



Study guide:

Caring for the military

They need our support

By Robert C. Blezard

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About 5,500 men and women in the armed forces have died in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003, and tens of thousands of others have returned or will return home with physical or emotional injuries. The long-running wars provide an opportunity for the church to serve those who have served their country.

EXERCISE 1: CARING FOR FAMILIES

Does your congregation or community have members serving in Afghanistan or Iraq? How has your congregation supported them or their families? What could it do better?

For action: Read through *The Lutheran's* articles and brainstorm ways your congregation can support service personnel and their families.

EXERCISE 2: THE NEEDIEST AMONG US

Matthew 25:31-46 lifts up the concern that God has for distressed people. Read the passage and discuss:

Jesus identifies certain people as needing assistance. Who are they and what do they have in common? Would it be correct to say that Jesus is talking about the people with the greatest obvious needs? How do the families of military personnel fall into that category? How do returning fighters? What are the emotional and spiritual hungers of these groups? How can your congregation help them?

EXERCISE 3: WIDOWS AND ORPHANS

The Bible repeatedly expresses God's concern for widows and orphans, but James 1:27 makes it plain. Read the passage and discuss:

Caring for widows and orphans is equated with what? Does this surprise you? Why is care for widows and orphans held so highly? What does it say about God's priorities? How is it different from how we ourselves define pure and faultless religion? How can we better look after the families of fallen service personnel?

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For extra credit: Do a Bible word search on “widow” and “orphan” and discuss God’s overwhelming concern for them.

EXERCISE 4: A ROLE FOR VETERANS

Military personnel who return from war face problems and issues that civilians often can’t fully understand because we’ve never experienced what they have. As a result, our well-intended efforts may not help much, and may actually harm. Have you or your congregation experienced this? Why is it important that veterans be involved in a church’s efforts to help returning fighters and their families? How can civilians learn from their expertise and experience?

Does your congregation have a formal way that veterans can consult, lead and work in efforts to assist current or former military personnel?

For action: Form an advisory group of veterans in your congregation. Ask them to address your group or council on how you can assist military personnel. Ask them to share their experiences of coming home.

EXERCISE 5: DIFFERENT HOMECOMINGS

Veterans returning from World War II came home to a nation that greeted them as heroes and helped transition them back to civilian life with the GI Bill, which offered them generous opportunities for education, business and home-ownership, as well as unemployment compensation. A generation later, soldiers returning from Vietnam received a different reception. Compare and contrast the two homecomings. Discuss:

What do members of your study group or congregation remember from those days? What have they read or heard? (Are there veterans who can share memories?) What lessons can be learned from how Vietnam veterans were treated? How can those lessons guide our response and care for today’s military personnel and their families?

For action: Come up with core principles for welcoming home our service personnel.

EXERCISE 6: WHO’S RIGHT OR WRONG? WHO CARES?

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have lasted nine and seven years, respectively—much longer than most observers had expected. Both campaigns have been controversial from the beginning. How have the wars been an issue in your community or congregation? How has any difference of opin-



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ion been handled? Even if people disagree on the politics of the wars, can everyone agree that we should support military personnel and their families? Why or why not?

Should the privates and corporals be held accountable for decisions made by civilian politicians and the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

EXERCISE 7: HONORING VETERANS

Many churches have made an effort to honor the men and women who have served in past wars. Bronze plaques listing the names of those who served in World War I or II are common.

Does your church have such plaques? What do they mean to members of the congregation? What do they mean to the veterans themselves? If your church honors veterans of WWII, does it also similarly honor veterans of Korea and Vietnam? How about the first Gulf War? The current conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan? Why or why not?

Is serving in a “popular” war more honorable than serving in an “unpopular” one? Should our respect for veterans depend on public attitudes about the conflict in which they served? If so, why? If not, then upon what should it be based?

EXERCISE 8: OUR DEBT TO VETERANS

Men and women who put on a military uniform and serve in the name of the U.S. often encounter hardships and trials that civilians can only see in movies—or nightmares. What do we “owe” these fighters who return from war? Should they be given the same kind of educational and financial opportunities afforded past veterans? Why or why not?

Should veterans receive full medical treatment for war injuries to their bodies, minds and souls? Why or why not? If returning veterans suffer from permanent disabling injuries as a result of their service, should medical and financial assistance to them ever be terminated? Why or why not?

Should tax dollars go to support veterans? Would you pay higher taxes to expand veteran programs as military personnel return from Afghanistan and Iraq? Should the church advocate for public policies that support veterans?

