



Beyond the Yellow Ribbon: Ministering to Returning Combat Veterans

As the master terrorist who planned and executed the 9/11 disaster that started us on a war with extremist jihadists, news that Osama bin Laden had been killed was welcomed by most Americans. The war he started has resulted in hundreds of thousands of men and women serving in the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force to be deployed, and many redeployed, to Iraq and Afghanistan. A large portion of them are Guard and Reservists – thousands of whom have given their lives in this cause.

These Guard and Reservists are citizen soldiers, men and women who have a civilian career and a military career. The Guard units not only have a federal role but also a state role. They can be called to duty at a moment's notice to serve almost anywhere to render almost any service

For example, as I write this I have just learned that a group of MP's (Military Police) are being mobilized to serve in the areas being impacted by the floods hitting Mississippi. One of those called to duty is a young chaplain who, in a few months, will deploy with his unit to the Middle East.

During times of peace, particularly prior to 9/11, there may not have been a need to be military-specific in ministry; however, those days are now over. Think about the Guardsmen or Reservists who have been deployed at least once. Many today have at least two and some three or four deployments.

How are they doing? How is their marriage? Are they employed? How are they spiritually? The stress on these warriors can be intense. Does your church minister to these men and women; do you have a plan in place? Is there something you can personally do to help?

If your church is near a military base you may already have some things in place to help the vet but what about the majority of churches that don't have a base nearby? Should they also consider being ministry-specific to military personnel? I believe they should. For, while they may not be near a base, most churches have either retired vets or Guard and Reservists in their congregation.

Recently, I read a book that provides excellent insight about reaching out to our men and women who serve in the military, along with their families. The book, *Beyond the Yellow Ribbon: Ministering to Returning Combat Veterans* (David A. Thompson and Darlene Wetterstrom, Abington Press, 2009) paints a broad picture of the soldiers and their families and what they go through. What I personally like about the book is the practical tips it gives for ministry.

The "yellow ribbon" has long been a symbol to the soldier that those at home support him and look forward to his return. However, the returning soldier needs more than just a welcome home. Many, if not most, will need help readjusting to the life they once knew and coping with the stress caused by the experiences of war.

Most pastors and church members have never served in combat situations and may find it difficult to relate to or understand the difficulties facing the returning soldier. If you fall into this category, you may not feel adequate or qualified to provide such help and be hesitant to begin such a ministry. Don't be.

I think you will find *Beyond the Yellow Ribbon* is an excellent resource to help get your church started thinking about how and what can be done to help these warriors. The book covers the following topics:

1. Soldiers and Their Families in Our Midst: Who Are These People?
2. The Soldiers Life: Why Is It So Hard to Come Home from War?
3. Military Family Challenges: Living in a Warrior Culture.
4. The Wounds of War: Unique Challenges for Wounded War Veterans and Their Families.
5. Comforting Those Who Mourn: Ministering to Families of Military Casualties.
6. Onward Christian Soldiers: Moral and Spiritual Issues Facing Soldiers and Their Families.
7. Putting Feet to Our Faith: Creating a Military Family – friendly Church.

These are Broad topics to be sure but it will help you to see the big picture. What I want to focus on for the rest of the review are some *practical tips in helping the vet*. At the end of each chapter there are a few tips that you as a church can implement. After you get a feel for a couple of the tips maybe you will want to get the book for a broader ministry.

One tip is to start a committee to look into the military ministry. This committee would try to determine how many vets and their families are in or around your church. You could have a military connection night. This would be a time to determine how many families have friends or relatives in the military or how many served in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, etc. You are looking for very broad connections. This will give you an idea of the breadth and depth of military service. Maybe some of the congregation's friends will also come on military connection night. All of this can identify and help to surface those who may be struggling – giving you an opportunity to serve those who served our country.

If your church has access to military Chaplains, consider using them as a resource to help you. For example, including me, the church my wife and I attend has three Chaplains (I am an Army Guard Chaplain and the other two are a Reservist Chaplain and an Air Guard Chaplain) who can serve as a resource. Chaplains have resources that could help inform and educate the congregation.

If you do not know a Chaplain, perhaps you can find out who your endorsing agent (the ecclesiastical organization(s) in your area that endorses those wishing to serve as military chaplains) is and connect that way to have Chaplains speak at your church or at a military connection meeting. I spoke at a church during their mission's week informing the congregation about the work of Chaplains; particularly those of our denomination. I also shared about the needs of the men and women and the needs of the chaplains so they could pray specifically for them.

