Soldiers can take solace in the knowledge that believers throughout the ages have struggled with their own capacity to be involved in the imperfect aspects of this world despite their best intentions. Condoning killing or dismissing the veteran's guilt may seem prudent, but it discourages the veteran from acknowledging the reality of evil in his/her own life (Barton & La Pierre, 1999). By recognizing that the veteran already accepts the ethics of God's Kingdom, but they have not yet become a full reality, takes into account the continuing transformation demonstrated in the Christian faith. In Mark's case, he may allow himself to acknowledge the chaotic, unexplainable aspects of his life experiences while not forgetting the ways his spirituality has allowed him to find purpose and to live as a faithful, ethical believer. Though the symptoms of PTSD may sometimes seem overwhelming, he can work through them while holding on to the deeper realities of the Kingdom yet to come.

Another dynamic tension emerges when speaking of Christian conversion. Many believers are aware of a specific time and place when they chose to follow the teachings of Christ, and for them, this experience holds great meaning. Although this one event is significant for the individual, it is important to envision Christian conversion as a lifelong process of transformation. Believers are continually working out their salvation (Philippians 2:12), a journey in which the presence of God is sometimes imminent, but may sometimes feel distant and unknowable. While some Christians may hold the same beliefs for years, veterans with combat-related PTSD may be forced to face some difficult inconsistencies in their faith, a process of adapting and deepening their view of God in order to take the next step in their spiritual journey. Though this experience may be painful, veterans can be encouraged to take comfort in trusting that these traumatic events are part of a lifelong process of transformation (Shaw, *et al.*, 2005). Understanding his faith as a journey with the Divine may help Mark accept that though his faith may never again be as simple as it was before the war, he is attempting to move toward a new, deeper spirituality.

If Christianity is a journey of transformation, it is never a walk taken alone. Each believer's story has a unique place in the overall narrative of the church. The body of the church is intended to be an entity of diversity without division and of unity without uniformity. Paul describes the church by stating that, "in Christ we who are many form one body, and

each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5). American culture places great emphasis on individual spirituality, but believers must not neglect the communal nature of the Christian faith. This means that members of the church help one another to appreciate their strengths and cope with their burdens together. Although the traumatic events of war may be a burden that only veterans will fully understand, fellow believers can be a source of encouragement and love by being available to listen, reflect, and struggle with veterans as they re-examine previously held beliefs and values that seem incongruent with their recent – or not so recent – experiences. Even though this process may be challenging for both veterans and fellow believers, a gracious, listening, and patient church community could prove a valuable resource for veterans as they attempt to work through difficult spiritual questions. Such a process may well prove beneficial to the spiritual maturation of both the veteran and his or her church community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLERGY AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

Become familiar with PTSD

Many churches find overt ways to honor veterans for their service and sacrifices, but becoming educated about PTSD and other issues facing veterans can result in an ongoing recognition that promotes understanding and overcome a negative stigma. Mark's Sunday school teacher who recognizes Mark's symptoms might privately encourage him to seek help. A group of Mark's friends may choose to watch a comedy rather than a violent war movie, because they understand that the images may be disturbing to their friend who is a combat veteran.

Most important, clergy who provide pastoral counseling to veterans should maintain a working relationship with appropriate mental health professionals, making referrals when necessary. While the spiritual issues surrounding combat-related PTSD are significant, ministers must not neglect the physiological and psychological symptoms of the disorder (Smith, 2004). A pastor with veterans in his or her congregation may contact a Veterans Administration social worker for information regarding available services for the congregants. When veterans tell a minister that they are overwhelmed with guilt about killing in combat and re-experience it in their minds continuously, the minister should recognize the intrusive thoughts as possible symptoms of a mental illness. The minister may discuss referral options with the veterans, and depending on the situation, continue to address spiritual issues related to PTSD as the veteran receives psychological care.

Reach out to veterans with acceptance and grace

Veterans suffering from PTSD may demonstrate avoidant behavior, meaning that they may not always be comfortable in large groups or in certain situations that trigger a re-experiencing of traumatic events. For that reason, even if some veterans wish to participate in worship, the social dynamics and noise may be anxiety-producing. Members of the congregation should make an effort to reach out to these persons, finding ways to include them in the body of the church. When veterans arrive home from

