Spring is God's best argument

By Chaplain B. Allen Vaughan

Spring is here! However, as I write this article, it is still cold, wet, cloudy and rainy. But, the signs are all around us.

When I was growing up in Missouri, the first signs of spring were the sun-kissed yellow and white daffodils that would begin to push their way up amidst the grass that was still brown from winter. The tulip bulbs wouldn't be far behind in making their colorful appearance. Also, in the Ozark Mountains, while most of the trees were still bare, the hills and valleys would be dotted with the bright white and pink blossoms of the Dogwood and Redbud trees.

Here in Japan, the appearance of the beautiful and delicate cherry blossoms is the most famous sign of spring. The days are becoming much more pleasant. Instead of running to get inside, away from the cold and rain, folks are beginning to stay outside a little longer.

We slow down; take a little more time getting to where we are going, because we just want to enjoy the weather before we have to go back to work. The winter "blahs" are being replaced by "spring fever" and there seems to be a renewed vigor and purpose in every living creature.

It is no wonder, then, that many religions and faith communities celebrate special occasions in the spring that emphasize the renewal of life in the midst of death. Some of the most familiar celebrations are the Christian observance of Easter and the Jewish observance of Passover. It is as if God is saying in the springtime, "See, this is what I have in store for you if you allow your hearts to wake up and warm up to my presence."

Revah Summersgill, in her poem *"Thought in Spring"* wrote "*How can he doubt the grace of God when beauty springs from stick or clod? How can he doubt God's grace who sees, the light-laced pattern through the trees, the sun and rain, the fecund earth, the ancient miracle of birth, who knows the wind and clouds, the sight of lifting seas and stars at night? How wise was he, how wise, who sent the spring to be his argument!"*

The cherry blossoms, the dogwoods, the daffodils and tulips, are God's messengers in the spring. I invite you to join us at the Chapel of Hope for our Easter and Passover celebrations and, hopefully, you will experience a spiritual "springtime" in your soul.

May God bring his grace to full bloom in your heart.

Department of Defense family care plan policy to expand

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service

The Defense Department's family care plan policy will be expanded in the coming months to encompass a wider population of military parents, a defense legal expert said.

The new policy will require military parents with custody of children from a previous relationship to file a family care plan, said Army Col. Shawn Shumake, director of the Pentagon's office of legal policy. The requirement already is in place for dual military couples and single parents with custody.

Family care plans are used to ensure family members are cared for while the service member is away for an extended period of time, whether it's for training, a deployment or a remote assignment, Shumake explained. The document includes everything from designation of temporary guardianship to arrangements for financial and logistical support, including relocation and medical care.

While the family care plan always has been a required and useful planning tool for dual-military couples and single parents, the lack of inclusion of "blended" families represented a "gaping hole" in the policy, Shumake said, prompting the first policy update since 1992. "What we're trying to do is put these service members in the best possible position before they leave," he said.

In recent years, Shumake said, he has seen an increase in custody disputes involving blended families that mostly arose from a lack of prior coordination. The deploying parent may designate guardianship to the step-parent, for instance, only to have the biological parent intercede while the custodial parent is gone. And the biological parent has every right to custody of that child, he explained, unless extenuating circumstances exist.

Shumake noted that this situation can put a deployed parent in a tough, stressful spot while far from home. "The worst possible thing is when things come to a head while the service member is gone," he said. "The service member is going to be overseas, and that biological parent is going to pop up and be able to walk away with that kid."

Requiring service members with a blended family to have a family care plan will lead to anticipating some of these potential problems early on, he said.

Shumake noted that although it's helpful, the family care plan isn't a legally binding document. But if it's prepared early enough, the service member generally would be able to take the plan to court and petition for a court order to enforce it.

Service members who anticipate that they won't be able to reach an agreement with or trust the noncustodial, biological parent should visit their legal assistance office so they understand the legal ramifications of not involving the biological parent, Shumake advised.

The new policy also will address issues that affect all parents required to have a care plan. For instance, if a catastrophic circumstance arises – a temporary guardian refusing to care for the child or getting into an accident and being unable to provide care, for example - the new policy allows for a deployment deferment until the issue is resolved. Commanders also will be sensitive to those circumstances, Shumake said.

"It would shock me if there was any commander out there who would not allow a military parent the opportunity to deal with that and figure out a good response," he said. "We have no interest in ripping a service member away from a child and sending the service member to Iraq or Afghanistan. No commander is going to want that to happen."

In extreme cases, when the service member just can't piece together a family care plan, the commander has the option of separating the service member from service. "The commander needs to rely on his people and needs to know they'll be there," Shumake said.

The commanders also are tasked with advising service members of the risks involved with designating a nonviable guardian or leaving a biological parent out of the equation. The new policy will outline this increased responsibility for commanders, he added.

Family care plans are extensive and can take some time to fill out, Shumake acknowledged, further underscoring the need to start well in advance of a departure. Legal assistance offices are a valuable resource for help with a plan, as well as Military OneSource at www.militaryonesource.com or Military Homefront at www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil.

For parents needing more extensive assistance, such as those seeking court orders to establish guardianship, Shumake advised they first check with their legal office for advice. Local legal offices can help to point them to free legal assistance, such as that offered through the American Bar Association's Military Pro Bono Project.

According to Shumake, the aim is to avoid problems in the first place. "We want to mitigate or avoid the problems before they happen," he said. "Deployments are stressful enough without the added worry of care for your children back home."

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