MIKE ELICSON

A photo and flag rest at the grave of Damon Winkleman. The Army combat medic and member of St. John Lutheran Church, Lakeville, Ohio, was killed in action in September 2009.

Caring for the military

Novak is a freelance writer in Lisle, Ill., and a member of Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Naperville, Ill.



Sgt. Maj. Richard Winkleman (center) of the 300th Military Police Brigade in Columbus, Ohio, says his congregation, St. John, Lakeville, supports him emotionally while he grieves for his son, Damon, killed in action in September 2009.

their rural community. St. John's members immediately put the family on the prayer chain. Within an hour, Winkleman said 60 percent of the congregation had arrived at their door.

Over the next few days, parishioners rotated—talking, praying and crying with the family. They also greeted visitors, answered the phone, cleaned and prepared meals.

"They insisted that we do nothing so we could sit and talk with visitors," Winkleman said. "It was a continuous banquet for days. The congregation made sure we were taken care of."

Despite their loss, Winkleman said he and Patricia and their two other adult sons, Nathan and Jason, felt blessed with the outpouring of support from St. John. They were particularly touched by a scholarship fund the congregation established in Damon's name and a memorial tree members planted in their yard.

They remain grateful for members' continued prayers, phone calls and visits. "For the first couple of months you're living in this whirlwind trance," he said. "When reality sets in and you realize this is long term, family and church become so important."

Fact: They need us

As U.S. combat operations continue in the Middle East, so do opportunities for the church to support military members and families like the Winklemans, church leaders say. As of

May 3, the U.S. death toll for Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and other locations stood at 5,483, according to the U.S. Defense Department.

"Our approach has always been that it doesn't matter whether you're for or against our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan," said Steven P. Ridenhour, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Wytheville, Va. "The fact of the matter is we have men and women there who have left their families behind and need our support."

To help, Holy Trinity has raised nearly \$22,000 for its Troop Support Ministry, sending hundreds of care packages and 3,500 to 4,000 phone cards since December 2004.

Through Operation Joshua, members of Hope Lutheran Church, Fargo, N.D., also send care packages to "boost troops' morale, relieve their tension, and help them laugh and smile a little bit," said Ann Seczko, coordinator of Hope Care caring ministries.

Hope's members pray over the packages before mailing them. "Our prayers for them include inner strength and the knowledge that Americans will never forget the sacrifices they are making for all of us," Seczko said.

Not alone

"I've never experienced anything like that in my life," Angela Davis said of the support she received from Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Aberdeen, S.D., while her future husband, Thomas, was deployed to Iraq for seven months in 2008. "I felt surrounded by caring people. They were right there anytime I needed them. I

Across the ELCA, they 'need our support'

By Cindy Novak

They'd just buried their 23-year-old son, Damon. Richard and Patricia Winkleman then prepared to attend a funeral for one of his comrades, also killed in Afghanistan. After driving 10 hours that night, they arrived with food and other donations from their congregation, St. John Lutheran, Lakeville (McZena), Ohio.

"It made quite an impact that we would leave immediately after our son's funeral and drive all night to attend their son's funeral the next morning," said Damon's father, Sgt. Maj. Richard Winkleman, 300th Military Police Brigade. "We took the blessings we received and immediately passed them on to the other soldier's family."

And the blessings the Winklemans received from St. John came in innumerable ways.

News of Damon's death last September spread quickly throughout

For a study guide, see page 27. For resources and more about Damon Winkleman, see www.thelutheran.org/feature/july.



COURTESY OF THE EITEL FAMILY.

Camping R&R

Scott Eitel, a former Marine turned Air National Guard, his wife, Becky, and their sons Nathan, Travis and Clayton wear patriotic T-shirts over the July 4th weekend at Camp Onomia, Onamia, Minn. Each July 4 weekend, this ELCA outdoor ministry of ers military families a free stay, f lling them up with good food, activities, Bible study, baby-sitting, campf res and more.

didn't even have to say, 'I'm having a hard time today.' They were very proactive in reaching out."

During his deployment, Tim

Martin had peace of mind knowing Christ Lutheran Church, Roanoke, Va., was supporting his wife, Betsy, and providing positive role models for his teenage daughters, Carly and Caryn.

"One of the key issues for me was that my daughters have strong ties to church, family and school for positive support," said Martin, who deployed to Iraq with the Third Naval Construction Regiment, attached to the First Marine Expeditionary Force, in 2006-07. "I wanted them to

feel secure while I was gone, around people who could look out for them."

