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Ministering to the military and their families

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"Being in boots overseas is an awful lonely time," said Maj. David Johnson, a chaplain with the North Dakota National Guard. And when veterans return from deployments, he said, they are "forever changed."

Johnson, along with other Guard chaplains, met with local clergy and pastoral ministers Thursday at Lord of Life Lutheran Church for Clergy Day 2010, spending the morning offering guidance as to how ministers can help military men and women and their families.

With North Dakota soldiers and airmen serving in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa, and closer to home during floods, snow emergencies and other natural disasters, clergy and congregations can serve as a source of comfort and support during difficult separations and after returning home, Johnson said.

"For some of our military members, their church is their bedrock and faith plays an instrumental role in their lives. It is essential that area clergy understand some of the unique challenges and stresses placed on today's military members and their families," he said.

In 2009 alone, more than 900 North Dakota soldiers and airmen deployed overseas.

Chaplain Bill Ziegler, the state chaplain for the Guard in the state, said that the Guard wanted to give pastors tools to minister to military families, who often live in "a different world" because of their loved one's service.

There also is a need for more military chaplains, he said, particularly Catholic priests. Clergy Day 2010 also hopes to find clergy who feel God is calling them to do more in this arena, Ziegler said.

Currently, four chaplains serve about 1,000 members of the Air Guard, with a fifth coming on board soon, he said. The more than 3,000 members of the Army Guard are served by four chaplains, with five candidates coming up, he said. There also are roles for chaplains' assistants, he said.

"We're not there to bless bombs and bullets," he said, "but to be with the soldiers and airmen in all the challenges they face."

Like hospital chaplains, military chaplains are trained in "psychological and spiritual first aid."

"People can say thoughtless things" to veterans and servicepeople, he said. "It requires some forgiveness."

Activated on Sept. 11, 2001, Ziegler spent a year on active duty, constantly on the go, and has first-hand experience in the bumpy "getting back" to the different pace of civilian life.

Soldiers can begin to think "nobody knows what I've been through," and start to isolate themselves, he said.

"Talking is the therapy," Ziegler said.

Post-service trauma has been around for a long time, he said. In the Civil War, the aftereffects were called a soldier's heart. In World War I, it was shell shock, in World War II, combat fatigue. Only in the 1980s did the term post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, become used.

Assistant State Adjutant Gen. Pat Martin told the group that today's conflicts are "not the wars of the past," but instead have undefined enemies and undefined battlefields.

Stressors for soldiers and their families include the military operations themselves, time apart from family, the preparations to leave and to return, and "meshing back together" to resume family life.

What can clergy do?

Welcome them back, Johnson said. "Appreciate and affirm their service."

Call upon other veterans, old or young, for insight. Hold a service of blessing and sending. Display pictures of soldiers and their families, he said.

Also important: Maintain contact with soldiers, provide a place for families to meet and offer practical services to families, he said.

Going from citizen to soldier is in some ways easier than to return from soldier to citizen, Johnson said.

Clergy can help by being alert for signs of distress and having a list of resources that can help, he said.