Plenary Session 3  
Down But Not Out: Supporting Military Couples

Moderator: Bill Coffin  
Speaker: Dr. Dennis Orthner  
Rev. Dr. Ken Walden

This Plenary session presented strategies and interventions that support military couples and families as they strive to maintain healthy relationships.

Dr. Orthner began his presentation by discussing the various demands on military families today:
- More service persons are frequently deployed to war zones
- Young enlistees have uneven exposure to deployments
- More deployments done without a prior unit connection
- Half of the military force is in the Reserves and National Guard
- Uneven family support for military persons;
- Twenty percent of active duty and 42% of reservists reported symptoms of mental illness with increasing reports of deployment related child and spousal abuse.

In conclusion, Dr. Orthner reported the findings of a study of 15,000 Army spouses (whose husband or wife was deployed) regarding marriage satisfaction, support group participation, and social support assets from the Army, leaders, and friends. It was found that about half of spouses and children coped well during recent deployments. Those who coped the best typically had strong marriages, close friendships, participation in military-sponsored support programs and good parenting skills.

Rev. Dr. Walden said about 700,000 families had at least one spouse deployed in the Middle East and 17% of those deployed were African Americans. Today’s smaller military is charged with doing more. He suggested supporting military families by: expressing support for people in the military regardless of one’s feeling about the war; highlighting the military in faith communities (via sermons meetings, activities); providing a “thoughtful and caring” climate when personnel are home. He also referenced The National Military Family Association and the Army ancillary family support service at http://www.StrongBonds.org.