Having a Chaplain on your prayer list is one way to continue military ministry. Praying for the vets and chaplains is vital to the spiritual growth of the ministry. I know how important it was for me to know churches were lifting me up in prayer when I was in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even today as I work for the Vet Center sometimes opportunities arise and I need prayer to minister to veterans.

Another way to minister is to have someone come in, such as a State Chaplain, or VA or Vet Rep, who can talk about resources available to the military community. These can vary somewhat from State to State, but the State Chaplain or his representative can tell you the resources they can make available.

For example, some states have a program called "Partners in Care" in which the National Guard and faith-groups – churches, synagogues, and mosques – work together to help veterans. These faith communities agree to help vets and their families for free. They do not require any kind of commitment by the vet in need in order to be helped.

The church involved will appoint a Point Person (I Corinthians 9) with a real interest in the program; perhaps, because they are a retired vet or have a family member who is deployed. This Point Person takes responsibility to keep the participating Chaplains informed and assist the military family get the help that they need by helping to determine and connect with available services. Periodically, the Guard Chaplain, can provide training for participants on various ways they can help.

Many resources are available today due to the Global War on Terrorism. The VA offers numerous benefits for qualifying veterans. However, not all benefits apply to every veteran. For example, some are limited to combat veterans. The returning soldier will probably need help sifting through these benefits to determine which are available to him. The Yellow Ribbon program provides this help.

This is a state sponsored program to inform veterans of educational resources, health resources, employment opportunities, etc.; as well as, counseling and medical resources. This information is provided during their 30 day Yellow Ribbon program. There is also a 60 day program where some of the information is repeated and other resources are made available. Finally, the 90 day Yellow Ribbon program meets at their armory and serves as a Post Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA).

In this 90 day PDHRA, the medical community looks at the Guard/Reservists to try and identify those who may have problems after three months at home. They look at the physical as well as the psychological side of the veteran.

Another valuable and needed area of ministry centers upon the family who remains at home while the soldier is deployed. The family at home is always on the soldier's mind. Life at home goes on and the one serving abroad is no longer there to help. The spouse at home must maintain the household without the help of the one deployed. For many, this also means being a single parent.

The void on the home front is great; the needs are many. Maybe she/he needs a babysitter or some help around the yard. Maybe they are lonely and need a friend.

Problems at home, when the soldier is deployed, can distract the vet. If the vet is distracted, he could make a fatal mistake. Keeping the home front operating by helping the remaining spouse can go long ways in ministering to the whole family and having an impact on them.

Members of your church can help fill this gap. Offer to help or make repairs around the house. Make sure they are doing okay financially (sometimes a church can help with a one time gift to encourage the home front). It really blesses the family and the soldier to hear that his/her family is doing fine. My wife told me that one day someone just came up to our yard and mowed it for us when I was deployed. What a way to help vets and their families.

The biggest part of ministry to vets is sharing your faith with them. Many may know Christ. Many may not. This is an opportunity to let that light shine. Grow them in the local church and help answer their questions. They may have questions on evil, or needing forgiveness for something they participated in. A hard but rewarding aspect is consoling a family who lost their loved one to an IED in Iraq or Afghanistan. This is an awesome responsibility to share the gospel and honor the service of the vet.

It is good to "tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old oak tree" to let returning veterans know they are loved and were missed. However, there is much more that needs to be done beyond the yellow ribbon to minister to our returning soldiers. So, let me ask you again, do you have a plan to provide that help?

I would like to hear what you and your churches are doing to help vets. Has your church developed a ministry to vets? What kind of ministry do you have? What are some "positives" in your ministry you would like to share? What are some things churches need to watch out for in ministry to vets?

If you are on Facebook, connect with me there and let's talk. Look for Don Malin on Face Book and request to be a friend. Let me know you read the article or email me at richardmalin898@gmail.com.

Finally, get the book, "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon," and read it. It will give you much insight into the veterans and their families as well as ideas for ministry if you are not already involved.

Don Malin has served two tours of duty in the Middle East as a military chaplain. In addition to the work he does with the VA, Don serves the military community as the Executive Director of Cross-Swords, a ministry of the Crosswinds Foundation.

[Note: If your Church needs help or has questions about starting a ministry to military personnel, please email us at info@crosswindsfoundation.org and let us know and we will contact you to discuss how our staff can help you get started.