Youth group leaders provided a sounding board for Carly, Martin said. "She didn't talk about her feelings [about my deployment] with my wife or at school," he added. "But the youth activities gave her an outlet to vent some of her frustrations."

And the congregation helped Martin feel connected to his family, thousands of miles away. "I knew where they were every Sunday morning," he said. "I knew they were safe. It was something that brought a little

peace and comfort."

The congregation also sent Martin a large greeting card with handwritten messages like "I'm praying for you and your men."

"It was reassuring to know that people were thinking about not only me but everyone else over there," he said. "Sometimes you can feel like you're the only guy out there on an island. But when you get those cards, you realize you're not alone."

While deployed to Iraq in 2008, Carly Taylor received numerous cards, e-mails and well-wishes via Facebook from members of her congregation, Epiphany Lutheran, Pickerington, Ohio.

Taylor's dad, Michael Myers, an Epiphany member and an Army Reservist himself, told other parishioners that in his experience the little gestures—letters, cards and well-wishes—mean the most. "Every time she moved from one training assignment to the next, I couldn't keep her address updated at the church office quick enough," he said.

People continue to ask Myers about Carly, who is currently stationed at Fort Campbell on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. "It's nice to know that others are still thinking about her," he said. □

Healing the wounded soul

Congregations can begin by understanding some hurts can't be seen

By Cindy Novak

According to a 2008 RAND Corp. study, *Invisible Wounds of War*, one in five service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan report symptoms of post-traumatic

stress disorder or major depression. In addition, about 19 percent may have experienced a traumatic brain injury, usually the result of powerful roadside bombs.

But those statistics are likely higher, said Mary Neal Vieten, a Navy

Reservist who served more than 10 years as a clinical psychologist in the Navy and is currently president and co-founder of Mission: PTSD.

"Part of the reason ... is because people don't want to admit they are having issues," she said. "If the government is going to say, 'We are going to send off 100 people and more than 80 are going to come back with seri-

ous mental health issues,' they will have a hard time getting the public behind that."

After their discharge, it can be difficult for returning veterans to reintegrate into civilian life, said Mary Beth Galey, senior director for services, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota.

"They are dealing with so much complexity," she said. For example, some veterans find limited employment opportunities in a challenged economy. Some find that their children have gone through developmental stages—or even have been born—while they were deployed.

"It's like you stepped out of your life for 18 months," Galey said. "There's a huge amount of pressure to get situated, move forward, go back to your job and resume your normal life."

But that pressure to return to a normal life can be overwhelming and can lead to substance abuse, domestic abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system, depression, even suicide, she said.

Seeing their perspective

The 2007 Churchwide Assembly asked ELCA congregations and agencies to work with military chaplains on additional ways to provide "healing ministries to military veterans and their families."

Vieten said churches can support veterans in various ways, such as establishing support groups, calling and checking in on vets and their families, and helping fill out paperwork for the Veterans Affairs and other agencies, a task that can overwhelm someone with PTSD.

And while congregations can provide support, they also can be "awful" places for returning veterans suffering from PTSD, said John C. Manz, a clinical independent social worker for LSS of Minnesota and a pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran, St. Paul, Minn.

"They've learned to not be around crowds, to not sit where they can't see the door, and to be very careful about who is sitting behind them," he said. "They've learned to be suspicious of everyone and everything. Can you imagine now sitting in an Easter service when ... there are chairs in the aisle and you can't get out?"

Returning to church can be overwhelming, agreed Ed Hatcher, a retired Air Force chaplain. "When you come back to your congregation, you may feel like members don't understand," he said. "You may think, 'You have your faith in a nice, safe, predictable world. Our faith has been tempered in a world in which there is horror, destruction, death and danger at every turn.'"

