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8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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**Evangelical Lutheran
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Study guide

Ministry of presence

By Robert C. Blezard

Federal chaplains who serve with our active-duty service personnel and in our nation's military hospitals and federal prisons see a side of human life that few outsiders do. The ELCA pastors who serve as chaplains provide a powerful witness of Jesus to men and women in stressful and challenging situations. They bring a light of Christ into dark situations.

Exercise 1: Military chaplains

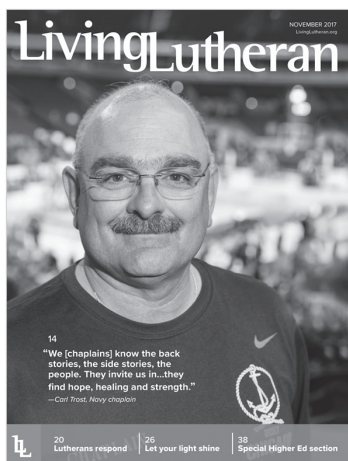
In the aftermath of the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, our nation has been engaged in some of the longest-running war operations in our history.

- What stresses have the long-standing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq caused for your family, congregation or community? How has this stressed our nation as a whole?
- How have you seen war affect the men and women who serve in our armed forces, or their families?
- What have you learned from others or the media about the stresses of war on military personnel and their families?
- Thinking of how your pastor accompanies and ministers to your congregation, why is it important that chaplains are present to help military personnel and their families?

Exercise 2: Military support

- See how many answers you can come up with for this question: Why is it important that the ELCA, through its three expressions (church-wide, synodical and congregational) encourage and support pastors in military chaplaincy?
- What does it say about the ELCA that we enthusiastically and proudly engage in military chaplaincy?
- As a study group, brainstorm ways that individuals, your congregation or your synod can assist ELCA military chaplaincy.

For action: Networking with your synod or with the ELCA Federal Chaplaincy Ministry, get in touch with a military chaplain from your area and establish a relationship with him or her. Learn about and publicize the chaplain's work—the challenges and the joys. Ask how your congregation can help, and then follow through.



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Exercise 3: Military memories

If there are veterans in your study group, congregation or community, invite them to share a time when a chaplain helped them or a fellow member of the armed forces. Discuss with the veteran:

- During your time in service, what did it mean for you to have chaplains to accompany you and your friends in uniform?
- How did the chaplains' ministry of presence enrich you or the group?
- What are some of the unique pressures and circumstances facing personnel in the armed forces that make chaplains essential personnel?
- What would be lost if there were no chaplains serving in our military? How would things be different?
- Why should we encourage and support military chaplaincy?

Exercise 4: Hospital chaplains

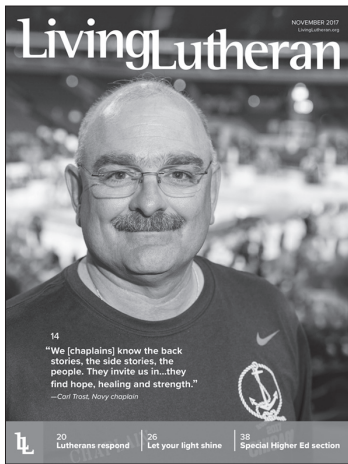
Think of your (or someone you know) most recent hospital stay.

- As the doctors took care of your physical health, what mental, emotional and spiritual needs did you have? What thoughts or issues arose that were helpful (or would have been helpful) to talk through with a chaplain?
- From personal experience, stories of friends or the news media, what can you say about the kind of injuries for which our returning combat service personnel are treated in military and veterans' hospitals?
- What are the short-term emotional and spiritual needs for injured combat personnel in our military and veterans' hospitals? The long-term needs?
- How many good reasons can you think of for why those needs are best addressed by qualified chaplains serving in military and veterans' hospitals?
- Why is it important that ELCA chaplains serve in such settings? What does it say about us as a Christian church to support this effort?

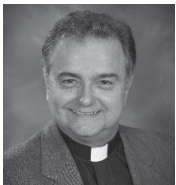
Exercise 5: On the home front

Our nation's military is deployed around the globe, and yet almost every community in the United States has firsthand experience with the armed forces—for instance, through local installations, nearby bases, Reserve or National Guard units, as well as veterans' organizations and support groups. Moreover, many people have family members serving in the armed forces.

- What connections does your congregation have to the armed forces and the men and women who serve?



About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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- How are you in relationship with them and ministering to them?
- What more could your congregation do to deepen those connections in support or ministry?
- In what ways is your congregation ministering to local families of military personnel? What more can you do?
- What potential connections could your congregation explore to support local military personnel and their families? How would you go about pursuing them?

