

Faith in Uniform

Law enforcement is a dangerous profession. That's why Christian cops take their faith seriously.

A burly street-hardened police officer with a clean-shaven head grabs a tissue from a female usher to wipe his tears. Seated with family members and 1,500 law enforcement officers from many states, he mourns Joseph E. LeClaire Jr., a fallen comrade, at Christian Life Center (Assemblies of God), Bensalem, Pennsylvania. "God is in control of an out-of-control world," David A. Cawston, senior pastor, comforts the funeral audience. "God weeps for those who hurt. Jesus died so everyone could have a relationship with God. He wants us to invite him into our lives as a partner."

LeClaire was gunned down near Philadelphia at 1:45 a.m. on March 19 while serving an arrest warrant on a fugitive wanted for raping a 13-year-old girl. Shot in the stomach and head, LeClaire, who was 53, died four hours later in the hospital. Two other members of his warrant team were wounded.

"God was right there helping Joe save two lives," Cawston continues. "It was Joe's time."

As LeClaire's casket is placed into the hearse, a loud voice echoes through the solemn crowd gathered in front of the church: "Badge 20 out of service!"

Law enforcement officers risk deadly confrontations on every shift. Even routine traffic stops can turn violent. When faced with using deadly force, an officer has mere moments to assess if it's justified. About as long as it takes to swat a pesky mosquito off your face is all the time a police officer has to

decide about firing his or her weapon.

According to current U.S. Department of Justice statistics, assailants using handguns, rifles or shotguns feloniously killed 594 law enforcement officers from 1992-2001, an average of more than one violent death a week each year.

How do cops cope with the daily threat of being killed on the job and the many other stresses they face? Not very well.

In the United States, 665,555 full-time officers are employed by almost 14,000 city, college, country and state police agencies. As a group, they suffer abnormally high divorce, alcoholism, suicide and mortality rates. The average age of death for police officers is 66, according to a 40-year study conducted at Rochester (New York) Institute of Technology.

"You don't have to convince policemen there is a devil," says John Carlo, senior pastor of Christian Pentecostal Church in Staten Island, New York, and a retired captain of detectives with the New York City Police Department (NYPD). "They literally face the devil every day in people, and they have no defense against spiritual warfare. That's why they drink. They don't meet many good people."

FBI Chaplain Steve Davis echoes the extreme challenges police officers face: "The average law enforcement officer is exposed to more evil in a year, more conflict, more disrespect and more personal threats than the average citizen faces in a lifetime."

Yet cops and those they help are largely overlooked in Christian outreach across the United States. Ministry efforts

in their field usually go to the other side of the law.

Davis points out that criminals, while incarcerated, enjoy free food and a bed, exercise equipment, recreation, vocational training, chapel services, free legal counsel, and easy access to mental health care. In addition, Christian groups provide them with toothbrushes, underwear, clothes, snacks, Bibles, prayer, comfort and support.

“The perpetrator is being reached out to and supported by the government and the church, and no one is helping the victim or the police officer,” Davis says. “It can come off as though we are helping the wrong side.”

Yet Christian cops are overcoming the strains of the job and making a positive difference in law enforcement.

Some lead Bible studies. Some pray for—or with—officers under their command. Some volunteer with Christian organizations that undergird cops.

At times they are thanked for their faith. At times they are ridiculed for it. Always they hope others at least see it. For when a cop of any stripe finds Christ, the personal change can be vivid and immediately apparent to fellow officers.

They Answered the Call

Finding Christ in 1998 dramatically changed John Halbeisen, a lieutenant with the Stafford Township, New Jersey, police department. Before that time he tried coping with the stresses of police work by drinking heavily and chasing women.

"It was the wildest part of my career," he says. "I had started to burn out. I lost my wife and kid. I steered my life into the trash can."

Today he leads a weekly Bible study with 18 male and female police officers. He has earned the respect of his colleagues with his professionalism and leadership.

"You can be a good cop and be a committed Christian," he says.

Halbeisen commands a 21-member SWAT team in Ocean County and makes life-and-death decisions in seconds. Attired in Kevlar helmets and military-style black boots and fatigues, his team controls dangerous situations through speed and shock.

"You go in fast and hard, and don't give a suspect the opportunity to resist," he says. "I thank God for the wisdom, planning and training. You make Him part of your team. I don't feel that overwhelming desperation because of Jesus."

Chief of Police Jerry Dyer of Fresno, California, says he was "not a role model" before he became a born-again Christian in 1991. Separated from his wife, he drank too much and was involved in extramarital affairs for many years. "My lifestyle led to problems on and off duty," he says.

Seeking to change, Dyer accepted an offer to attend church with a colleague and his wife. The pastor just happened to preach on adultery and alcohol abuse for three consecutive Sundays. Dyer rushed to the altar during the third week.

"I asked God to forgive me for my sins," he says. "I cried my eyes out."

God restored his marriage and took over his career, opening doors of advancement. Dyer says what God has done for him is a miracle. But it in no way has eased his dependence on God for the extreme stress that comes with his job.

Fresno is a hotbed of drugs and gang violence. Numerous illegal methamphetamine labs are operational, and 55 known gangs claim the city and nearby valleys and mountains as home turf. The number of youths in the Fresno County Juvenile Hall addicted to crystal meth ranges from 90 percent to 95 percent. Dyer runs a department with 1,150 employees and an annual budget of \$112 million.

