

Ministry to Military Families in Our Communities: Caring for Those Who Keep Us Free

by

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"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Galatians 6:2 (NIV)

Have you seen them lately in the stores, the schools, and throughout the community? The families of Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard military members are all around us. They could be your neighbors! As increasing numbers of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard people are being deployed throughout the world, the ongoing threat to them is felt deeply and painfully by their family members back home.

The effects of activations, deployments, and family separations on military members and their families are significant. An empty chair at the table is a constant reminder that a loved one is gone. Many children experience fitful sleep nightly --- or little sleep at all. Others have difficulty concentrating on school work, or they "act out" at home or in public. Remaining spouses struggle to be both Mom and Dad until their loved one returns home. Extended family members keep their telephones and the internet busy as they pass on the happenings in their loved one's part of the world.

Deployed military units and individuals leave families in need of our support and care. Presbyterian congregations should see them as opportunities for outreach and ministry showing God's love. Many people sympathize with these families, and they genuinely want to help. They just don't know where to begin. So, the key question is: "What kinds of things can Presbyterian individuals, families, and congregations do to assist military families around them?"

MINISTERING TO MILITARY MEMBERS

The military's missions and unique lifestyle can make ministering to service members a challenge! However, with intentionality, creativity and flexibility, churches can bring the love and care of God to those in uniform who serve as "Freedom's Guardians." Here are some things you can do for them ...

- **Pray for them!** Ask God to give them strength to live their faith in unfamiliar surroundings, to live their faith, and to have the courage to serve honorably in trying times. Churches can pray for them publicly during worship services, and other church groups can pray for them habitually.
- **Give them assurance!** Using whatever communications means you have, remind them that their families are being cared for back home and that they are not forgotten.

- **Maintain contact!** Get the military member's EMAIL and unit addresses, and use these to keep the lines of communication open. Within the published military guidelines, send military members letters, cards, hometown newspapers, personal care items, and other "care packages."

MINISTERING TO MILITARY FAMILIES

Military mobilizations affect families and entire communities in many ways. Typically, military units are ushered off on deployments with patriotic fanfare and military ceremonies. When units have gone, military families are left with drastically increased responsibilities and a "world turned upside-down." From loneliness and depression to numerous other down-to-earth needs, military families present us with countless opportunities to demonstrate the love of God. There are a number of things we can do to minister to military families left behind to carry on their lives.

- **Begin a Family Fellowship Group.** Sadly, many military families will withdraw from social contacts during deployments. Presbyterian churches or even neighborhoods can begin a Family Fellowship Group to meet regularly (weekly, monthly, etc) providing a system of mutual support, fun, crafts, and the opportunity to share their burdens and trials with others. The groups can schedule skilled speakers to assist families dealing with a variety of deployment issues (parenting skills, step-parenting, anger management, financial management, and separation issues with family members). A key ingredient in these groups is encouragement! Families need to know how others are successfully coping with their challenges, and how God is working in each other's lives.
- **Begin a Telephone Tree.** During a deployment, family members often experience different types of grief. Denial, anger, frustration, and depression are typical. A Telephone Tree can provide family members with a spiritual resource to gain strength. Other emergencies and crises also provide the need for families to reach out for support. The Telephone Tree is a quick way to get others involved in meeting specific needs as they arise. It reminds the military families that "someone is always there."
- **Start a "Mr. Fixit" Ministry.** Many families need help with small repair jobs around the house, yard work, and general maintenance. Presbyterian churches are filled with caring Christians with skills in carpentry, electrical work, electronics, or even computers, and these talents and interests can be used by God in providing great ministry to military families.
- **Help with Landscaping.** Many families may need help with lawn mowing, tree and hedge trimming, and general clean up of their grounds. As we've seen so often the last several years around the country, they may need help hauling off debris after yard work and storms.
- **Help Cleaning House.** How many of us would appreciate help occasionally with laundry, vacuuming, or just straightening up?! A small amount of assistance can be a huge amount of ministry to stressed families.
- **Schedule a Movie Night.** Take a rented movie or one you own to a military family along with popcorn, cookies, etc. Only stay if asked. A movie night can also be scheduled at a church social hall for a group of families.
- **Cook a Dinner Meal.** On special days such as birthdays, anniversaries, or just any old night, cook an entire meal and take it to the military family. Be creative ... do it with a flair! Make it a special occasion.