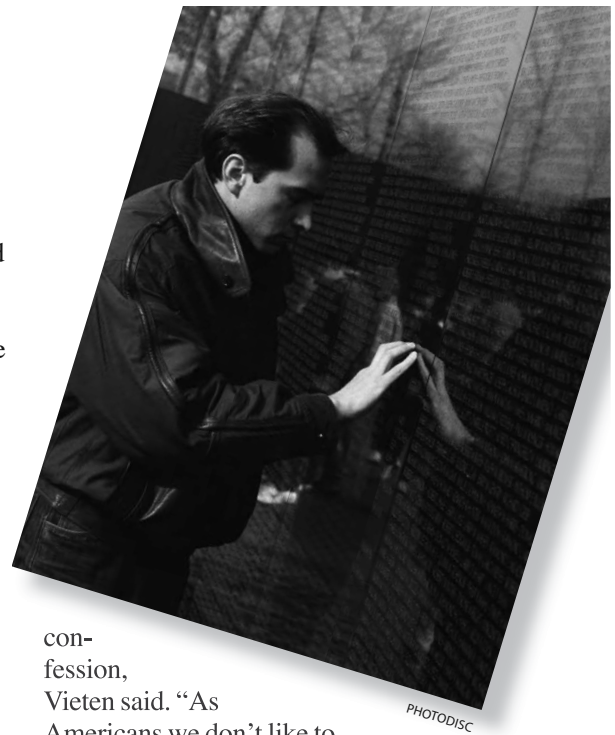
"When we say God is all-loving, all-kind ... a vet may wonder, 'Then why does God allow all of this terrible stuff that I've witnessed and was involved in to happen?'"

"Easy beliefs of our childhood don't stand up when people encounter war," said Amy Blumenshine, a diaconal minister and founder of Coming Home Collaborative, the Minneapolis Area Synod's veterans' ministry. "Who is helping veterans develop those changed images of God? Not enough. So many vets don't return to church."

'We ... can do a better job'

Current literature says those who were involved in combat and killing often have the greatest difficulty transitioning back into the civilian world, Hatcher said. "We as a church can do a much better job in terms of our absolution and forgiveness," he said. "Even the command 'Thou shalt not kill' creates a dilemma for those who serve in the military. Most scholars will tell you that the better translation is 'Thou shalt not commit murder.'"

Cheryl can even offer times for



confession, Vieten said. "As Americans we don't like to think about the fact that our soldiers go over there and do things they are not proud of. But they do," she said. "It's part of their job. ... A pastor can say, 'Let me talk to you about this. I can help you grapple with these difficult things that occurred.'"

Pastors also can encourage veterans to talk about their grief. "When your buddy dies in combat, he gets put into a plastic bag and gets taken away. You don't get to attend the funeral," Vieten said. "You don't get to cry. You have to keep on going. The pastor can help with that grief, survival guilt and battle fatigue that comes after loss after loss."

And if a pastor isn't a veteran, it's "wildly" important that they become aware of other clergy in the area who are, Vieten said. "Pastors should take a humble approach about the fact that they can't sit back and say, 'I know what you're thinking and feeling,' because they don't know," she said.

But it's a new day for military culture and mental health issues, Galey said, adding: "We are seeing more people who feel comfortable accessing care, whereas before there was more stigma."

Manz added: "There is terrific joy in watching people start to understand there is a path ... to take back some of that pain." □

ELCA military chaplain Kerstin Hedlund baptizes Sgt. Jason Carter in summer 2009 at Fort Hood, Texas—just days before their unit was deployed to Iraq. Hedlund covered the altar with a bedsheet and for a font “borrowed a pancake mixing bowl from the dining facility,” she says.



For ELCA military chaplains ...

‘Every day is Sunday’

By Anne Ford

When Army Reservist Christopher D. Laughlin was a homesick 18-year-old in basic training eight years ago, two things sustained him through weeks of drill-sergeant diatribes and endless push-ups: the daily mail call and Sunday worship services led by an ELCA Army chaplain.

“It was a connection to home,”

Ford is freelance writer living in Chicago.

said Laughlin, a lifelong Lutheran who recently completed chaplaincy training.

But as the number of ELCA military chaplains continues to dwindle, the kind of connection Laughlin experienced is available to fewer ELCA members serving in the armed forces.

Darrell D. Morton, assistant to the presiding bishop for federal chaplaincy ministries, would like to have at least 150 ELCA military chaplains on active duty. Instead, he’s seen the number shrink from 82 to 70 since 2008, mostly due to retirement.

That’s a nearly 15 percent drop in just two years.

“We can no longer be sure that there’s a Lutheran chaplain in every installation, even in units that may be in proximity to real danger,” Morton said. “The impact for our military members is huge if we care about the sacramental ministry that we Lutherans are called upon to provide.”

Several possible reasons exist for the shortage, including the age requirement—with a few exceptions, military chaplains entering active duty can’t have reached their 42nd birthdays—and the intimidation fac-

tor. That is, “if you’ve not been a part of the military, it seems quite foreign and maybe even kind of scary,” Morton said. “It’s very easy for the military to feel like a big machine.”

