

TWE-04 Regarding Worship Resources for Ministering to Veterans

Recommendation

This item was referred from the 224th General Assembly (2020) for consideration during the 225th General Assembly (2022).

The Presbytery of Blackhawk overtures the 225th General Assembly (2022) to direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through its Office of Worship and Theology, to consult with military chaplains, mental health professionals, and other Christian traditions to develop worship resources and other appropriate rituals that pastors and military chaplains could use to assist military personnel when they are sent for training, when they are deployed, when they return home from deployment, and when they separate from military service. The new worship resources should be available to chaplains, pastors, and churches at the 226th General Assembly (2024).

Rationale

Every year since 2008, at least 6,000 veterans who have served on active duty have died by suicide. In 2017 the rate was 16.8 veterans per day[1] (If we include non-activated Guard and Reserve members, the rate was 19.3 per day.)[2] But taking into account the declining veteran population—largely older and male, the sex and age adjusted rate (to match the U.S. demographics of the 2000 C.E. Standard Population) of death by suicide in 2017 was 27.7 per day per 100,000, up from 18.5 per 100,000 in 2005![3] Of special note, the rates for women veterans taking their own lives has increased to 2.2 times the national average for women,[4] and the overall suicide rate of all veterans was 1.5 times the general population in 2017.[5] And it's not just recent veterans—though that rate is considerably higher than for older veterans, but veterans of all ages are dying by suicide at an alarming rate.[6]

Our most recent veterans between 18–34 years of age had the highest suicide rate of 44.5 per 100,000.[7] It is important to note that of the 17 deaths per day average of active duty military veterans, six had some kind of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) engagement while 11 veterans didn't have any record of VHA engagement.[8] This means that 2/3 of veteran suicides could be intervened by pastors and churches. Far too many military members are facing “moral injury” and post-traumatic stress issues without getting the help they need and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) currently has no resources available to help military members when they leave for service, when they return home, or when they separate from military service.

Ancient Israel had cleansing rituals to welcome warriors back into the community after returning from war (Numbers 31: 19–24). They recognized that war could make a person feel dirty, and that special rituals could help returning fighters deal with that sense of uncleanness so they could rejoin the community. Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, in their book *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*, write that in addition to deep grief over the loss of comrades and sometimes horrendous memories of what they have seen, veterans can often suffer from “moral injury.” It is a violation of one's conscience that can occur in the heat of war. The Christian church as a channel of God's grace and healing power is in a unique position to address “moral injury.” In fact, as Brock and Lettini note, the church in the first millennium recognized this and “required that anyone who ‘shed human blood’ to undergo a rehabilitation process that included reverting to the status of someone who had not been baptized and was undergoing training in the Christian faith.” While this seems a little

extreme today, it would be helpful if the church had liturgies that addressed the needs of returning military members to help them discover, or perhaps rediscover, the love and forgiveness God offers us in Christ and through the Christian community.

What sort of new worship resources would be helpful? *Resources for sending*: resources for congregations sending their young people into military service; resources for congregations and military chaplains for sending military members when they are being deployed: resources that remind military members and their families that God is with them. *And resources for welcoming home*: resources for local congregations and military chaplains to welcome military members back and to help them reintegrate into the community; and resources that pastors and Christian therapists could use with small groups or in one-to-one counseling.

Endnotes

1. [National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report 2019](#), Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, pages 3, 9.
2. Ibid, pages 3, 19.
3. Ibid, page 10.
4. Ibid, page 16.
5. Ibid, pages 3, 10.
6. [Alarming VA Report Totals Decade of Veteran Suicides](#) by Richard Sisk, 9/23/19, [military.com](#)
7. [National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report 2019](#), Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, page 14.
8. Ibid, page 26.

Advice and Counsel —From the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns (ACWC)

The Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns advises that the 224th General Assembly (2020) approve this item.

The Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel (PCCMP) is a joint ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, and the Korean Presbyterian Church Abroad. As a joint ministry of these four denominations, they only receive less than 50 percent of our operating funds from these General Assemblies and Presbyterian Mission Agency. There are currently twenty-five Presbyterian women chaplains (of 138 total Presbyterian chaplains) serving in the Armed Forces.¹ Currently there is no intentional resource available that provides care for these chaplains. Chaplains are called upon to minister to their troops regardless of their religious affiliation by bringing hope and healing.²

Suicide is becoming more and more prevalent among all military chaplains; however, the rates for women veterans taking their lives has increased to 2.2 times the national average for women.³ For this reason and many others, the church must provide readily accessible resources to support those who serve. Additionally, spiritual materials for the spouses of military service members and veterans are minimal. The church would commend a powerful service to our veterans as we seek to support those who have served as well as those who currently serve and the families who support them.

Endnotes

1. Information received from the Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel.
2. Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel (<https://pccmp.org/>).
3. National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report (2019).

Presbyterian Mission Agency Comment

The Office of Theology and Worship is ready and eager to undertake this project in consultation and collaboration with the partners identified in the overture, as well as theological scholars, pastoral leaders, and intercultural constituencies. The work proposed would fill a gap in currently available resources and would respond to a critical need among those experiencing the effects of trauma and moral injury. If it sees wide distribution, the resulting resource could be of great use and benefit in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and beyond.