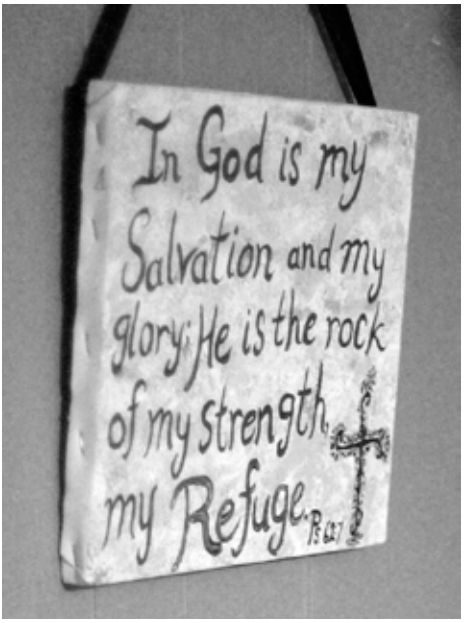
deployment, their transition can be eased by congregants offering to do simple tasks, such as cooking a meal or running an errand. These acts of kindness can show veterans and their families that the church understands that returning from combat is a difficult transition, and may allow veterans more freedom to participate in social/religious activities that will help them to reconnect to the congregation. As veterans choose to participate, churches should be a place of sanctuary, where they feel welcomed, but not pushed to act as "a well-behaved guest" (Bridgers, 2001, p. 74).

In the same way, veterans may find it difficult to fit into the mold of "regular" churchgoers, feeling that they cannot truly be themselves. As Decker (1995) suggests, "Survivors [of trauma] turn away from organized religion because it is not personalized" (p. 3). For these veterans, demonstrating grace and acceptance means allowing them to relate to God in a way that is true to their own spiritual journey. This includes allowing veterans to participate or not as they see fit without fear of judgment or being prodded. It also means providing veterans with safe, nonjudgmental opportunities to express feelings of anger or abandonment toward God.

If appropriate to the congregation, church leaders may consider establishing a Sunday School class or other support group specifically for veterans. The class could welcome veterans of all ages and from different periods of service. In Mark's case, the ability to connect with other veterans may ease his transition back into the life of the church. He also may gain helpful insights from Vietnam, Korean, or World War II veterans who have had similar traumatic experiences in war. Likewise, these older veterans may finally have opportunity and a safe place to deal with their own war-time traumas. Awareness of and treatment for PTSD were not as readily available for many who fought in previous wars. Whether Mark meets with a formal group at a specified time or an informal group over coffee, he needs relationships with believers who can help him process his feelings, discuss his questions related to combat experiences, war, and his understanding of God.

Find opportunities for veterans to tell their stories

Veterans need access to people and places where it is safe to talk about the spiritual implications of their traumatic experiences. Clergy can use reflective listening skills to validate experiences and clarify underlying questions about faith. Even better, clergy can equip lay persons to provide support by teaching basic listening skills and educating the congregation on the



realities (and potential blessings) of having returning veterans who are struggling to integrate their faith with their experiences. As Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 3:2, veterans dealing with combat-related PTSD may be searching for a more mature faith and they need fellow believers who are ready to receive and provide solid food instead of milk. As veterans find new spiritual resolution, the rest of the church body is likely to benefit from their deepened insights.

As Mark reflects on his experiences, his pastor may ask him to keep a journal or find another way of chronicling the ways in which his faith has helped him through his difficult time of transition. As Mark finds new insight into his spirituality, he may be encouraged to share his insights with others in his faith community who find themselves facing similar trials.

Though nothing can explain away his experience of trauma, he may see good coming out of his reaction to the trauma through the strengthening of others' faith.

CONCLUSION

The church needs to gain a better understanding of the effects of combat-related PTSD on Christian spirituality. Future research should focus on religious involvement of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, examining engagement with a congregation, and include qualitative accounts of the effects of PTSD on personal theology. Research should examine the attitudes and responses of congregations to veterans with PTSD, including awareness of the disorder and willingness to reach out to veterans and their families. Spouses and children of returning veterans often feel as estranged and confused as their loved ones, and the church has great opportunity to be a source of comfort and encouragement to them as well.

Combat experience can create lifelong struggles for many of our veterans. Doctors and clinicians may provide help and healing in addressing the physical and psychological symptoms. Some of the deeper existential questions brought on by trauma, however, may be best addressed in the context of a listening and accepting congregation. If combat has shown veterans a picture of the world that is chaotic and hopeless, the church should be present in the lives of veterans as a counterweight to these experiences. As veterans attempt to move forward in their spiritual journeys, they should find the church a place of acceptance, peace, and healing.

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Widen the Circle

Albert Einstein

We are part of the whole which we call the universe, but it is an optical delusion of our mind that we think we are separate. This separateness is like a prison for us. Our job is to widen the circle of our compassion so we feel connected with all people and situations.

Source: Unknown