But that’s exactly why more chaplains are needed, he added. “One of the things the chaplaincy brings is the human touch. It’s not a matter of us saying, ‘Hey, I’m praying for you.’ Prayers are very important, but chaplains are out there with people in the midst of all the stuff they’re going through,” he said. “That’s the incarnational aspect of ministry.”

Michael T. Lembke, an ELCA Army chaplain, sums it up this way: for him and his colleagues, “every day is Sunday.” (See page 26.)

‘Can I talk to you?’

Lembke led the prayers at the memorial service for 13 people killed in the mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas, last November. He now serves as the U.S. Forces-Iraq chaplain in Baghdad, where he is frequently approached by service members asking, “Chaplain, can I talk to you?”

“In the combat zone, there is a special poignancy to these encounters,” he e-mailed. “A relationship that might take six months to develop in the civilian world is quickly grown in a couple of minutes.”

Military chaplains also are in a unique position to provide pastoral care to the unchurched. Air Force Chaplain Christine Blice-Baum remembers chatting one evening with an airman at his post. “He said, ‘You know, Chaplain, I am not a very religious person,’” she e-mailed from Baghdad. That was the segue to a deeply spiritual discussion carried on while helicopters buzzed overhead.

Afterward, Blice-Baum wrote, “as I walked away and looked up into the star-filled Iraqi night sky, I was grateful for our holy conversation in

a combat zone.”

In Morton’s view, ELCA chaplains are particularly well-suited to intense, on-the-spot pastoral counseling because of what he calls their “amazing emphasis on God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”

“Our chaplains don’t beat people up with a Bible,” he said. “They’re nonjudgmental. That’s not to say that anything goes, but I think our chaplains are more willing to accept people where they are and be with them where they are.”

David G. Oravec serves as casualty affairs chaplain at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. He works primarily with returned Marines who have been wounded in combat. He said the ELCA’s emphasis on ecumenism has served him well in his military career. “You don’t compromise who you are, but you learn to understand and appreciate” other religious traditions, he said.

Another Navy chaplain, Russell Graef, agreed. “It is a privilege to be able to lead worship for Christians from many denominations,” he e-mailed from his deployment in Afghanistan. “We don’t focus so much on our differences as much as on our similarities partly because we are just so glad to have fellow believers with whom we can pray.”

At the same time, Oravec added, “I wouldn’t be truthful if I said there wasn’t a special connection when I meet another Lutheran brother or sister in the service. There’s that sense of being at home with another person.”

Thanks to the new Military Chaplaincy Program at Lutheran Southern Seminary, Columbia, S.C., more ELCA service members could make that special connection in the future.

About-face, hopefully

With the help of a grant from Thri-

vent Financial for Lutherans Foundation, Southern Seminary now offers seminarians—in addition to a two-week course designed to help them discern whether they are called to the chaplaincy—the opportunity to earn a master of divinity degree with an emphasis on military chaplaincy.

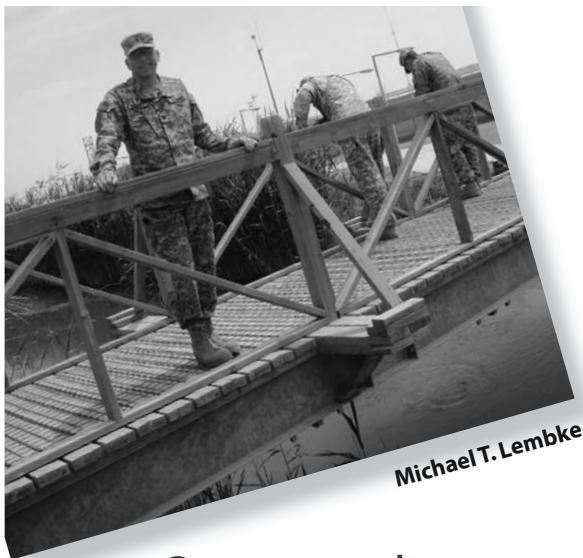
“Because we are just down the road from Fort Jackson, we are very well-situated to do this,” said George Onstad, the program’s project coordinator. Fort Jackson houses the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center, where the Air Force Chaplain Service Institute, Naval Chaplaincy School and Center, and Army Chaplain Center and School are located.

Students entering the program must first be approved as a chaplain candidate by their ordination committee and bishop and accepted into the military’s chaplain candidacy program. Once in the divinity program, they take courses at Southern and at Fort Jackson.

