

Bringing a new meaning to 'peace officer'

sub: Lay chaplaincy serves police, public

5/2/00

By Neal Ross

Behind every gold badge, and inside every blue and khaki uniform, beats a human heart. And for 31 volunteers with the Law Enforcement Chaplaincy Service in Sonoma County, keeping that heart beating is all in a day's work.

"The primary purpose ... is to support the law enforcement agencies," said lay chaplain David Mendricks, who "rides the circuit" between the Valley sheriff's substation and the Sonoma Police Department. "Even though we do a lot of ridealongs, and we're there for the police officers ... we just love to go by and talk with them, chat with them."

But Mendricks, a March graduate of the chaplain's academy, said that's only one part of his job.

"More importantly, (we'll) be with the people who have had a tragedy in their life," he said. "It could be SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome), it could be suicide, it could be murder – really bad news things that we respond to."

"It's just a passion of love for people who are just having the worst day of their whole life," Mendricks said. "My heart is in this, totally. I just don't like to see people in pain – and we've got so much of it in our society."

Mendricks and the chaplaincy program are scheduled to be formally introduced to the Sonoma City Council during tomorrow's regular 7 p.m. meeting, at the 117 First St. W. council chamber. Sonoma Police Chief John Gurney said the chaplaincy is yet another way for his officers to keep the peace.

"A lot of times, we are dealing with somebody who can use the kind of comfort and support that they can provide," Gurney said. "We think it's a valuable service to provide to the community and the department, and that time will show the benefits of this particular program."

Although staffed by volunteers and operating on a shoestring, law-enforcement chaplaincy is "a booming industry – it's all over the country," said the Rev. David Powell, who heads the county's program from a house in Sebastopol.

Powell, a 27-year veteran of various police agencies who became a priest in 1985, was approached two years ago about setting up a chaplaincy service for the sheriff's department.

That request led to a contact with the 2,700-member International Conference of Police Chaplains, which provided "professional standards and training resources," Powell said. "Probably the best chaplaincy program in the country, in my opinion, is Sacramento's," he said. "And they helped us from the get-go."

The county's first 20 chaplains began service in March 1999, with another 11 graduating this year – 26 of them ordained, with another five lay leaders and caregivers in their respective churches. All attended an 88-hour academy given by law enforcement agencies, experienced chaplains and professionals in the healing arts.

Powell said the service handled 125 calls last year, with a record that reads like a litany of pain: death notifications, suicides and suicide threats, homicides, traffic fatalities, traumatized children, child deaths, alcohol- and other drug-related trauma, and drownings.

Chaplains logged more than 5,000 hours talking with officers, deputies and staff in eight law enforcement agencies. They also performed four funerals and a wedding.

Mendricks, who was assigned the Valley beat because he lives in northeast Santa Rosa, said that's not unusual – since, by nature, the chaplains become intimately involved with the people they serve.

“We do eulogies, we do funerals for people upon their request ... and we do an awful lot of follow-up,” he said. “There's specific signs of suicide ... people can basically take their own life from a tragedy in their life. That's why it's so important for us to be there for the first week.”

And “being there” – the chaplaincy's motto – is also an accurate job description, Mendricks said.

“There's very little talking (on our part),” he emphasized, saying that after he's dispatched to the scene, an officer or deputy will make the initial introduction.

“One of the first questions that we ask is, ‘Do you have a pastor or a priest that we can call for you?’ ... Normally, they answer ‘yes,’” Mendricks said. “If they say no, my response from there (is), ‘Would you like me to stay with you?’ And I don't believe any chaplain has been turned down.

“From that point, we're just there for them. We don't ask any questions – we just simply set with them in their sobbing and mourning,” he said, then paused.

“I don't know what they're going through,” Mendricks said, explaining, “If I haven't been there, I don't.”

But he does what he can, telling people, “I don't know what you're going through, my friend, but I'm here for you.”