Exercise 6: Prison chaplains

The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 mentions a number of groups for whom God identifies. Read the passage and discuss:

- In what context are prisoners mentioned? With what other groups of people?
- In what ways are prisoners the “least among us”?
- How does God expect us to treat prisoners? What’s at stake?
- Given the teaching, why is it important that our ELCA Federal Chaplaincy Ministry provide trained pastors to work in prisons? Why should we support that as ELCA members?
- How does Matthew 25 provide an important corrective to the “lock them up and forget them” attitude toward incarceration?
- What do you know about prison life and the hardships that face those who are behind bars? Why should we care? How can chaplains help?
- What are the special problems facing inmates who are released as “returning citizens”? How can chaplains help?
- Does your congregation have a prison ministry, or does it support a prison ministry? Why or why not?
- Does your synod have a prison ministry? Why or why not?

For study and action: Download “Hearing the Cries,” the 2013 ELCA social statement on criminal justice (available at elca.org/socialstatements). Study the statement and its observations on the problems and needs of inmates, as well as problems within our criminal justice system. Explore how you can help educate others and raise awareness of the need for prison ministry, including federal chaplains. Locate a prison ministry in your area or synod that your congregation can help support.



A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

By Megan Brandsrud

Erik Feig, an Army Reserve chaplain and interim pastor of Celebration Lutheran Church, Mount Juliette, Tenn., leads a Christmas Eve candlelight service at Joint Base Balad in Iraq.

Deployed in Saudi Arabia, John Shipman, an Air Force chaplain, had an airman come to his door looking for help. He told Shipman that he was in charge of the armory, had access to weapons and was thinking about taking his life.

Maintaining confidentiality, Shipman worked with the man's commander to help him get out of the situation, and the airman was allowed to leave.

There are more than 160 ELCA pastors like Shipman who, through the church's federal chaplaincy ministries, provide pastoral care in contexts that are both public and intimate.

Endorsed by their church and employed by the government, ELCA federal chaplains serve in the U.S. military, Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers and correctional institutions—places that most Americans will never experience. While these places might sometimes be dangerous, remote or isolating, chaplains are present there, sharing the gospel and bringing messages of hope, forgiveness and healing.

"The ELCA provides federal chaplains in the military, VA hospitals and prisons because there are ELCA members in all of those institutional settings," said Eric Wester, assistant to the presiding bishop for federal chaplaincy ministry. "One reason we send pastors is, in many cases, these individuals wouldn't have access to the word and sacrament ministries otherwise."

It's the responsibility of federal chaplains to help uphold the First Amendment rights that provide for free exercise of religion. ELCA chaplains are put in secular settings where they are expected to provide religious and spiritual care for people of any or no faith. They are pastor to ELCA members and a chaplain to all.

"Our theology is anchored in grace rather than conversion," Wester said. "We trust God with the faith life of every person a chaplain encounters, and our chaplains approach that person from a perspective of genuine respect and affection. ELCA chaplains are highly regarded in their practice of ministry because of their strong commitment to ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, and respect for the God-given dignity in everyone."

For many ELCA chaplains, this pluralistic environment is a highlight of their work.

"It's incredible ministering to people of other faiths," said Erik Feig, an Army Reserve chaplain and interim pastor of Celebration Lutheran Church, Mount Juliette, Tenn. "It's a gift to me as a pastor. My parish ministry is ministering to people like me, but the world isn't just like me



Photo: Will Nunnally

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton (right) gives Rear Adm. Margaret Kibben, chief of chaplains of the Navy, an ELCA *Prayer Book for the Armed Services*. Earlier this year Eaton visited the Pentagon to meet with representatives from the chiefs of chaplains' offices.

and my church. This opened doors to learn and grow, but also to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus with people who might have other ideas about what that's about."

Fredi Eckhardt, chief of chaplains at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, said, "You realize that working with so many different people, faith groups, religious and spiritual points of view doesn't threaten who you are—it strengthens it."

Pastor in uniform

The largest number of ELCA federal chaplains serve in the military, with 136 men and women in the Army, Navy (includes Coast Guard and Marine Corps) and Air Force. They're commissioned and go through officer training but are noncombatant. And even though they wear rank insignia, chaplains typically get to work across ranks, ministering and counseling to service members at all levels.

Out of 1.5 million men and women on active duty across all military services, Wester said there are approximately 30,000 ELCA members serving. But that number increases when you add the people who serve in the Reserves and National Guard. Chaplains in the Reserves and National Guard share their military time with a congregation.

Michael Lozano, an Army Reserve chaplain, talks with his congregation to help them see their place in his role as chaplain: "It's an extension of their ministry. When I put the uniform on, I represent not the U.S. Army Reserve, but Christ Lutheran Church in Sharon, Pa., where I currently serve. I'm part of their ministry, not just to the wider church, but to all who wish to know God's love."

