

FEDERAL CHAPLAINCY MINISTRY RESOURCE

Suggestions for Chaplain Reentry into the Congregation

Operational commitments assigned to the Armed Forces of the United States (Active Duty, Reserve and National Guard) in recent years have been at a level not experienced in several decades. A large number of Reserve and National Guard chaplains have been activated and had to leave their parishes for considerable periods of time, some up to 18 months.

Suggestions have been developed for chaplains and congregations in time of military involuntary call-up under the title "Suggestions for Chaplains and Congregations in Time of Military Involuntary Call-up".

Congregations whose pastors are members of the Reserve or National Guard should have a standing "Mobilization Agreement" to provide for the needs of the pastor and family as well as the congregation during periods of mobilization.

When the period of active duty has been completed and the pastor returns to the parish the critical process of reentry begins. The form it may take and the time required for its completion will vary with each pastor and congregation; some estimates are 3-6 months. Chaplain Lance Kittleson has provided a helpful description of the variety of experience chaplains may have during their deployment in his article "Coming home from Iraq" (*The Lutheran* magazine, September 2004). The experiences may range from frequent boredom to long periods of tension and tragedy. The effects of these experiences can be long lasting and chaplains are not immune to post-traumatic stress syndrome.

As marriage partners are advised to have patience with each other as they both make their way through the reentry process, the same patience is needed on the part of pastors and congregations. The most common instinct is the desire to "pick up where we left off and get on with it" as though nothing had changed in any of the relationships. Every effort should be made to resist this temptation since all persons in the relationships have changed and need time to get to know one another again. If a "returned chaplain" is available in the area, every effort should be made to invite the chaplain to meet with the congregation and congregation council to talk about the experience of deployment and reentry.

If at all possible, congregations are urged to make provision for the pastor and family to go away together for a couple of weeks and get reacquainted after the separation. This is the primary relationship and should be addressed first. It also may offer opportunity for the pastor to get body and emotions in the same place. With the rapid means of transportation available, it is possible for a person to be physically at home but emotionally still half a world away. Bishops should give consideration to organizing retreats for returning chaplains and their spouses, perhaps on a regional level, led by a

skilled counselor who would help the couples process their experiences and adjust to ministry in the parish.

Perhaps the next planned event would be an overnight retreat for the pastor and congregation council where the pastor can listen as council members describe how they experienced the time of separation and the pastor's experience also might be shared. Special attention should be paid to the new agreements that have been worked out within the congregation during this period. If a number of functions formerly performed by the pastor have been assumed by members of the congregation, some renegotiation will probably be necessary. When done with care and sensitivity, this process may produce new models of ministry to the benefit of the congregation.

For the congregation, the "get acquainted period" that was necessary when the pastor first arrived in the parish will need to be repeated in a shorter form at this time, perhaps the three to six months mentioned previously.

The pastor will experience some strong "pulls" in various directions:

- From the congregation. Some members of the congregation will require extended amounts of the pastor's time so the pastor can be brought up to date with the events in the member's life. The pastor must make special efforts to provide for this time.
- From the unit. Strong bonds are formed when people are together in a hostile environment. As the chaplain assisted the members of the unit to deal with events and experiences during the deployment, so she or he will usually feel the obligation to assist them in their family and community reentry process that may be prolonged and quite difficult. A chaplain's presence is in greater demand following a deployment than preceding it. Congregations can render valuable ministry to the community through sharing their pastor and facilities to assist soldiers as they navigate their individual reentry processes through such support activity.

The pastor will probably need to adjust to a different pace and focus upon return. Military operations are frequently characterized by a high level of activity and an intense focus on a particular task. The pace in most congregations is slower and the focus more diffused compared with military operations. This will call for some adjustment on the part of the returning chaplain who may experience the feeling of being "at loose ends" when the focus of activity is not as sharp.

The pastor may have experienced long periods of extreme tension produced by attempting to be aware of any imminent danger and instantly react appropriately. Ordinary sounds that occur without warning may be interpreted differently by persons returning from a combat theater and produce unusual reactions. It is not unusual for such persons to experience difficulty sleeping or have "nightmares" for a period of time following their return.

It would not be unusual for questions to arise in the hearts of both pastor and parishioners if this relationship still fits and is workable. All parties are urged to withhold judgment for some time and let the reentry process unfold.

A period of separation, be it between spouses or pastor and congregation, tends to amplify the existing relationship. If the relationship was warm, close, and caring prior to the separation it will probably be even more so upon return. By the same token, if the relationship was troubled prior to the deployment, it will usually be even more difficult at the end of the separation.

Excellent resources are provided by the Army Chief of Chaplains in the document "Deployment Resources for America's Clergy", which is available on the internet. Go to the [Army's site](#) and click on "Civilian Clergy Resources" on the left hand side of the home page.

Essential elements of the process:

Be patient with one another.

Listen intently to what the other person is saying.

Speak candidly and lovingly to one another.

Hold on to the unity you have been given in Christ.