

Because “Thank you for your service”
is simply not enough.

How can your faith community go beyond gratitude to truly become a place of welcome—and ongoing service—for veterans and their loved ones? In *Coming Home*, commissioned military chaplain Zachary Moon fully equips you to mobilize a receptive and restorative ministry with military families.

“*Coming Home* would have been invaluable upon my return. I would have handed a copy to every member of my congregation.” —Stephen Boyd, Chaplain (Col.-retired), USAR, Minister for Chaplains and Specialized Ministers, United Church of Christ

“Readers will find in these pages a valuable guide to being a better friend to those who, like my own father, serve their country and come home from war forever changed.” —Rita Nakashima Brock, Coauthor of *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*

“This book will help congregations bring military service members and their families home—really home. For such homecomings both congregations and service members need to be transformed. This book will guide in that process toward healing and wholeness.” —Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President, Disciples of Christ (Christian Church)

“Moon helps readers recognize that walking beside those coming home from war and their families gives congregations opportunities to deepen faith and practice.” —Nancy J. Ramsay, Brite Divinity School



ZACHARY MOON is a commissioned military chaplain who previously served as a chaplain in the VA hospital system and with combat veterans in residential treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Includes discussion questions and veterans' reflections



VETERANS
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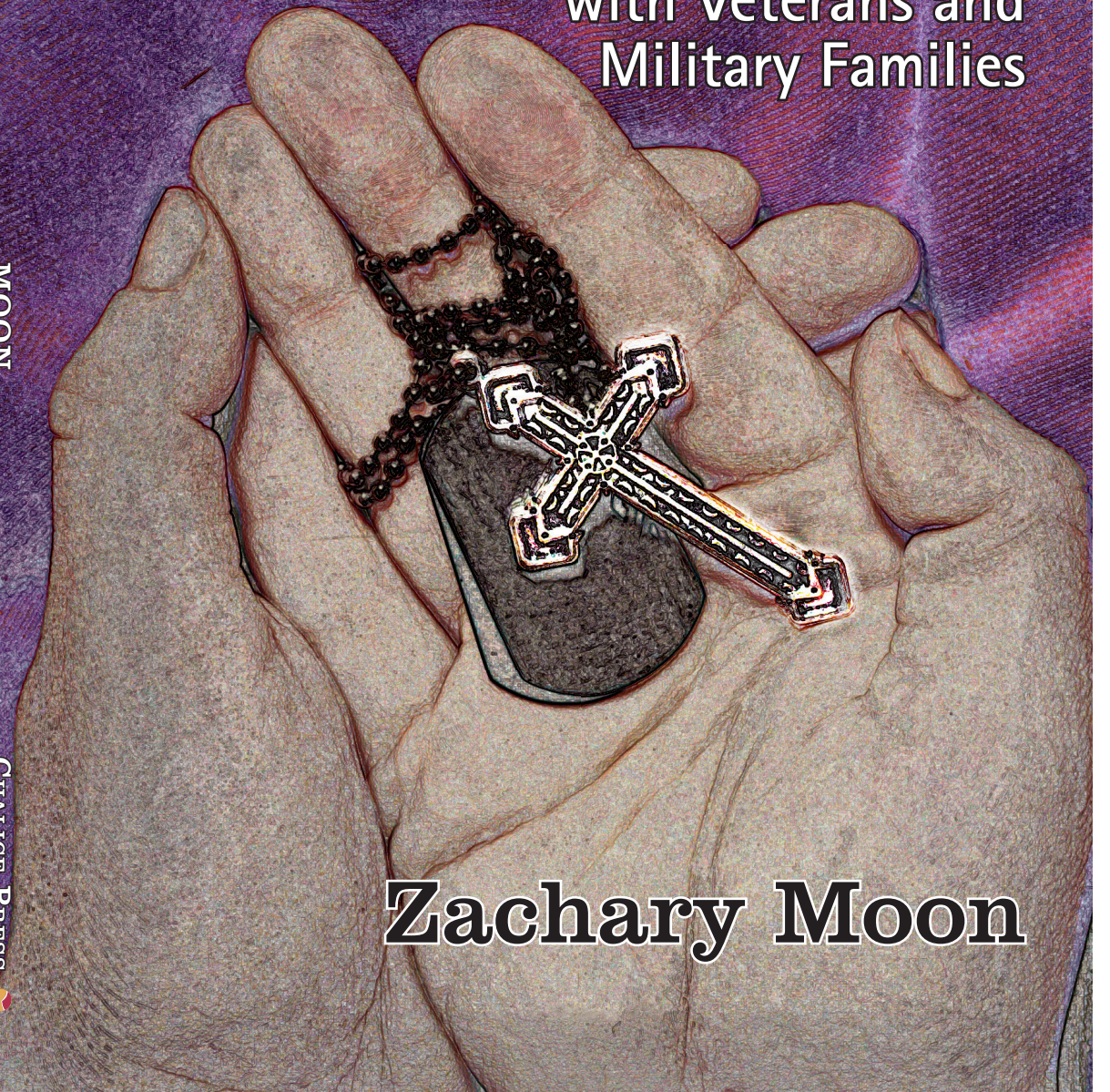
COMING HOME