Military chaplaincy presents many opportunities for ministry among young adults, with 75 percent of people in uniform younger than 26.

"These are college-aged adults, maybe leaving home for the first time," said Jasmine Tesdahl, an Air Force Reserve chaplain and pastor of Faith (Cuba City) and First English (Platteville) Lutheran churches in Wisconsin. "They're learning how to manage a budget, get to work on time, all the things that young adults do—except their getting to work on time is to guard multimillion-dollar nuclear weapons. They're studying for tests and getting judged all the time. ... It's important they have someone to talk to."

From drill weekends to monthslong deployments, military chaplains work to help men and women in uniform through all the transitions that can come from a life and career in the armed services.

"We prepare them physically but also spiritually," said James Eckert, a Navy Reserve chaplain recalled to active duty. "We prepare them to be mindful of their humanity in uniform. Everyone is changed by the experience of war, but some have a harder time making those transitions than others, and we're there to support them in their new reality. We have concern for the whole person, and we have the privilege as a chaplain to help them in that process."

Tony Setley, an Army National Guard chaplain and campus pastor at West Virginia University in Morgantown, said, "To be able to introduce the idea to soldiers and their families that what they're doing is something they've been called to do ... to expand on this Lutheran idea of vocation brings a new notion of faithfulness into the everyday lives of the soldiers we serve."



Fredi Eckhardt, chief of chaplains at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, says she and her team of chaplains help provide holistic care to veterans and their families.



Photo: Courtesy of Eric Wester

Jasmine Tesdahl, an Air Force Reserve chaplain and pastor of Faith (Cuba City) and First English (Platteville) Lutheran churches in Wisconsin, takes the oath of office. “Being a pastor makes me a better chaplain, and being a chaplain makes me a better pastor,” she said.

Perform and provide

At the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, Eckhardt leads eight chaplains of various religions in providing spiritual and religious care to hundreds of veterans, some who could be in for a short outpatient procedure and others who are in hospice, approaching the end of life.

“There is no typical day,” Eckhardt said. “We deal with everything from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), palliative care and hospice, mental health, and intensive and acute care. Our care is totally veteran-led. It’s making no assumptions about where the person or family is, walking with them, being present and giving them time. And also to have the grace to bow out when you perceive you need to.”

For the 27 ELCA chaplains at VA medical centers, their role can include not just care for the veteran, but also for their families and sometimes the medical staff that cares for them. While there are regular chapel services at the medical center, Eckhardt emphasized that individual patient care is less liturgical and more focused on active listening.

“It’s a deep and rich experience and it involves many nuances,” she said. “We’re out there in the daily grind with people, very hands-on. You figure out what you can do in this moment, right now, to be helpful to that person. The privilege of being with people, and hearing their stories and deepest concerns and fears, and feeling like they trust us enough to divulge that stuff, is a privilege. I think that’s rewarding.”

In a setting just as religiously diverse, chaplains who work at federal correctional institutions are in highly restricted environments. Lew Messinger, one of the ELCA’s two U.S. Bureau of Prisons chaplains, works at the low-security federal correctional institution in Allenwood, Pa. Due to the high number of religions and faiths represented at the facility he serves, he said much of his role is facilitating.

“We have the same mantra as they do in the military: to perform and provide,” he said. “I can’t perform the prayers for the Muslims, but I’m responsible for providing them a space and coordinating for some kind of leadership—maybe an inmate who takes a leadership role and I’m more or less a supervisor of that particular chapel program.”

Sometimes the restrictions on inmates can make Messinger’s job challenging, as he tries to accommodate for those who want to meet collectively for worship and prayer while still working with the prison to ensure security for the 935 inmates.

“To be able to introduce the idea to soldiers and their families that what they’re doing is something they’ve been called to do ... to expand on this Lutheran idea of vocation brings a new notion of faithfulness into the everyday lives of the soldiers we serve.”



Photo: Courtesy of Eric Wester

Eric Wester (left), assistant to the presiding bishop for federal chaplaincy ministry, visits Scott Ofsdahl, an Air Force chaplain for more than 28 years.

In addition to coordinating up to 20 religious programs per week, Messinger preaches and administers sacraments during worship on Sundays.

In the Bureau of Prisons, chaplaincy falls under re-entry services. “We’re considered one of the primary program areas that helps facilitate an inmate’s preparation for re-entry into society,” Messinger said. “For the ones who our ministry and program matter most to, coming here was a real wake-up call for them. They’re missing something, and they tried to go down one avenue to fill it and went down this bad path. If they can hear a welcoming and freeing gospel, despite all of the terrible bad that they’ve committed, I’d like to believe they could leave here a much more balanced person who is less likely to ever come back.”

