SOUL CARE INITIATIVE

CONGREGATIONAL TOOLKIT

Connecting faith communities with veterans and their families
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We hope this resource equips you as you develop ministries of partnership with those who have served in the military. As United Methodists, our perspective emerges from the Christian tradition. We trust that you will find this resource usable and adaptable for your context and faith tradition.

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Imagine you have decided to build a table. You have gathered together the wooden legs and tabletop, and the metal braces for increased strength and support. You might attach the legs to the table with nails. You might fix the metal supports to the legs and tabletop with bolts and nuts to ensure stability. Perhaps you will use sand paper, paintbrushes, ratchets, sockets, screwdrivers, hammers, and even a measuring tape.

While all of these tools help with the process of building a table, some are more appropriate for particular tasks. For example, you wouldn’t use a hammer to secure a bolt to a nut, or a screwdriver to smooth out the wood. Hand tools, in contrast with power tools, offer the opportunity for real engagement, and provide sensitivity to the natural resistance from the mediums of wood and metal. All these tools have their place within the building project, and are used when the next action requires its assistance.

Building a ministry for veterans is similar to the idea of building a table. The materials for building the ministry are already present. They are the assets you have within individuals, within your congregation and within your community. They are physical spaces, skills, abilities, finances and other resources. If the table were built with wood, it would look very different than if it were built with marble, or metal. In the same way, the assets within your community will provide a veterans’ ministry that is unique to your context, and to the needs of those who have served in the military.

This toolkit invites conversation among key individuals and communities when considering a ministry of soul care in your context. It is not a manual, nor a “how to” for the building of a veterans’ ministry. While suggestions are offered for ways in which a congregation can engage the tools, it does not provide a formula to follow for a successful ministry. Instead, this toolkit provides a way to begin the dialogue for how a veterans’ ministry can take shape with the assets already in your community. Each tool uses the process of asking questions of yourself, congregants and those who have served to determine the ways in which a ministry can be effective, sustainable, powerful and transformative for the individuals, families, and congregations.

It is important to recognize from the beginning of the ministry that the lives and experiences of those that serve or have served in the military are as diverse as civilian lives. There are veterans who have seen combat, and those who have not. Some have experienced traumatic events and others who have not. Some women and men, who served in the military, may have a need for healing and some may not.

“If the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail.”

– English Proverb
Why is soul care for veterans important?

Often times when we talk about what it looks like to be whole and healthy individuals, we only address very specific parts of ourselves. We are taught to take care of our physical bodies by healing illness and injury, eating well, exercise, and shelter. We have specialists who teach us the importance of maintaining a healthy mind through therapy, mental exercises, and sometimes medication. Humans understand that wholeness is best met when someone is socially healthy. Relationships are an important part of who we are as humans, and our social connections affect other aspects of our health. Healthy emotions contribute to resilience and strength in times of distress.

Maintaining health and wholeness includes a spiritual dimension, and soul care is sometimes missing in our medical and psychiatric fields. Soul care refers to a person’s overall spiritual health and reflects the role of spirituality in meaning making and resiliency. It also promotes an understanding of spirituality within the context of trauma, moral injury, and ways to speak to a hurting soul through prayer, meditation, liturgy, sharing sacred stories and deep listening.

Sometimes, traumatic experiences, like those experienced in combat, affect the mind, body, soul, relationships and even physical needs of people. The reality is that while there are systems in place to help people with psychological, medical, social, and physical needs, the matters of the soul are not addressed. This is an aspect of human health that is not typically addressed in the doctor’s office, the social work office, the community, or even at home.
Can faith communities provide soul care for veterans?

Communities of faith have unique strengths and capacities for care within their context. They provide a structure of social support, establish traditions, and practice rituals stemming from a rich history of healing, forgiveness, witness, repentance, and reconciliation. Congregations are an essential entity that accompanies individual community members toward healing and restoration.

With particular trauma-sensitive skills congregations can also offer deep listening in a way that is free of judgement and that recognizes the individual stories of veterans and their families. Through acts of being present and providing attention, faith communities can be key in addressing the needs of those who served in a sensitive and healing manner.

What can we do to help?