MOON

CHALICE PRESS

COMING HOME

Ministry That Matters
with Veterans and
Military Families



Zachary Moon

“Zachary Moon shows us how to build bridges where gulfs and gaps often exist between congregations and veterans and their families. Moon paves a way to bring the resources and strengths arising from military service into congregational life. He links the rich resources of congregations to veterans coming home. This well-written and usable book takes veterans and congregations into territory that they will be relieved to discover and inhabit together.”

—Larry Graham, Iliff School of Theology

“This book will help congregations bring military service members and their families home—really home. For such homecomings both congregations and service members need to be transformed. This book will guide in that process toward healing and wholeness. We’ve been waiting for this book.”

—Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President,
Disciples of Christ (Christian Church)

“*Coming Home* is THE book for people of faith who want to start a ministry to military personnel and their families. The theological reflections coupled with practical suggestions and resources make this book an ideal study guide for small groups or individuals. I wish this book had been available for the congregations I served as pastor!”

— Col. Robert C. Leivers, Chaplain,
U.S. Air Force Reserve (retired)

“Chaplain Moon writes: ‘Recovery and restoration are a process like tending a house you live in.’ As I continued to reintegrate, I had no idea the extent of the punishment that my own house had taken. A volume such as Zachary Moon’s *Coming Home* would have been invaluable upon my return. I would have handed a copy to every member of my congregation. It is not that they were not loving, caring, accepting, and welcoming but more that we all just wanted to get back to ‘normal’ as quickly as possible. *Coming Home* would have shown us, and given us the permission, to take our time.

Chaplain Moon’s *Coming Home* speaks frankly to the underlying issues of welcoming our veterans back into our communities. The text, the personal and small group discussion questions, and the veterans’ reflections lead the reader through a well-defined and insightful process of coming to a personal, and communal, understanding of the feelings one may have about war and about those who engage in our wars. Chaplain Moon encourages the reader to welcome veterans and their families home into community without assumptions and preconceived notions of an individual experience. He encourages us to walk with the veteran and their family through the good and bad times. And he celebrates; the good news in all of this is that life, post-redeployment home, can be even more resolute through healthy reintegration.”

—Stephen Boyd, Chaplain (Col.-retired),
U.S. Army Reserve, Minister for Chaplains and
Specialized Ministers, United Church of Christ

“Home, as a metaphor, describes that which is worth living for and dying for simultaneously. Using the metaphor of ‘coming home,’ which is as much a metaphor for the inward faith journey as it is a physical journey from one geography to another, Moon offers a great gift to the nation as he walks both congregants and veterans alike through a much-needed paradigm shift on how to develop ministries for our returning military men and women. Presenting a comprehensive picture of the psycho-social-spiritual dynamics and witness of military personnel and their families, he carefully sensitizes the reader to the cultural nuances of military life as he introduces helpful perspectives on how returning veterans and congregants can, through mutuality, both find the way home as people of faith.”

