

**Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Phoenix, Arizona
November 8, 2008
Ken Moe, Executive Presbyter**

At the March 2005 presbytery meeting, I reported to you about ministry with and for returning war veterans and their families. The positive response to that report has been greater than for any other report I've made here. Since these reports are posted on the presbytery website, they're subject to google searches, and as a result, I've received inquiries about this subject from across the United States and as far away as Australia.

Last month I received an email from a woman named Gina Greenberg, who had found my 2005 presbytery report while researching Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. For a reason that will become clear shortly, I count her email in the category of providential communications.

For the benefit of those who weren't at the March 2005 presbytery meeting, the EP report that day dealt with the traumatic effects of war on the minds and spirits of soldiers and civilian victims and some ways the church has responded to their needs in the past. The PC(USA) has an admirable record in standing up for veterans' needs, as well as speaking out for justice on their behalf. Yet, I noted then and continue to believe now, something more is called for from the church. We have a limited number of copies of that report available here for those who haven't read it.

The spiritual and physical health needs of people who have served in combat situations are significant, as are the needs of their families. Now more than ever, we need to come together as people of faith to reach out and offer helping hands and listening ears for those who have borne the heart-wrenching duties of military service during a time of prolonged war.

The extent of need was reinforced for me recently when I called an official at the Veterans Administration and reached her voice mail. Her voicemail message included instructions on what to do if you're experiencing thoughts about harming yourself. It's no secret that the suicide rate among Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans has reached unprecedented epidemic levels.

As I noted two and a half years ago, this is not a matter of whether one favors or opposes the multiple wars our country is engaged in. It is a matter of faithful response to those who have suffered as a result of their military service. There is no contradiction in hating and opposing war while loving and caring for our warriors.

Recently I read Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, which describes the manner in which President Lincoln drew together into his cabinet the other men who had been candidates for the Republican presidential nomination, as well as some men who had opposed or criticized him in different contexts. It was this team of rivals led by our greatest president whose strenuous efforts brought the country through the Civil War.

Goodwin's description of Lincoln's management of the human dynamics, ego conflicts, and temperamental outbursts of these men is inspiring. But what touched me most deeply about Goodwin's description of Abraham Lincoln was how deeply the president felt the pain arising from the war that ignited after he was elected. He grieved the loss of soldiers no less than the death of his own son from typhoid. He went to extraordinary means to find excuses to pardon soldiers who had been convicted of

desertion and other military crimes. He felt great compassion for those who bore the burden of battle on both sides.

It's easy to speak good words, to name a problem, to express sympathy for a situation and then let it go. It's easy to preach and not follow through. But I want you to know that people in this presbytery and beyond it have stepped forward to act on the matter of veterans' needs. Particular thanks go to the Rev. Nathan Byrd, pastor of Historic First Presbyterian Church, Phoenix. Nathan is a Reserve Army Chaplain, who has served in Iraq, so he knows from direct encounters the spiritual, physical, ethical, and family issues that can arise from combat service.

A few months ago, Rev. Byrd invited me to a meeting at First Presbyterian, to talk about an outreach ministry for veterans. Since then, an outline of such a ministry has emerged. The working name is Military Veterans Support Center. CLP Reginald Ragland, who works for the City of Phoenix in addition to serving Southminster Presbyterian Church, is also part of the committee creating the Military Veterans Support Center.

There are two aspects of this developing ministry that I want to share with you today. As you listen to my descriptions, consider whether you or your church might be able to help with or provide space for this work.

Many resources are in place right now to help veterans and their families. Federal, State, and local governments have programs and agencies to address needs for employment, medical care, emergency assistance, etc. But many people don't know what's available and even if they do, too often it is hard to get into the system or to navigate the maze of requirements and procedures to get the needed benefits. And some of those in need are so emotionally distraught that simply handling the necessary application steps can seem overwhelming. And sometimes, veterans simply mistrust institutions. This lack of trust is one of the unintended consequences of war.

So what we envision doing with the Military Veterans Support Center is to recruit and train a group of volunteer System Navigators to assist veterans and their family members find and qualify for those resources that are already in place. We don't envision replacing or competing with the good services (governmental and non-governmental) that already exist. Rather, our plan is to develop personal contacts and lists of resources that we can publicize and make available to people and provide appropriate referrals. Because the Arizona Ecumenical Council is on board with us, we will have publicity access to many thousands of church members and clergy.

Another subject close to my heart is the all too common spiritual struggling that combat veterans frequently go through. The basic question about how could a good God allow the barbarity that humans inflict upon one another can become searingly painful for those who have participated in the casual violence of warfare. Many veterans turn against the religious traditions they grew up with when faced with such experiences. Many others psychologically turn against themselves. Anger directed at God is quite common. Alienation takes a psychic toll.

And so we envision identifying and training a group of Spiritual Friends, mainly but not exclusively clergy, who can listen to emotionally and spiritually wounded veterans. The goal is not to provide psychotherapy. The goal is also not to convert veterans to one's particular religion or doctrinal positions. The intent here is to provide a safe outlet for a vet to unload combat related baggage to someone who will listen

unflinchingly and without judgment and who can assure the spiritually suffering soldier that he or she is not alone. We'd like to field a team of listeners from various religious traditions who can converse in the language of their particular traditions while meeting the soul-sick veterans where they are.

Earlier I mentioned a providential email from Gina Greenberg. She is working on a project based at the Department of Pastoral Care at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, where she is an advisory board member for the CPE program. Let me share a little of what she wrote:

“Through a small grant from the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, I am currently researching and developing a curriculum unit for chaplains that will highlight some of the spiritual aspects of PTSD among combat veterans...A central goal of my research is to provide examples of holistic, interdisciplinary programs that address elements of spiritual distress of combat veterans with PTSD. My sense is that collaborative care and a robust referral network of providers...is essential to addressing the many dimensions of PTSD and helping to re-integrate combat veterans once they have returned home.”

This is the kind of great human connection and resource we need for our vision here in Arizona. Naturally, I put Nathan Byrd and Gina Greenberg in contact with each other.

For both of the purposes that we want to develop for the Military Veterans Support Center, providing system navigators and spiritual friends, we will need volunteers with particular gifts and skills. We will also need meeting space, such as church buildings, at locations throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area, and hopefully in time, far beyond the city. Monetary gifts would be welcome also.

Has any of this peaked your interest? Are you feeling a sense of call about being involved in a ministry for combat veterans and their families? Can you think of anyone you know who would be well suited to either of these ministry tasks? If so, call Nathan Byrd or me for more information.

Let me now, through poetry, conclude by introducing you to a haunted veteran I met a quarter century ago in Pennsylvania. He exemplifies the need for our proposed ministry. The poem is called “The Combat Engineer.”

What he enlisted for was a skill
 To take home to civilian life:
 Bulldozer operator. The job he got
 In Viet Nam was prevention of disease:
 Plough under the bodies left on battlefields
 Before the rats come in –but be quick
 And watch for lingering snipers.
 After a while he pretended not to see
 The lips that moved and eyes that blinked
 On bodies as he set his blade and folded
 Them into the earth. He pretended
 Not to hear their cries –but he did.

May we all be touched by God's blessing and mercy. Thanks for listening.