Creating a Wholistic Ministry For Veterans In The Church

Bishop Justin Cohen, BCC, Ph.D.
Chief Chaplain, National Association of Veterans Service Organization Chaplains
Executive Director, Veterans Chapel Community Development Corporation

A wholistic ministry to veterans outside the VSO post should address spiritual, emotional, relational, and practical needs while building genuine community in the places veterans actually live, work, and gather.

1. Lesson Aim and Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Articulate a biblical and practical rationale for wholistic ministry with veterans in the community (not just "at church" or "at the post").
- Identify key spiritual, emotional, social, and practical needs common among veterans and their families.
- Sketch a simple plan for a wholistic veterans ministry that connects with community partners and VA resources.

2. Introduction: Why Veterans, Why Wholistic?

1. Veterans in every community
    - Most congregations underestimate how many veterans live within a short drive of their building.
    - Many veterans never set foot in a VSO post, but still carry moral injury, trauma, loneliness, or transition stress.
2. Biblical and pastoral rationale
    - Scripture calls the church to care for "the least of these," bear one another's burdens, and proclaim healing and hope; veterans often carry burdens that are invisible to civilians.
    - Wholistic ministry follows Christ's pattern of caring for body, mind, relationships, and spirit together, not in isolation.
3. Outside the post
    - God is already at work in VA hospitals, community clinics, workplaces, coffee shops, and neighborhoods; the church joins that work by going to where veterans are.
    - Ministry "outside the post" means collaborating with VSOs and VA, but not depending on their buildings or programs to be the main ministry context.

3. Understanding Veterans Wholistically

1. Four key dimensions of care
   Many effective faith-based veteran ministries work from a four-part model: psychological, physical, spiritual, and social wellness.
    - Psychological: PTSD, depression, anxiety, moral injury, grief, and identity confusion after leaving the military.
    - Physical: Chronic pain, TBI, sleep disturbance, substance use, and health system navigation challenges.

    - Spiritual: Questions about God's goodness, guilt over actions in war, difficulty connecting to worship, or feeling judged or misunderstood by the church.
    - Social: Isolation, loss of unit cohesion, strained marriages and parenting, unemployment, and difficulty trusting civilians.
2. Listening before fixing
    - Effective ministry starts with listening deeply to veterans' stories, not rushing to advice or quick spiritual answers.
3. Faith communities can become "bridges" between God's healing and the veteran's real-life context by building sensitive, caring relationships.
4. Knowing your limits
    - Pastoral caregivers and lay ministers are not a replacement for clinical treatment; they must know when and how to refer to VA and community mental health resources.
    - VA policies explicitly recognize chaplains as part of a holistic care team and encourage appropriate spiritual assessment and collaboration.

Discussion questions:

- What stories or images come to mind when you think about "veterans"? How might those be incomplete?
- Where do you feel confident caring for veterans, and where do you feel out of your depth?

4. Core Practices of a Wholistic Veterans Ministry

A. Identify and connect with veterans

- Learn who is already around you: in your congregation, neighborhood, local businesses, VA clinic, colleges, and civic groups.
- Contact local VA, VFW, American Legion, and VA faith-based outreach to understand needs and volunteer opportunities.
- Use appropriate public recognition moments (e.g., Veterans Day, Memorial Day) as on-ramps for deeper relationship, not just applause.

B. Build relationships where they are

- "Meet them where they enjoy being": fishing, coffee groups, sports, hobby clubs, or community service projects.
- Offer relational spaces: small groups, peer support circles, retreats, and family nights that are veteran-friendly and low-pressure.
- Consider a dedicated veterans group or class that emphasizes community, confidentiality, and shared experience, with the goal of integrating into the wider body, not isolating.

C. Integrate spiritual care wisely

- Create safe spiritual spaces: Bible studies, retreats, and worship times designed with trauma-informed practices (predictable structure, no forced sharing, respect for triggers and silence).
- Use peer-led or co-led formats where veterans minister to veterans, with trained chaplains or pastors available for deeper spiritual work.
- Offer pastoral care that honors consent, respects diverse faith backgrounds, and collaborates with clinical providers when needed.

D. Attend to practical and family needs

- Partner with organizations that help with housing, employment, financial coaching, and family support, rather than trying to do everything alone.
- Include spouses, children, and caregivers in your ministry design, recognizing that the whole household is impacted by service and trauma.
- Provide tangible acts of service: meals, transportation to VA appointments, respite for caregivers, mentoring, and help navigating benefits.

5. Planning a Ministry "Outside the Post"

Step 1: Clarify your why and who

Have participants answer:

- Why do we believe God is calling us to serve veterans in our community now?
- Which veterans are we most likely to reach first (age range, era of service, families, homeless, students, etc.)?

Step 2: Map your current assets and partners

Invite the group to list:

- People: veterans already in your church, trained chaplains, counselors, social workers, or military family members.
- Ministries: small groups, benevolence fund, counseling, men's/women's ministries, family nights that could be adapted to veterans.
- Partners: local VA medical center, Vet Center, VSOs, faith-based veteran ministries, and suicide-prevention networks (state or regional).

Step 3: Choose 2–3 starter initiatives

Encourage them to pick simple, relational, and sustainable first steps, for example:

- A monthly veterans coffee or breakfast hosted at a neutral, accessible location (not just the church building).
- A short, peer-led group using a trusted faith-based curriculum for trauma, moral injury, or spiritual resilience, with clear referral pathways to VA.
- A "bridge ministry" team that accompanies veterans to appointments, helps with paperwork, and offers spiritual support as invited.

Step 4: Build in safety, referrals, and training

- Train leaders in basic trauma awareness, suicide warning signs, listening skills, and VA/community resource navigation using available faith leader resources.
- Establish clear boundaries: confidentiality standards, mandatory reporting, when to refer to clinical care, and how to collaborate with VA chaplains or providers.
- Plan regular debriefing and spiritual care for your volunteers to prevent burnout and secondary trauma.