Executive Summary

Over the next five years, more than 1 million people who have served in the U.S. military will integrate back into society as Veterans. While in the military, servicemen and women experience a distinct shared experience, but once they leave the service, they may experience alienation because of their unique experiences. Whereas they were once guided by and provided for by the military, they are now on their own. They were once part of a small, united and strongly bonded network, but now face losing those connections in favor of people who may not have the same experience of loyalty.

Military officials themselves have recognized the integral role that local churches can play as Veterans settle back into American society. However, many churches lack the understanding, materials and support needed to successfully engage Veterans as they reintegrate into their congregations and communities. This Sector Report surveys a landscape of church-run military ministries in the United States. The report looks at how Veterans and military families engage with local churches, characteristics of effective military ministries, and the gaps in services addressing their needs and those of their families. Recommendations are made on how to further augment the specific church-run ministries to better assist those currently serving in the military, Veterans and their families.

Summary Findings

A total of 39 churches were researched and 14 interviews were conducted with ministry leaders. The most prominent characteristic of thriving military ministries is that they are holistic in their approach and address the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs of the entire military family. Most ministries focus their programs on the military family, especially during times of deployment. Programs for individual military members and Veterans are most often offered upon their return from deployment and address marriage and family relationships, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although no two ministries work exactly the same (since most are making an effort to respond to the unique needs of the military community), there are several types of programs common to the churches studied. The most common include:

- Military-focused Bible study
- Practical support for deployed families (home and car repair, childcare, etc.)
- Military wives support groups
- Organized prayer teams or events
- Care packages for deployed service members
- Marriage and family counseling or support

Other programs include:

- PTSD support
- Mentoring
Appreciation events
Adopt-a-unit/ship/family
Family reintegration support
On-base outreach

The ministry leaders interviewed revealed that many of these programs use the same Scriptures or Bible study materials. Overwhelmingly, these resources are those produced by Cru’s Military Ministry Press or accessed through the website www.militaryministry.org. The most commonly used materials include:

- Combat Trauma Healing Manual (Military Ministry Press)
- When War Comes Home (Military Ministry Press)
- Hope for the Home Front (New Hope Publishers)

Other resources used by ministries included in this study are “Defending the Military Marriage” and “Making Your Marriage Deployment-Ready,” as well as “God Understands” from American Bible Society (ABS).

**Characteristics of an Effective Church-Run Military Ministry**

**Informed.** When the issues of military families are well known they can more easily become shared issues. In this study, many of the churches or the communities have large concentrations of military families. Veterans serving with the church staff or in the ministry can provide an understanding of the issues facing military members.

**Holistic.** Effective churches provide a full spectrum of practical support for the individual service member and their families.

**Scripture-focused.** Effective churches are keen to offer military members ways to engage with the Scriptures.

**Proactive.** Ministries in these churches have taken a proactive approach to helping military families, primarily because families do not always ask for help or even identify themselves as military families.

**Timely.** The churches interviewed recognized the unique window of opportunity to serve military members and their families during the return and re-entry process following deployment.

**Partnered.** Effective churches partner with other military and Veteran’s resources available in their community. Through those partnerships, the church is able to provide volunteers to serve in a wider sphere and to refer military members with specific needs to more specialized service providers.
Community Building. It is a common characteristic to create a community of military believers to act as a support system for families and individuals who have similar challenges and experiences.

Strengthening Church Ministry to Veterans

Prayer. By being in prayer for the military member and their families, churches let the Veteran know that the leaders are looking to God for help and healing. Prayer begins the conversation with Veterans and their families as church members ask for prayer and then check back for answers to prayer. Because the church is not identified with any one country or political system, praying for all those affected by war sets the church in its global context and gives participants the ability to see that God and his church are more concerned about individuals than political powers.

Listening. To overcome the lack of understanding, even apathy, about the need to minister to Veterans, church members need to learn the skill of actively listening to Veterans and their family members. A key role is that of impartial listener, concentrating on the servicemen and women’s anguish and not making a diagnosis.

Social Media. As many Veterans are not in close proximity with other Veterans, they often use social media to stay connected. If churches are connected to Veterans’ social media groups, Veterans and their families are more likely to find them.