You have gifts, talents, and resources available right now within yourself, your congregation, and your community. We believe that if you can map the assets (people, places, institutions, gifts, strengths) of your particular faith community it will better equip you for a veterans’ ministry. This toolkit offers ways in which you and your team can begin the process of designing a ministry. It offers questions on content for you to explore, engage, and adopt so that it is customized to the needs and assets of those who served and the community. This might mean that your ministry will look vastly different from the veterans’ ministry of another community or it might mean that it looks incredibly similar. The designing of your ministry comes out of the resources you have available, and the needs of veterans in your context.

This toolkit has been designed for you to use in a group setting to address the needs of veterans and their families in your community. It is not a prescription for your team to take, accept and implement. Instead it is way in which your ministry team can engage those who have served in conversation that is aware, informed, soul-focused and trauma-sensitive. The toolkit also offers ways in which other faith communities have implemented these tools.

“Love begins by taking care of the closest ones – the ones at home.”

- Mother Teresa
Tools for Ministry
Tool: Cultivate Awareness

Awareness is one of the primary components in creating and maintaining a veterans’ ministry. The following questions are ways in which your congregation can begin to cultivate awareness of those who have served in your midst.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Provide recognition
- Create a Hall of Veterans
- Participate in VA “Stand Downs”
- Begin community outreach
- Encourage youth and senior participation
- Provide prayer sponsorship for family members
- Conduct home visits
- Initiate small groups
- Share in meals together
- Provide educational opportunities for congregants through meetings and literature

Ministry Hint

As you begin, what do you envision or hope for this ministry? What specific goals might help you reach that vision?

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

-Martin Luther King Jr.
Tool: Provide Support

Support can be offered to veterans and their families in many ways through a congregational ministry. Ask these questions to discover how you can provide the support needed.

What are your (veteran’s) needs?

What are your (family’s) needs?

Do you feel safe in this physical space?

Is there a traditional practice we can do together?

Provide Support

Ways in which you can do this:

- Provide liturgy in a new setting
- Ask preference for and provide reserved “safe seating” in the sanctuary (Near the exit? With back to the wall?)
- Link and network with community organizations: VFW, Wounded Warrior Project, American Legion, Disabled Veterans of America
- Link to resources at Veterans Affairs
- Link to Veteran Centers
- Link to local social services
- Give pastoral and congregational care
- Participate in traditional practices or rituals
  » Conduct a circle process
  » Have a foot washing ceremony
  » Provide a “love feast”
  » Provide communion
  » Conduct a flag pole service/prayer
  » Design a worship service: welcoming, healing, reconciliation

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

-Simone Weil
Tool: Create Space

Telling personal stories about the experiences one has had during service or deployment is an important part of the wellness journey. Through exploration of these questions, you can navigate ways in which a safe space can be created for story sharing.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Invite through face-to-face interaction
- Create mutually agreed upon guidelines for engagement
- Participate in online interaction
- Provide a safe physical space
- Invite supportive persons to participate
- Design a mentorship program (veteran to veteran)
- Provide opportunity for peer support from other veterans
- Create networks: with other veterans, with congregants, with pastors, with families, with the community
- Provide means for story sharing: in person, in writing, in artwork, through playback theatre, through social media site.

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.”

- Viktor Frankl
Tool: Make Meaning

The ways in which we make meaning of our world can be powerful tools of healing and moving forward. These questions can be ways of engagement for veterans and community building for the entire congregation.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Create small groups: Art, Exercise, Literature, Bible study, Writing, Gardening, Dance, Music
- Provide opportunities for an educational environment within the capacity of the congregational community
- Provide volunteer opportunities for other veterans: Buddy to Buddy, Swords to Plowshares
- Provide volunteer opportunities for disaster relief: Team Rubicon, UMCOR
- Provide opportunity for missions
- Provide volunteer opportunity within the congregation: Youth groups, boards, leadership
- Mark anniversaries
- Design special ceremonies to memorialize

“Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone – we find it with one another.”

-Thomas Merton
Seeking a restorative path requires awareness, self reflection, and creativity. These questions may provide directions from which to approach, and continue in the journey of restoration and healing.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Love one another as Christ has called us *
- Be aware of the relationship between your congregation and your community
- Partner with others in your context, in other faith communities, and in your community at large
- Imagine the vision of wholeness and health for you, veterans, your congregation and your community
- Explore new opportunities for ministry (think outside the box)

* Other faith traditions may use their own doctrines of interconnectedness or love.

