

# THE PASTOR AS VOLUNTEER

JAMES D. BERKLEY

Nine o'clock on a warm May evening found me cruising our little town in a police car. With a loaded shotgun racked in place in front of me and a cautiously friendly officer beside me, my first shift as the volunteer police chaplain was passing uneventfully.

The radio interrupted our conversation: "6-L-11, we have a report of a 594 at the Mexican Deli."

Expecting something big, I asked, "What's that?"

"Not much. Just malicious mischief."

It was not hard to determine the guilty party at the deli, but the officer soon found more excitement than he expected. When an arrest became necessary, an unruly crowd grew menacing. While I watched, a girl called me a "narc" and then proceeded to inform me that "Narcs should be burned!"

*Tremendous, I thought. I've just been threatened.*

In a moment the same girl grabbed the officer, who was struggling to handcuff her friend, and I de-

cidated that maybe I should become involved. I removed her hand from the officer. She delivered a roundhouse slap across my face. *Great. Now I've just been hit. What's next?* Fortunately, a siren was next, announcing the arrival of a back-up officer and dispersing the crowd.

In a few minutes we were on our way to the jail with a steady stream of threats and profanity emanating from our prisoner in the back seat. While gingerly trying to realign my jaw, the question leaped to my mind, *What am I doing here?*

The same question must be posed by the scoutmaster sloshing about his tent in a rainstorm and the hot-line listener dragged out of bed at 3:30 A.M. by a despondent alcoholic. *Why did I get myself into this?*

## Why Have an Outside Ministry?

In the ensuing three years as a police chaplain, I

It might be good for many pastors  
to get on the other side of the volunteer problem once in a while.

have come across at least four answers:

- First, there's altruism. Our world brims with unmet needs. Tears flow everywhere, and handkerchiefs are scarce. We all know of the tremendous needs within our congregations, but they remain only the tip of the iceberg. So many human needs are never bathed in the light of stained-glass windows. They swell in the harsh, neon-lighted streets, and will remain there. Even though they will not come knocking at our doors, the human problems and needs in the world cry out for our attention.

The same officer who rescued us the night I was slapped unloaded his anger and frustration for three hours one night as I rode and listened to him. He has never come to my church office and probably never will, but in that cruiser on a slow evening I ministered by listening. Police officers bear a tremendous load of stress. This man said, "I'm about ready to explode. You know, you're about the only person I can talk to." Needs like this tell me one reason I bother with an outside ministry. Needs like this, multiplied by the millions, shout for others interested in volunteer ministries.

- A second reason for outside ministries involves theology. A favorite cartoon of mine shows a wizened old preacher in the pulpit of a magnificent church. One parishioner whispers to another, "I'm afraid Rev. Rogers doesn't harmonize with the edifice."

Pastors have been categorized. We belong in the church, where, hopefully, we harmonize. Sometimes we are allowed into selected parlors for tea, but we certainly should stay out of the "real world." In some ways we pastors have built this image ourselves, and as long as we stay within our own parochial confines, we contribute to its preservation.

Churches often cherish the opinion that their pastor is their "hired gun" to work for them. Although it is true that a pastor's primary responsibility is to the body that supports him, they do not own his every moment. He has a wider ministry. Churches can learn to respect that ministry even when it is not directed toward them.

"What in the world were you doing in a police car last night?" If I have heard that once, I have heard it a hundred times. Being a police chaplain has pro-



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vided me a great opportunity to burst people's stereotypes of ministers. What in the world am I doing? I am ministering in Christ's name in the world; that's what I'm doing.

I once approached the fire chief about the possibility of joining the volunteer fire department. I could sense his uneasiness. Finally he said gently, "You can get really dirty fighting fires, and it's a dangerous business." In other words, surely a minister wouldn't consider getting dirty or being in danger. He now sees a different model of the ministry as I hold a flashlight while he administers first aid at a midnight freeway accident.

- A third reason for outside ministry boils down to pragmatism: I like the results.

First, I gain contacts. In my previous ministry I remained thoroughly entrenched in what has been called the evangelical ghetto. I hardly knew a soul who was not already a Christian. Things have changed. I now spend six to ten hours a week primarily with non-Christians through my service club and my police work. Although I cannot claim streams of them joining my church, I can point to a couple of youth advisers who came solely because of my visibility as police chaplain. Outside ministries give me the opportunity for witness that I never had before, along with exposure to the community. In breaking out of the evangelical ghetto, I find myself more in the mainstream of community life, not hidden away on the sanctified fringes.

Pragmatic me also likes the education I have gained in the community. My town at 3:00 A.M. is a different place than at noon. By being involved in something not at all related to the church, I get a wholly new perspective on my community.