Military Leadership. Churches need to identify and equip Veterans to minister to other Veterans, active duty personnel and the families involved. Retired or active military in the congregation who are available to help are key to a successful Veterans ministry. Many military personnel suggest that these individuals are the best ones for direct interaction with military families.

Needs Awareness. While counseling skills and other high-level abilities are not required for all church ministries, individuals should be able to identify high-risk behaviors associated with PTSD, depression, addiction, etc. Church members should be trained and encouraged to report such behavior, as appropriate, and help individuals find necessary intervention as quickly as possible.

Family Services. Families are often the first to know about a Veteran’s struggle and the first to be affected by it. While many Veterans will not seek help, their families may. Reaching out to the family of the Veteran is often the best way to help the individual.

Employment. After family, finding a job is a critical concern for returning troops. While the workplace may be stressful, it offers structure, support and help in finding meaning in everyday life. Churches could provide connections to make job referrals available for Veterans.

Christ-centered. Simplistic or trite answers do not work for servicemen and women who have undergone so much, and suffer war trauma and moral injury. Nevertheless, Scripture explains that Jesus was tempted in every way, experienced pain, separation and death itself – yet was
raised to life. There is no other story or hero that can bring more hope in a seemingly hopeless situation than Jesus Christ. By keeping the story of Jesus central, Veterans and their families will have the source of comfort and revelation of God’s understanding and presence in times of hard questions.

**Healing Worship.** Many times, words and academic theological answers cannot break through the pain or difficulty that Veterans face. God created worship and music to provide a form of healing and teaching that helps in a way that academic study often cannot. Worship services can welcome Veterans of all educational backgrounds and provide a level ground for God to comfort and speak to each individual.

**Veterans as Part of the Church Community**

Churches in this study approach their military families’ involvement in different ways:
1. They create many opportunities for military families to have community among themselves, with the assumption that no one will understand the unique issues facing military families like other military families.
2. Some churches do not offer “military only” programs, but instead give families the opportunity to reach outside of the military culture and incorporate into the general church community, accessing the support system of the entire church.
3. A few of the churches in the study make both options available so that families can get involved in the ways that work best for them.

Similarly, the ways active military, Veterans and their families contribute to individual churches vary. Some seek out opportunities to minister to other military families through mentorship or serving in the military ministry. In the case of nearly every church studied, the military ministry leader is either active or retired military.

**How Churches Can Integrate Veterans After Deployment**

In an effort to integrate Veterans after deployment and their families, churches identified two specific needs that were not being met: Family and society reintegration, and PTSD support.

Less than a third of the churches in this study offer programs that address both of these issues, even though the psychological and emotional stress of combat has been well documented in recent years. Most ministries address the family during the time of deployment. Ministries are not unaware of the effects of combat trauma on the individual and families. It is simply far easier to mobilize help to meet those needs, and spouses are more willing to come forward and ask for help during times of deployment. PTSD and family tension are much more difficult to identify and resolve. They create deeper needs that often require professional counseling and take significant time to heal.

Military culture emphasizes resilience, which can be beneficial to families in several ways, but can also make Veterans reluctant to ask for help in the face of stigma associated with their problems. Although spouses are generally more willing to ask for help, service members themselves often will not seek it. In addition, service members are often so heavily involved in
the military community that they don’t see the need to be involved in a church community, making it more difficult to reach the individual service members. Ministry leaders expressed frustration in the difficulty of identifying those people, especially the service members themselves, who need help and the kind of help needed, in a timely way.

When military ministry leaders were asked about the kind of help that could benefit their ministries, two themes emerged: resources and networks. Resources designed to help families through transition and address spiritual and moral wounds as a result of war are needed. And local networks are also extremely important in any type of ministry. Churches want to collaborate with others that are involved in military ministry.

**Conclusion**

Today, servicemen and women return to civilian life from a distinct experience, coming equipped with remarkable skills. However, their transition to civilian life is a process that does not happen overnight. All Veterans, especially those who experienced injuries, including PTSD, are challenged to adjust to their new environment. Many churches lack the know-how to address Veterans’ needs. Churches can respond by providing access to a designated and equipped person or ministry programs, such as an advocate, counselor and mentor, to those in their congregations who have returned from deployment. Such a function would help ensure that Veterans know where to begin once they connect with a local church.