—Lee Butler, Chicago Theological Seminary

“Within the peace-church tradition, so many of us are completely ill-equipped to respond lovingly or helpfully to members of the military or their families. Because of our inability to see beyond the war and violence we reject, we miss the opportunity to see individuals who may actually share our passionate quest for peace, purpose, community—and God. Zachary Moon’s *Coming Home* refocuses our attention on the person now home from battle and wondering if there is a place for them in our congregation. The combination of story, biblical references, and reflection questions makes this a very useful resource for faith communities interested in learning to accompany military personnel along a healing and transformation journey we all need.”

—Colin Saxton, General Secretary, Friends United Meeting

“News reports often focus on the needs and problems of military service members, veterans, and their families, compelling people of faith to reach out and help. Chaplain Zachary Moon says that such help will likely be rejected if congregations only see service members as wounded. He challenges congregations to set aside a ‘helper-victim’ approach to pastoral care fostered by the media. His readily accessible text invites congregations into a relational process of pastoral care that begins with their own experiences and beliefs about military service and war. Readers are invited to bring their beliefs into dialogue with a range of Christian perspectives on military service and war. He collaborates with service members and veterans in providing a series of biblical conversations about what it means to make space in our hearts and pews for service members and their families. This relational process of care creates church homes that can truly welcome and honor the unique stories and strengths of service members, veterans, and their families. *Coming Home* is a unique and highly needed resource for congregations whose faith moves them to reach out in love and caring to military service members, veterans, and their families.”

—Carrie Doehring, Iliff School of Theology

“*Coming Home* is an excellent resource for individuals, study groups, mission committees, and congregational care teams in faith communities who want to engage in informed and caring relationships with military service persons, veterans, and their families. Chaplain Moon offers a compelling and richly thoughtful invitation into such ministries. He helps readers recognize that walking beside those coming home from war and their families gives congregations opportunities to deepen faith and practice.”

—Nancy J. Ramsay, Brite Divinity School

COMING HOME

Ministry That Matters
with Veterans and
Military Families

Zachary Moon



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To my parents and the many loving people who are my family.

To my wife, son, and daughter.

My life is possible only because of you.

Thank you.

Foreword

Congregations using this guide will discover how to be better friends to all those we love, and we will become stronger communities in the process. We will more deeply incarnate a life-giving, transformative wholeness in a larger society anxious about the future, reactive to threats, resigned to disposable relationships, and distracted by consumerism. This is holy work indeed.

I first met Zachary Moon at the Riverside Church in New York on March 20, 2010, where we were serving as Commissioners for the Truth Commission on Conscience in War. He was finishing his M.Div. degree and working as a Veterans Affairs chaplain. As our Commission deliberations proceeded, I was struck by his seriousness of purpose, his perceptive listening abilities, and his deep concern and respect for military veterans and families, commitments that are evident in this book.

Since then, Zachary has deepened his understanding of how to support those who serve in the military and its veterans, as well as their families and communities. He offers us the wisdom he has gained through his previous work as a VA chaplain and his current vocation as a Navy chaplain. In addition, he brings insights from his intellectual work as a scholar of pastoral theology and care.

Readers will find in these pages a valuable guide to being a better friend to those who, like my own father, serve their country and come home from war forever changed. If this book had existed in 1968, my relationship with my father, our entire family, and my adult life would have been very different—and, I know with certainty, transformed for the better. I am glad this book has finally been written. We all need it.

Rita Nakashima Brock

Are We Ready for Our Veterans?

The unique and needed role of congregations in the reintegration process for veterans and military families was made clear to me early in my work as a chaplain. I was working at a VA hospital, and a young combat vet asked to talk. He was at the VA that day to see his primary care doctor, who recommended he see the psychiatrist for a screening for post-traumatic stress disorder. He began our conversation by saying, “Chaplain, they’re gonna tell me I’m crazy. I’m not crazy. I’m just dealing with some things.” I worked with many vets with PTSD diagnoses, and I could see that he was exhibiting many of the symptoms that substantiate that diagnosis, but I could also hear that he wanted to be seen as more than those symptoms, more than his suffering. He entrusted me with his story, and it changed the way I understood my work.

