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Church's Reunion after COVID-19: Expectations Must be Clearly Communicated

The LORD called me to serve as a military chaplain and when I took the Oath of Office on April 28, 2000, and graduated from Chaplain Officer Basic Course at Fort Jackson, SC on August 31, 2000, I had no idea how God would use me. The Chaplain Officer Basic Course taught me how to advise the commander on spiritual, ethical, and moral issues; and how to coordinate to in order to provide or perform religious support. The purpose of this paper is to prepare Pastor's and congregants to reintegrate as a church after the COVID-19 lockdown is lifted.

The Deployment cycle consists of five components: 1. Pre-deployment. 2. Deployment. 3. Sustainment. 4. Re-deployment. And 5. Post-deployment. The Post-deployment phase includes three components: 1. *Reunion* {1-2 weeks home}. 2. *Readjustment* {3-4 weeks}. And 3. *Reintegration* {5 or more weeks}. I will share lessons learned from teaching it while deployed (2003-2004 and 2010-2011) and as well as serving as a rear detachment chaplain for the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, NY.

One of my tasks during my two deployments to Iraq was to conduct the Reunion briefing to Soldiers returning home for their 2-week Rest and Recreation (RR) or re-deploying from their deployment. This is a time of great excitement as the Soldiers and families are excited and looking forward to seeing each other and the emotional connection is high. Everyone is looking forward to being reunited. Why then would I be tasked to conduct a reunion brief? The Army understands that, even though everyone is excited and emotionally connected, there is also a lot of anxiety for re-deploying Soldiers, spouses, significant others, and children.

The Reunion brief contains a number of important topics, but the focus for this paper regarding a church's reunion is "expectations." Everyone has expectations; when those expectations are not expressed through written or verbal communication, miscommunication or disaster can ensue. People's expectations are emotionally driven and when those expectations are not met, a person responds emotionally on the scale from depressed to anger. There is a lot of potential for blessing or hurt and much of it depends on how everyone communicates their expectations. Our feelings can either lead us to isolation or elation.

I imagine churches all across America will immediately open their doors when given the opportunity; everyone is looking forward to connecting with their friends. This will be a time of great joy and excitement as we gather to worship God and to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit's power. However, people will also come to church with expectations! How the pastor, staff, and congregants navigate the waters of expectations will determine how effectively they worship and go forth to serve others!

The LORD blessed me with the opportunity to serve as a rear detachment chaplain for the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, NY from May 8, 2006 – March 2, 2010, and from April 13, 2012 - December 31, 2013. I learned a lot during those years. Some of the most important events I attended

were at 2 am when a flight returned bringing Soldiers home. (I still get goosebumps when I think of the Soldiers walking through the doors, and the band playing, the spouses, significant others, and the children waving flags, and all eagerly wanting to race up and hug their loved one.) Each Soldier had the reunion briefing before re-deploying and understood in theory what the three phases of a reunion were but the problem is that what is taught in the theater does not become reality till 3-4 weeks after returning home.

Unfortunately, many Soldiers came to see me after being home 3-4 weeks because they thought that the reunion phase, high energy, and emotions would last, only to find themselves arguing and fighting with their spouse, significant other, or children. Why? We all believe it will not happen to us, but to someone else, and therefore no one takes the necessary precautions so as to communicate expectations for each phase.

According to Mateczun and Holmes, (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK225083/>, 1996). A brief definition of each phase:

Return Phase: The return phase of reunion entails the anticipation of the reunion and the actual physical reunion of those who have been separated.

Readjustment Phase: The readjustment phase is the time during which service members and their families tend to modify their behavior to fit back into a lifestyle together.

Reintegration Phase: The reintegration phase is a time when the service member eases his or her way back into a routine, and returns to the day-to-day civilian or garrison life.

Recommendations:

1. Pastors clearly think through what their expectations are for those attending the service: members and visitors of varying ages. (Social distancing, masks, hand sanitizer, seating, choir, and fellowship, before, during and after the service, singing etc.)
2. Congregants need to examine their expectations and clearly communicate them through a questionnaire developed by the church and leave room for suggestions. (same or different Expectations)
3. Form a committee to address the pastor(s) and congregants' expectations and work towards commonality, knowing a church will not be able to meet everyone's expectations.
4. Develop a plan prior to church reopening and communicate with the congregants the data collected and how the church plans to move forward.
5. Know that no one can predict at how quickly a church will go through the phases. Be prepared to listen to the individual's concerns and to help each other worship safely and joyfully.