As former project officer for the joint working group that created the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center at Fort Jackson, ELCA Army chaplain Eric Wester can testify firsthand to the need for Lutheran chaplains.

It was normal to have 300 to 500 young Lutherans in the pews during the weekly worship services he held during peak training times at Fort Jackson, Wester recalled. “In the absence of an ELCA pastor, Lutheran soldiers are given the option to attend other Protestant services,” he said. “But without a Lutheran pastor, there’s not going to be a Lutheran liturgy.” □

Want to learn more about the ELCA chaplaincy program? Contact the ELCA Bureau for Federal Chaplaincy Ministries at 202-822-6414 or elcachap@aol.com, or visit www.elca.org/federalchaplains.



Michael T. Lembke

Steeped in hospitality

Could Iraqi tea offer a recipe for building bridges?

By Michael T. Lembke

In Georgia, asking for tea gets you a tall glass of sweetened iced tea. It took awhile for a Yankee like me to get the hang of it. Here in Iraq, where I'm serving as an ELCA military chaplain, drinking tea has an almost sacramental character. No one would think of holding a meeting here without chai tea.

How tea is made and the way it is served is a gateway for spiritual diplomacy, giving me insight into the *soul* of Iraqis. Spiritual diplomacy, a term I learned from a Danish Lutheran chaplain in Bosnia, reflects the sacred dynamics when people of faith enter into authentic dialogue.

Iraqi people have a specific way of preparing tea. **First, the water must be boiling hot.** Nothing short of boiling will do. Truly good tea is a right

now experience. It must be hot.

Appreciating engagement with another culture is a right now thing as well. There's an immediacy and intensity in fully grasping the power of the moment. Religious dialogue is never without an agenda, revealed and hidden, but we also hope for a moment of shared experience in the here and now.

Tea is an unspoken, immediate expression of hospitality. It doesn't sit around all day, like coffee, growing bitter and tepid. Here, spiritual dialogue over tea involves savoring what harvest may come from the conversation. Much in the same way Jesus engaged two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and later in the breaking of bread, so, too, there can be immediate revealed connections in cross-cultural or interreligious dialogue.

Second, steep the tea for exactly five minutes—an absolute in the tradition. More than five minutes and your tea is too strong.

In this same way, I've learned to help "steep" cross-cultural conversation in short intervals. When conversations grow contentious (as they tend to do), I've learned to resist the temptation to "prove" my point, raise my voice or lean forward. It's right to share opinions, to be authentic, to admit shortcomings and disagreements, but don't tarry too long on the difficult terrain. Dwelling on the friction points leads to a bitter brew.

As we read in James 1:19-20, as believers we are to "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

Third, serve the tea in small

portions. Our Iraqi hosts want us to enjoy the tea now and in small—not 42-ounce rock-your-world java—servings.

Following this example, I'm trying to take each conversation in its own context, in small portions and with limited goals. I can always have a sec-

ond glass and we can always meet and talk again. As one cup of tea doesn't represent the whole tea universe, this one conversation isn't to be extrapolated to all times, all places and all people.

Relax, no need to get right to the point—the *point* is often simply to be together, drinking tea. It's an experience of good will and hope, reminding me of Jesus' words in Matthew 6:34: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Four, sugar is a key ingredient that doesn't diminish or dilute but rather enhances the tea.

In spiritual diplomacy a relaxed, cordial manner based on listening (rather than talking) brings *sweetness* to the conversation. This isn't *syrupy* manipulative condescension that is the death of mutual care and consolation and quality dialogue. Sugar provides a joyful pace to conversation, where one isn't so much interested in destination and action but more curious about the journey together.

Lastly, presentation is important.

An Iraqi host will arrange tea on a lovely brass tray with small glass cups in brass holders, often with a mint leaf on top of each glass.

Here, when I set up an engagement, the setting is as critical as our topics of conversation. It ought to convey a sense of openness, hospitality and a willingness to take some risks in extending friendship.

There is a sacred aspect to dialogue, when people of differing cultures and faiths come together. I've learned to closely and curiously observe the small details of culture, not merely to avoid offense, but to be open and provide a nonanxious presence.

Learning to drink tea is making a positive difference for my work and ministry as an Army chaplain. □

Lembke, an ELCA pastor, is currently the U.S. Forces-Iraq chaplain in Baghdad. He writes regularly about his experiences at www.thelutheran.org/blog/chaplain.