



20 ways to reach out on Veterans Day

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The observance began almost a century ago.*

In the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the Allied nations and Germany declared an armistice — a temporary cessation of hostilities — in World War I. Commemorated as Armistice Day the next year, Nov. 11 became a legal federal holiday in the United States in 1938. After World War II and the Korean War, Armistice Day became Veterans Day, a holiday dedicated to U.S. veterans of all wars.

Now is the perfect time for congregations to engage in ministry with active troops and the families left behind. Here are 20 ideas.

Reach out to soldiers

Bless deploying troops, praying for safety and for peace. Include deployed soldiers on the weekly prayer list. At Christ United Methodist Church, Franklin, Tenn., the list includes friends and relatives of church members and constituents as well as those with a formal relationship with the church.

- Send birthday cards and personal letters of encouragement. Angie Doerlich founded “Hugs for Soldiers” in 2003 as a ministry of First United Methodist Church, Duluth, Ga. The program has grown from encouraging 31 soldiers deployed from Fort Benning, Ga., to more than 1,000 service men and women. Families, individuals, schools and church groups “adopt” troops to receive supportive mail during their tour of duty. Hugs for Soldiers also assists military spouses and children in Duluth through Thanksgiving and Christmas food drives.
- Invite children to write thank-you notes and draw pictures for troops, especially at special times such as Veterans Day. This is a good class project.
- Assemble and send care packages. Lists of suggested contents can be found online. When the spouse of a newly deployed soldier began attending Glendale United Methodist Church, Nashville, Tenn., members sent care packages and letters to him throughout his deployment. They assured the young man that members were caring for his wife and daughter back home.
- Do something special for troops during the holidays. One idea is to sew Christmas stockings from camouflage-print fabric, fill them with goodies and mail them to soldiers.
- Make lap robes for injured troops using instructions from eHow mom.
- Send a Cup of Joe for a Joe. Since 2009, the Green Beans Coffee Company has delivered a cup of coffee and a personal note to troops serving far from home. The company has cafés on military bases in Afghanistan, Djibouti, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, Southwest Asia and United Arab Emirates.
- Start a military support group like Liz Whitley did at First United Methodist Church, Oviedo, Fla. “It’s put me in contact with thousands of soldiers and their stories,” she told a Seminole Voice reporter. “They remind us why we’re here and the importance of what we’re doing.”
- Go to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs website for planning ideas and images.
- Study and discuss The United Methodist Church’s position on military service, which reads in part: “We support and extend the ministry of the Church to those persons who conscientiously oppose all war, or any particular war, and who therefore refuse to serve in the armed forces or to cooperate with systems of military conscription. We also support and extend the Church’s ministry to those persons who conscientiously choose to serve in the armed forces or to accept alternative service. As Christians we are aware that neither the way of military action, nor the way of inaction is always righteous before God” (The Book of Discipline, 2008, Par. 164 I).



Reach out to families

United Methodist Chaplain Laura Bender, who serves at the United States Marine Corps Wounded Warriors Regiment in Quantico, Va., offered suggestions for starting a conversation or beginning a local church program.

- Identify the military families in your community. Are there any wounded veterans? Offer their families assistance with yard work, errands, child care, respite care and transportation to appointments.
- Start a “veterans only” fellowship. Reservists and veterans, especially in areas remote from military bases, often find it difficult to find others with whom to speak about their military experiences. Those who have experienced combat are especially in need of fellowship with other combat vets. Begin with the veterans of any war who are in your congregation. Ask them to do a community-service effort, a building project, an athletic event or a meal together. Include only veterans. Leave them alone. Let them talk. If a few are motivated enough to invite other veterans and plan other activities, you’ll have an ongoing program. Even if they meet only a few times, you’ve given them the opportunity to identify those with whom they can confide.
- Holidays can be especially difficult for military families who move often and usually live far from extended family. Invite them to share an activity or meal with your family. Give them good community info like where to get the freshest real Christmas tree or the best deal on decorations; what parades, concerts and festivals are held annually; and directions to the sunrise service. Ask what additional support they need through the holidays while their loved one is deployed. If they are reluctant to seek help, do something nice to surprise them and don’t wait for a response.
- Invite military family members to participate in community-outreach projects with other members of the congregation.
- Evaluate how welcoming your church is to newcomers. Military families often live in a community for a short time, rarely more than three years and often much less. Must a person sing with the choir for years before being offered a solo? Do children of long-term civilian families always get the leads in the church play? Are project chairs only selected from long-term members? If the answer to any of those questions is “yes,” military families could spend a lifetime being on the outside and never having a significant role in any of the churches they attend. Remember to allow even your short-term members an opportunity to use their God-given talents.
- Advocate for the needs of veterans within your community and at regional and national levels.
- Use your influence to educate potential employers about the benefits of hiring veterans. If you are an employer, hire a vet.
- Offer to mentor and apprentice veterans in the acquisition of new skills so they can be better prepared to transition to civilian employment.
- Transcend your position on war and find ways to care for military members and their families despite your politics or faith stance.

Always, pray for military members and their extended families. Support troops and their loved ones in a variety of ways by getting involved in a community project that includes military families or just spend some time with people from diverse viewpoints to talk about your corner of the world and how to expand it.

The United Methodist Church has many chaplains providing spiritual care for military service personnel and their families. Based upon their input, the United Methodist Endorsing Agency, Board of Higher Education and Ministry, has put together a list of ideas that empower congregational care for deployed and returning service members and their families (www.gbhem.org).

Veterans Day is a perfect time for congregations to integrate some of these ideas as we remember and care.



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