Public church

Federal chaplains have many of the same roles and responsibilities as pastors in a parish setting: they preach in worship, administer sacraments, bury the dead, counsel and teach.

“We’re simply clergy and not separated from the church, just in a different environment,” said Scottie Lloyd, pastor of Lutheran Church of Our Savior, San Bernardino, Calif., and a retired Army chaplain. “Forty years ago when I came into the system, I’d hear, ‘So when are you going to come back to ministry?’ It was a hurtful thing ... as if we’d somehow left the church and weren’t in real ministry.”

“If they can hear a welcoming and freeing gospel, despite all of the terrible bad that they’ve committed, I’d like to believe they could leave here a much more balanced person who is less likely to ever come back.”

Jeff Jacobson, a Navy Reserve chaplain recalled to active duty, takes the oath of office administered by Michelle Howard, a Navy admiral who was his high school classmate.



Photo: Courtesy of Eric Wester

Chaplains are often privy to intimate and vulnerable moments since their role has them immersed in people’s daily lives.

In a combat support hospital in Baghdad, Scott Ofsdahl, an Air Force chaplain, visited a 19-year-old Army private named Chad (last name withheld) in the intensive care unit. Chad and a friend drove convoy every day on a dangerous highway. The road was covered with debris, and often someone would drive over a roadside bomb. Chad and his friend knew their time would come—and it did, two weeks before Christmas.

“He was the passenger and his friend was driving,” Ofsdahl said. “The bomb exploded under the gas tank, so the petrol exploded and blew into the front of the cab and disabled the vehicle. Both individuals were living human candles on fire.”

Chad told Ofsdahl that his friend looked over before he bailed out and saw that Chad was in shock. Parts of Chad’s leg and arm were missing and he was just sitting there on fire. His friend gave him a shove, which forced Chad out of the truck.



Carl Trost, a Navy chaplain, served as the lead chaplain providing and organizing all the spiritual and religious support for the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games held this summer in Chicago. The games are an international athletic competition for active-duty service members and veterans who have experienced a serious injury or illness. Go to livinglutheran.org for a video of Trost at the Warrior Games.

“As I was in the hospital there, talking to him, Chad had no face left,” Ofsdahl said. “And yet, he was one of the most grateful human beings I’ve ever met. He was so thankful he still had his vision ... and for his buddy, who stopped in that moment of crisis and reached out with a hand of love and saved his life.

“Here I was to encourage him, and he was the human being who encouraged the chaplain that day. His life was a sermon to me.”

Julia Shreve, chief of chaplains at the Fargo (N.D.) VA Health Care System, visited a veteran who shared some deep, dark pain from his military experience—“something he had to do during his time of serving our country,” she said. “He was still struggling with it because it was so contrary to what he thought he ought to be doing as a human being.”

Shreve asked him if he’d be interested in absolution, and he readily accepted. “I pronounced the forgiveness of all his sins in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit while making the sign of the cross on his forehead,” she said. “He just collapsed into it, and I saw a couple of tears in his eyes. We prayed for God’s health and presence as he moves forward in his life.”


The daily immersion of chaplaincy also means bonds with fellow chaplains are formed. This is something Lloyd said isn’t as strong in the civilian sector.

“What I miss the most is the level of camaraderie with chaplains who I know would take a bullet for me, literally, and I, no question, would take it for them,” he said. “The intensity of ministry and interaction in that kind of environment develops that kind of relationship.”

Just as there’s been a decline in the number of new ELCA pastors, there’s been a drop in the number of its chaplains since 2000, with a decrease of about 65 percent in military chaplains alone.

“When I was in Afghanistan, there were over 150 support personnel chaplains enlisted and only three of them were from the ELCA,” said Jeff Jacobson, a Navy Reserve chaplain recalled to active duty. “It woke me up to the fact that, at that time, we were a couple 10,000 strong and for the most part, none of them were hearing the gospel as we uniquely present it as Lutherans in the ELCA. We talk about the unconditional love of God and unmerited grace. Usually that’s a new or refreshing message for people.”

From a combat hospital in Baghdad to a hospital room in Fargo, N.D., chaplaincy ministry puts the ELCA in positions to share the gospel in ways and places it might not otherwise be heard.

“Our chaplains are our expression of public church,” Wester said. “ELCA chaplains don’t focus on proselytizing but on accompanying men and women, and in many cases their families, in their journey of faith. The single most important expression of a chaplain’s ministry is announcing God’s salvation and bringing a witness of hope in situations that, from many points of view, would be seen as Godforsaken.” 

For videos on chaplaincy ministry and individual chaplain interviews, go to livinglutheran.org.

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org.



Megan Brandsrud is a content editor for *Living Lutheran*.