- A fourth answer to the original question remains important: it's fun! I often ride on patrol on Sunday nights. Sunday afternoon may find me wrung out, but when I put on my uniform and get out on the streets, I am a different person. This is not more work; this is fun. If it ever becomes a consistent drudgery, I had better get out. Unless it is something interesting and fun, outside ministry is more of a drain than a boon.

I do not intend to make such service appear all joy. Sometimes I encounter problems that make my church ministry look like a piece of cake. Sometimes my shifts leave me emotionally and physically

drained, but there is a difference. This outside work broadens me. It regularly provides great diversion, sometimes genuine excitement, and very often some humor. David Lloyd George said it better than I: "With me, a change of trouble is as good as a vacation." This different kind of ministry may use many

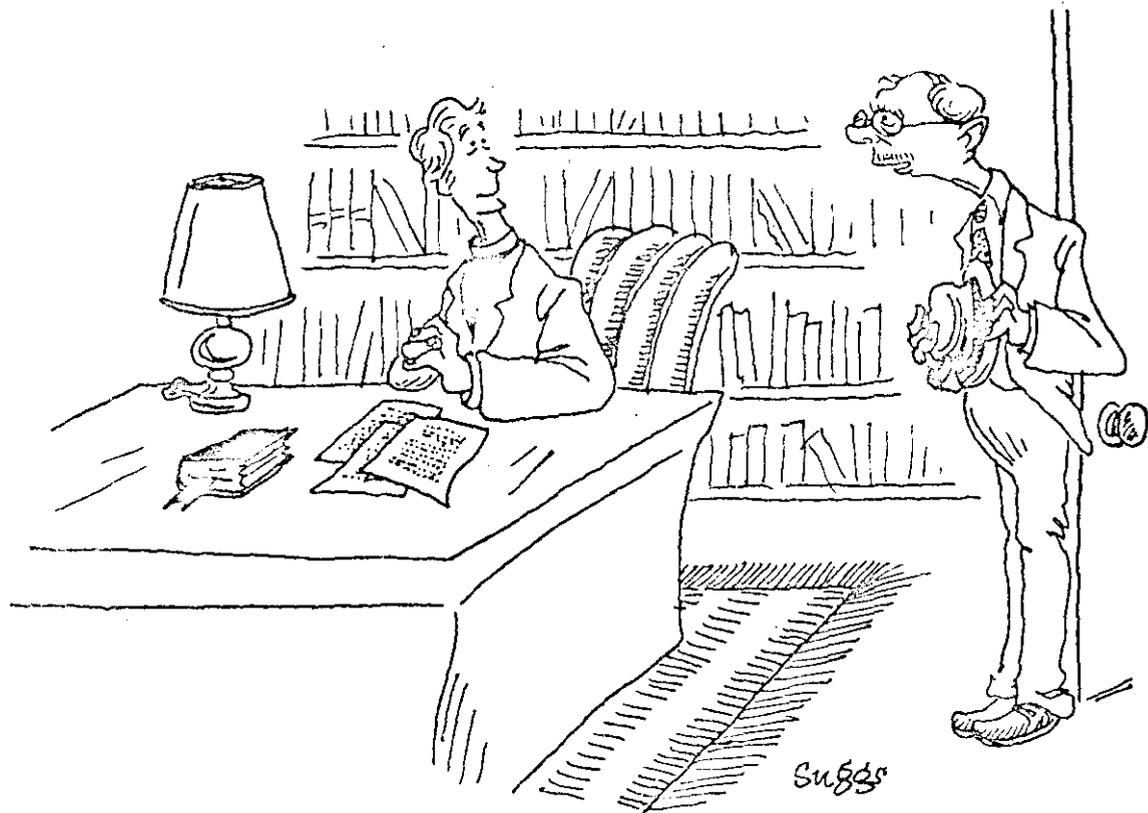
of the same skills and training that my parish ministry uses, but it remains different enough to provide diversity in my life. For this reason, I benefit from it as I would from a hobby.

Why do outside ministry? Do it because of the needs out there, because of the proactive ministry it

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*"Pastor always wanted to do that before he retired."*



*"Excuse me, I'd like to volunteer for committee work involving sensitivity and sacrifice in challenging a secularized, value-impoorished society with the radical claims of the gospel. I have Thursday afternoons free."*

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models, because of the contacts and education it provides, and because it is fun.

But with so many reasons for ministry outside our own churches, perhaps a few cautions are due.

### What Are the Drawbacks?

The time we carve from our schedules for outside ministries has to come from somewhere. Something will suffer—or at least be rearranged—if we will make good on our desire to broaden our ministry.

How easy it is to neglect our churches. You, too, can probably reel off the names of pastors who neglect their churches to pursue some other interest. Perhaps their parish ministry is slumping a little anyway, and so their swing into presbytery office or a teaching role or a political cause becomes all the more rewarding. At least in these arenas they receive some strokes. But their churches suffer from neglect. I know a pastor so involved with art that his church is withering on the vine.