If trauma, conflict or injustice is recognized as a need within the veterans' ministry team or congregation the following tools can assist in navigation.

- Trauma Healing
- Conflict Transformation
- Restorative Justice

"Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence."

-Henry David Thoreau
Tool: Trauma Healing

Trauma can be experienced individually or collectively, through a single event or ongoing, continuous, and cumulative events. It is important to note that trauma can impact people in a secondary way even if they weren’t directly impacted, through participatory experiences, and through violations of dignity. And collective trauma can be impacted historically, culturally and even structurally. These questions may offer an opportunity for dialogue around trauma healing and awareness.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Provide education regarding trauma, its experiences and affects
- Seek trauma experts for assistance if needed (See list of resources)
- Respond to the needs of those with trauma experiences
- Adapt to the needs of those feeling trauma reactions
- Be aware of secondary trauma

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.”

- Maya Angelou
Tool: Conflict Transformation

As a natural and normal part of human interactions conflicts sometimes arise in our congregations and ministries. Sometimes stepping back and addressing the answers to these questions will help us navigate conflicts in a way that honors one another respectfully.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Engage in deep listening
- Focus on balanced actions
- Respect diversity and discovery
- Participate in open communication and conversation
- Focus on what is good for the group
- Accept ambiguity as an outcome
- Focus on trust, shared information and a shared future
- Focus on issues, challenges and possibilities
- Focus on relationships and adaptability not rules and rigidity

“Transformation is a process.... a journey of discovery – there are moments on mountain tops and moments in deep valleys of despair.”

-Rick Warren
Tool: Restorative Justice

The biblical idea of justice is founded on Shalom (everything is as it should be, “rightness” and “right relations”). There are many levels in which injustice can be present. Justice may be sought on the interpersonal (person to person), family (group), community, national, and global (international) levels. Asking these questions can be a way in which the congregation may seek justice alongside those who have served and their families.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Acknowledge the harm that has taken place
- Include everyone affected by the harm
- Seek mediators or facilitators as needed
- Create or encourage an encounter in a safe space
  » Circle process
  » Family Group Conference
  » Victim/Offender Conference (Community Conference)
- Make or encourage amends for the harm that has been done
- Participate in a reintegration process

“Although we are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same river of life.”

- Chief Oren Lyons

Facilitation Hint

Using a talking piece can be a helpful way to invite one person at a time to share and encourages others to listen intentionally.
Tools for Wellness
Tool: Wellness Within

In ministry it is so important that we care for ourselves. When we are not well cared for it becomes increasingly difficult to care for others. These are questions we can ask ourselves to bring awareness of what our needs are in our journeys.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Use self reflection techniques
  » Journal
  » Artwork
  » Music
  » Meditation/ Prayer
  » Exercise
- Discover self care
  » Emotionally
  » Spiritually
  » Physically
  » Mentally
- Seek ways to improve wellbeing

Ask Yourself

* What is important to me? * What do I like to do in my free time? * “What makes me feel healthy?”

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart.”

- Helen Keller
Tool: Wellness With Others

While wellness for self is important for ministry, there is also a need of wellness within the community and with others. We are not just individual islands of ministry, but rather we are interconnected in our journeys of wholeness.

Ways in which you can do this:

- Use buddy system for checking up on wellness
- Provide prayer chain for spiritual needs
- Provide response chain for material needs
- Engage in commitment to wellness with one another
- Provide space for group/ committee reflection
- Encourage caring for one another

Ministry Hint

Have you invited feedback about the ministry? Do the actions and outcomes meet your vision and goals?

“My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”

- Desmond Tutu
Community Networks & Assets
Activity Planner
References and Resources:

**Soul Care Initiative**
www.soulcareinitiative.org

**JustPeace** Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, United Methodist Church
www.justpeaceumc.org

**Soul Repair Center**, Brite Divinity School www.brite.edu/academics/programs/soul-repair

**STAR**: Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience, Eastern Mennonite University: Center for Justice and Peacebuilding www.emu.edu/cjp/star