He grew up with a church being the center of his life, a guiding and loving community that helped him grow into adulthood. He enlisted after graduating from high school and spent much of his deployment in Iraq serving as military police. Since returning from deployment, he was struggling to integrate his experiences in combat with the day-to-day life he found back at home. And his wife and kids were trying to figure it out, too—how to bring this member of their family back into a meaningful role and connected part in their lives after his absence.

Because he had mentioned the importance of his church and his faith, as the conversation continued, I asked him what role his spirituality and church had in his life since his return from Iraq. He said his home church was the first place he went, bringing with him excitement and expectation. He had been separated not only from his family but also from this loving group of folks, and he looked forward to being reunited. But as he sat in his spot in the pew and looked around at these folks who had known him his whole life and helped

him become the man he was today, he did not experience relief.

His combat experiences had changed him, not just in harmful ways, but in many significant and strengthening ways. In combat, he had been with a community of brothers and sisters who stood shoulder to shoulder in the worst circumstances, who lived out the meaning of Jesus' teaching that "there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend." He wanted church to be willing to practice what they preached, and what he witnessed when he returned to church was a bunch of nice folks sitting passively in the pews without much regard for those around them. He said that everyone was living in their own bubble. He said he felt betrayed.

That day I felt I could help him by hearing his story and responding with my perspective on what God thinks about our wellbeing. I told him that I believed that God wants us to be healthy and whole, wants us to have the support we need, and wouldn't want anything to get in the way of that. We talked about the stigma around mental health and how it is sometimes hard to navigate the VA system to get what you need.

But his story lingered in my mind. What kind of church was he looking for? What would a church need to become that sort of community? He and I had grown up in very different Christian traditions, but I understood his experience of feeling unseen and of needing more from his church family but being unable to ask.

I have been on both sides of this encounter. I grew up in a liberal Christian community that was deeply committed to pacifism and viewed military service quite negatively. As I grew up I came to believe that this approach was problematic, particularly in terms of engaging the human experience of war and the real cost of military service. During my seminary education, I began chaplaining at a VA hospital. And then, following graduation, I took a chaplain job at another VA hospital. A little more than a year later, I was commissioned as a military chaplain. There were times when my religious upbringing felt at odds with ministry in a military environment. But what surprised me most was how little any of that mattered, as long as I was aware of it, stayed in the conversation, and was willing to meet individuals where they were, for who they were.

As I did this work, I realized that as a chaplain I had only a brief time to accompany each person on his or her journey. Where would they land next? Would they find the support they needed? I recognized that many churches didn't know where to begin in reaching out and receiving returning combat veterans, not because they didn't want to, but because they didn't see how to do it effectively.

Churches have a unique and powerful contribution to make: engaging in our rich traditions and practices, engaging with one another, and making meaning and integrating the many experiences life throws at us. Together, the Body of Christ is stronger than any of its individual members.

Military service members and their families need our attention. They need space in the pews of our churches and room in our hearts. Whatever they are dealing with, they are people just like us. We need to bring them home—not just back from overseas, but home.

This will be a transformative process of reorienting, not just for the service member and his/her family, but for all of us. We need to say more than, "Thank you for your service." We need to find ways of saying, with our words and our actions, "We are excited that you are here. We have been waiting for you. We have a meaningful role for you to play in our community. Together, in this relationship, we can create something that wasn't possible before. Thanks be to God!"

Seemingly, every day there are new headlines about growing rates of suicide, domestic violence, unemployment, homelessness, and slowness in gaining medical services for veterans. As our nation seeks to address these matters, new threats abroad remind us that the demands of military service are never far away.

Many good folks are gaining awareness of some of the issues and are concerned, but how can we best engage and contribute? There are as many ways to contribute as there are people who have the heart to do so. Remember the call to prophetic work received by Jeremiah—we need to remove barriers and build new possibilities (Jeremiah 1:10).