"In decision-making, I could not imagine being a police chief without Christ," he says.

The chief's mettle was tested earlier this year when police arrested Marcus Wesson for allegedly murdering his nine children. The killings became the worst crime in Fresno's history. Overseeing the criminal investigation and facing the national media put an enormous strain on Dyer and the entire Fresno police force.

"It was Christ who allowed me to get through that difficult time in my life," he says. "It was the most emotionally draining event that our department has ever faced. Seventeen employees needed counseling and had to go on administrative leave. Veteran police officers cried."

Christian leaders are influencing other departments too.

Before joining the Chattanooga police force six years ago as police chief, Jimmie Dotson, a born-again Christian, told the mayor: "I am going to manage this department on biblical principles. If God can't be part of my management team, I'm not coming."

He was hired and served with distinction until last spring. Before he left, tragedy had tested him to fulfill his pledge to include God in his ranks.

In May 2002, one of Dotson's officers—26-year-old Julie Jacks—died while grappling with a mental patient who had taken her gun and shot her six times. Dotson prayed with her family in the hospital emergency room. "It took a long time for the department to bounce back," he says. "You have to hold up as chief of police. God stepped in."

Andrew D'Amora, a captain with the NYPD Transit bureau, heads a unit of 130 officers. "God has ordained us to be cops," he says. "You can be more of a productive officer as a Christian. I'm doing it unto the Lord."

Bob Vernon served 38 years with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). An outspoken Christian, he retired in 1992 as director of operations responsible for 10,000 employees.

He earned the respect of his peers through gutsy policing. Early in his career he refused to engage in everyday macho street-talk by screaming the F-word at suspects. Vernon worked with a new partner who criticized his refusal to curse as dangerous.

"I'm a follower of Jesus," Vernon explained. "He wouldn't want

me to talk that way.”

Vernon then challenged his partner to observe his performance for a while. After two months his partner admitted: “You do get the guys out of the car without a problem.”

Vernon currently provides ethics training to police departments in 21 countries and uses that platform to share the gospel.

Shields of Faith

Law enforcement officers may be cynical, street-tough and wear a diamond-hard spiritual shell that is tough to crack, but courageous Christian colleagues lead outreaches for them nationwide. Organizations such as Cops for Christ ([Cops for Christ](#)), Peace Officers for Christ International ([Peace Officers for Christ International](#)) and Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers ([Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers](#)) provide forums for evangelism and encourage Christians to share their faith openly.

Bolivar Medina Jr., president of the Cops for Christ (CFC) chapter at the NYPD, began a new program in January to reach the department’s 75 precincts with the gospel. Ranked as a detective 2nd grade in the Brooklyn Organized Crime Auto division, he’s a hotshot, with 650 arrests to his credit. He’s an aggressive police officer—and an equally aggressive evangelist.

Medina and a partner staff a table after precinct roll calls to hand out CFC literature and Bibles, as well as coffee and donuts. “You can’t have a police function without donuts and coffee,” he quips.

He then shares a five-minute description of CFC and a 10-minute devotion. His CFC business card has Romans 10:13 (“‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’”) printed on it. The designation 1013 is also the NYPD’s radio rescue call for help.

Carlos Aviles Jr. who retired in January as a detective in the NYPD Special Victims (sex crimes) unit in the Bronx is vice president of CFC under Medina. Another aggressive witness for Christ, he’s been ribbed and ridiculed.

“I found wooden crosses in my police car when they knew I would have that car the next day,” he says. “There would be nails on the seat.” He always shrugged it off and kept on sharing Jesus.

He viewed his years in the sex crimes unit as a ministry. He prayed for rape victims and gave them copies of the Daily Bread devotional. God even prompted him to pray for criminals and give them gospel literature.

Aviles has seen God’s intervention on the streets, too.

Alone and on duty one night, hiding in the shadows of a doorway, he spotted a suspicious-looking man entering a club and then leaving a few minutes later with a loaded shopping bag. Drawing his weapon, Aviles identified himself as a police officer and approached the man.

He was stunned when the man suddenly dropped the bag and leaned over a car with his arms behind him, ready for handcuffs. “OK, you got me,” the man said meekly.

The bag contained several pounds of marijuana. It was the easiest arrest Aviles has ever made—and he found out why when the man told the desk officer that he saw “seven cops with their guns out” during the arrest.

Aviles believes the man saw angels. Citing Psalm 91:11, he adds: “That’s why I know God does encamp His angels around.”

Tom Eilman, narcotics investigator with the LAPD, recalls how his witnessing energy took on a new urgency after a close friend was gunned down three days before Christmas in 1997.

The officer died while pursuing a thug who had stolen beer from a convenience store. The thief opened fire when the officer stopped his patrol car in an alley. A bullet hit the officer’s exposed left arm traveling into his chest and severing an artery in his heart.

Eilman was nearby when he heard the shooting and found his mortally wounded friend. The thief also died. Both lives were lost for the value of a 12-pack carton of beer.

The experience became a dose of reality for Eilman. The death of his friend “brought to life” the seriousness of his job, he says. He became convinced, as many other officers across the country are, that more than ever cops need the prayers and the witness of the church.

“From that point on it drew me closer to the Lord,” he says. “It made me realize the importance of witnessing to my fellow officers.”

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