Outside ministry cannot be pursued at the expense of the parish. We should not give our heart to

another love. Outside ministry is secondary—a supplement to our major efforts in the parish. If not, it will return to us in misunderstandings. "How can you have time to ride in those police cars when you've never visited my mother?" We are wise to keep our bases covered before we play the field.

Neglect of our families is appallingly easy. What does your calendar look like? Does it allow any time for your spouse or your children? When did you last play with your kids? If we guip at these questions, the idea of taking on another ministry is preposterous. If expanded ministry will only come at the expense of my family, the price is too great. No one else can be husband to my wife and father to my children, so I had better do it.

However, this does not mean that I forget the idea of broadening my ministry. It only means that I must plan it wisely. Some outside ministries *involve* one's family. Coaching a child's team, enjoying a music ministry together, campaigning for a cause as a family, and team-teaching with your spouse all provide opportunities to work together. Other ministries can be worked around one's family. Most of my police

patrol occurs after my young children are tucked in bed.

We find the time to do those things most important to us. With careful planning, outside ministries need not adversely affect one's family.

One's self may be the easiest to neglect. "Fragmented" often describes life for many of us. As one Christian leader put it: "Everybody wants a piece of my soul." Ministry outside one's church can easily degenerate into one more commitment, one more responsibility, one more hook in your flesh. Enough is enough. We all need rest and regeneration. We all need some time for ourselves.

So a necessary question is this: Is it good for me? If a given ministry will not be good for you, you can bet that you will not be good for it. Burnt-out, overcommitted workhorses make poor ministers.

Last summer I was approached to run for the school board. After appraising the situation, I decided to give it a go. I thought it would provide an interesting and broadening experience as well as an avenue for service. When the ballots were counted, three people were elected, and I was not one of them. I think I heard God's voice saying, "Jim, you're overcommitted." After the initial sting of defeat, I have not regretted the outcome.

### What Are the Possibilities?

The possibilities for ministry outside the church bounds extend to the limit of our imaginations. No list can be adequate, but some suggestions may kindle your ideas. I see three basic categories of outside ministry: church roles, professional roles, and secular roles.

*Church roles* involve the pastor in church-related ministries, but not within his own congregation. Most denominations and associations expect some sort of work from pastors within their judicatories. The conference youth committee and the district stewardship task force are but two examples. These responsibilities serve the church in other places and may provide a great avenue for growth in a specialized ministry. Such other opportunities as speaking at special events, consulting, and serving as an adjunct professor at a seminary or church college also help serve the church. Writing, directing, and performing in theater arts and music offer further areas of ecclesiastical ministry.

*Professional roles* include community services that only the clergy may provide. Chaplains of all types fit most readily into this category. Whether it be a police department, a medical facility, a jail, a rescue mission, or a beach, the clergyman is uniquely capable of offering service. Pastors find open doors for ministry as crisis line listeners, hosts on television forums and radio shows, newspaper columnists, ref-

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erence board members, and as advocates of various political and social causes. With the training and stature they bring, pastors find many unique opportunities for ministry to the community.

Some pastors find their auxiliary ministries in *secular roles* almost anybody could fill. They minister more as individuals than as pastors. Youth work offers leadership in scouting, 4-H, Big Brothers and Sisters, and athletic coaching. Schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations always need competent board members. Service clubs and service groups seek skilled volunteers. Christian teachers make a great impact in both private and public schools.

You could probably add a lot more ideas to this list. I have been trying to somehow combine skiing and ministry, but the role of chaplain of the slopes just hasn't proved viable yet.

### Funerals and Firing Lines

The other day a man from my service club called to tell me his father died and he wanted me to do the funeral. He is a gruff bear of a man—a man about town, unaccustomed to a pastor's study. He nervously fidgeted and walked around as we arranged the service.

Following the service, he was a different man. Christian hope had left its mark. Without the relationship we had built through our association in the service club, I doubt I could have done much more than a perfunctory service. I'm glad I escaped my evangelical ghetto to serve him in his time of need.

About a year after I joined the police department, I finished the courses required of a reserve police officer, including firearm training. I was duly invited to join a department shoot, even though I would not carry a weapon on the street. I had a marvelous day and shot nearly a perfect target. Only two expert marksmen bettered me.

When we scored our targets, the patrolmen were amazed: "The preacher can shoot!"

Pop goes the stereotype.

The camaraderie and interesting experiences I have logged as police chaplain make it an enjoyable ministry, a demanding but rewarding complement to my pastoral routines. That is how it should be. Not only do I perform a ministry, but I like it. The type of outside ministry may change for me, but I know this: I will always seek some way to minister apart from the work I do through my church. It makes good sense, it fills real needs, and I enjoy it. God works that way. ■