Military service involves complex human experiences that don't easily fit into boxes or categories. Some reflecting and reorienting are

necessary for us to do this community work effectively. If all of our knowledge is acquired from the media coverage and other sources that focus primarily on post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, instances of suicide, and so on, we may come to see our service members as victims of their combat experiences who need our help to heal.

This “helper-victim” approach is problematic and will likely repel and exclude most military service members because most of them don’t think of themselves as injured or ill. Although most church communities are well versed in how to do charity work, that is not what is needed from us at this time; the opportunity here is to become more deeply receptive and responsive in relationship, to reach out and meet folks where they are, and to embrace their full personhood and experiences.

This book explores issues related to military service and how congregations can best reintegrate and engage military service members and their families. These are not simple matters, and there are no simple answers. It is not the intention of this book to prescribe the agenda or dictate the action plan for you, because the most vital responses will come from each congregation, discerning its gifts and building meaningful relationships.

To fully realize this opportunity, we need to do some reflective work both as individuals and as communities of faith. We have rich gifts, which we may have not yet recognized, to offer to military families. And we may have some barriers, which we haven’t considered, to building relationships with those serving in the military. This reflection and preparation is part of the needed reorienting process. Instead of just learning about combat experiences and veterans’ hardships, we need to begin with ourselves: our experiences, our beliefs, and our spiritual gifts.

Once we have completed this inventory as individuals and as communities, we can better grasp where we stand, who we are, and what we can do. Just as important, we can better hear the experiences of others and engage in conversation. Or, to say it differently, the work of relationship isn’t about gathering lots of bits of information about the person you want to meet; it begins

by looking within ourselves and then meeting that person for who he or she is. When we better understand who we are, we will be better listeners and better communicators. And that's what we need to build relationships.

This book is designed for small groups to easily engage it for study and conversation. Each of the following six chapters provides exploration of an important area and is accompanied by discussion questions that will support further reflection and dialogue. The appendix includes five biblical reflections and recommendations for further reading.

Here are just some of the ways to utilize this book:

- Personal study;
- Small group study, such as adult religious education;
- Background for a sermon series;
- Reflection and theological education within a seminary context.

Whether you are a military service member, veteran, member of a military family, a chaplain working in this field of ministry, a pastor, or a civilian concerned for the wellbeing of military service members and their families, this book has something to offer you.

- Chapter 1 introduces traditional Christian beliefs about war and invites you to take an inventory of personal experiences that inform your thinking about war and those in the military.
- Chapter 2 unpacks important elements of military culture, including motivation for enlistment, the process of training and identity formation, and the specific language, symbols, and practices that make life in the military culturally distinct from civilian life.
- Chapter 3 examines the human experiences of combat and the many ways participating in war can impact people.
- Chapter 4 considers the unique experiences of military families, including the opportunities of military life and the challenges of the deployment cycle.
- Chapter 5 concerns our pastoral responses to veterans and military families, focusing on a strengths-based approach.

- Chapter 6 explores options for taking action, and how individually and as a church community we can engage in receptive and responsive ministry.

One of the goals of this project is to dynamically connect your personal experience, the resources of your faith tradition, and the active role you can enact in responsive ministry with veterans and military families. You will find many questions in this book and very few prescriptive solutions to the challenges that lay ahead. This is intentional. There aren't any quick fix-its, and to forward a single agenda or program for all congregations would be as foolish as asserting that all veterans and military family members need the same thing.

The hope that I carry and that sustains a book like this is that you will take the time to thoughtfully reflect and discern how God is leading your response and that we will develop a diversity of ministries that are deeply rooted in our particular communities. I believe the gifts and resources each congregation needs to get involved are already present. Our task is to join together and faithfully knock at the doors God has placed before us.

As those doors open, congregations will find many ways they can accompany military families throughout their lives, providing a space that encourages reflection, learning, and integration. Congregations, the living witnesses to God's grace-filled presence in human experience, can embrace the whole person, because God's love has no bounds. Our nation's veterans and their families may already be in your congregations, while many others would seek to join your community. Whatever your background, opportunities for meaningful relationship are available if you answer the call.