- **Offer to Serve as a Substitute Mom or Dad.** Deployment times for military spouses are even more hectic than normal. Volunteer to take children to movies, birthday parties, ball games, and school events. “Senior saints” can be Substitute Grandparents. Offer to take children shopping --- daughters may need assistance shopping for prom dresses, and children may need help shopping for birthday or Christmas gifts.
- **Assist with Correspondence.** Some families may need help with EMAIL messages and letters to the military member. If you have a scanner or digital camera, you can help them send pictures of family, church, and community activities. It’s true --- a picture is worth a thousand words!
- **Offer to Provide Childcare.** Military spouses have many outside the home responsibilities and commitments during deployments. By providing childcare, you allow them to have some personal time or to attend various adult functions. Sometimes both children and parents need a break!
- **Send Letters and Cards.** Everyone needs encouragement! Cards and letters sent to military families can have tremendous benefits to the senders and the receivers. All of us want to know that others care about us and are praying for us. That need only grows during military separations!

A FEW WORDS OF CAUTION

Military deployments and family separations are very difficult for all those involved. Here are some things to keep in mind as you and your church care for military families ...

- Few things encourage military families like hearing that you are praying for their loved one. Demonstrate those prayers with a card, an EMAIL message, or a package. Hearing “We prayed for _____ today” can be the “good word” that gets a family member through another day!
- Sometimes a listening ear is what people need most. When they want to talk about their loved one, listen! When they don’t want to talk, let them be silent, also. Their needs are paramount, not yours!
- **DON’T** constantly ask the family members if they’ve heard from their loved one! Erratic communications is normal for military operations. By endlessly questioning the families, you may needlessly contribute to their existing anxiety and worry. If they have heard from their family member, they will tell you!
- **DON’T** tell the family members that you’ve just seen something terrible on the news! The families who watch the news nonstop already know about the terrible event, and those who avoid the news don’t want to know about it.
- Military family members experience an emotional and spiritual roller coaster during deployments. Sometimes all of us struggle with our faith --- even Presbyterians! Pray for the family members ... encourage them ... and allow them to experience the “ups and downs” of their own journey. They need the space to process their feelings and spiritual growth. Don’t judge them. With God’s help and your care, they will make it through this ordeal.
- If you don’t support the particular military deployment or war, keep it to yourself! Your arguments about the military operation mean far less to military families than the well-being of their loved one!

- **Do** visit military families and share your love and care with them! **BUT**, call in advance when you want to schedule a visit. Remember, every time there is a knock at the door, it could be the harbinger of bad news for them! For military people, bad news comes through the front door. Sometimes, surprises aren't a good thing!

Currently, the United States has huge numbers of Reserves and National Guard activated and deployed. Others will be following soon. Virtually every American community is being touched in one way or another. Certainly, these are difficult times, but they are also times of opportunity to minister to our military and their families. Look around --- has God placed a virtual missionary opportunity at your own doorstep? Prayerfully ask God to use you, your family, and your congregation to extend God's care for the people who are paying a high price for the freedom we all enjoy.

Don't forget to include our own Presbyterian Chaplains and their families in your prayers and ministry. The Chaplains endorsed by the **Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel (PCCMP)**, are providing critical pastoral care for military members in all uniformed services and in VA Hospitals. Their families are under great stress as they try to maintain some sense of normalcy while their own loved ones selflessly serve those committed to their care.

As a popular 70's Christian song said, "Love is something you do!" May God love and care for our military people through Presbyterian congregations and **YOU!**

"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."

James 2:18 (NIV)