

# Servant Leader on the Beat

By Dr. Merlin Switzer

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Nine o'clock at night and it's time for graveyard briefing to start. A message comes down from the Communications Center. A woman has just reportedly been shot in the chest and officers are enroute. As I wait for an update, one of the Sergeants has started briefing for this crew that will be on duty until the glow of morning sun invades the Sacramento Valley of Northern California. Ten minutes has passed since briefing started and I get another message. This time the message has to do with the pursuit of a stolen vehicle in the North Highlands area. The car has crashed and the driver has fled on foot. Officers are responding and beginning to get into position in hopes of catching the thief.



This is my last night as the South Patrol Division Graveyard Watch Commander. I have been in this assignment for only five months, but it seems much longer. Its tough staying up all night...more than once, I have stopped at a stoplight and seemed to blink and the light has turned green. I drink coffee, but some nights it doesn't help.

This night, in 1993, is one I will not forget. I am the only Lieutenant on duty for the unincorporated area patrolled by the Sacramento Sheriff's Department serving a population of over 500,000. On a typical graveyard shift, North and South Patrol Divisions would field about twenty to thirty officers. Many nights we could have used twice that many during peak busy periods. This was an unusually busy night with a number of emergency situations.

After briefing, this crew of predominately young officers took their posse boxes containing the multitude of forms that might be needed, extra handcuffs and ammo, Penal Code and other miscellaneous supplies and headed for their patrol cars. After a quick safety check of our patrol vehicles to ensure the emergency equipment was working, we headed out to begin patrolling south of the American River in the communities of Rancho Cordova, South Sacramento, Elk Grove and beyond.

Swing shift would be out for a couple of hours yet, and for that I was thankful. Two officers responded to a loud party call in an area with a history of hostility toward officers. As the officers walked from their car to the address of the party, a shot rang out. The officers jumped for cover. A sniper had taken a shot in the direction of the officers. Many more officers, including myself, responded Code 3 with red lights and sirens. Officers were stationed around the area thought to contain the suspect(s) until canine officers could scour the area with their four-legged partners. Unfortunately, no suspects were found.

About midnight, a call came out in the North area involving a home invasion. Three suspects had broken into a home. The homeowner shot and killed one of the invaders and wounded another.

During the early morning hours, a couple of officers in the South area attempted to make a vehicle stop on a car containing two people. The driver refused to stop and a pursuit ensued. While fleeing, the driver ran into three other citizen vehicles. After the last crash, the fleeing vehicle was out of commission, but the occupants bailed out of the car and fled on foot. Our officers caught both of the suspects in short order. The two suspects were under the influence of drugs, probably crank, a common name for methamphetamine.

The final major call was from a young woman who went into the garage trying to find her boyfriend. She did. He had hung himself from the garage rafters. I tried to console the woman as she grappled both with the agony of her discovery and the question of why he would take his life.

As I left, I checked my watch. It was five o'clock in the morning. I was tired, but very much awake as the morning sun began to light up the horizon. This was the first time I was not headed to another call. Maybe now I could find some breakfast and a chance to rest.

In 2000, I was a Captain and responsible for the North Central Division, one of four new patrol divisions. The community, and correspondingly the department, has grown significantly in the past seven years. I led a staff of ninety people providing service to the 95,000 citizens living in the communities of Arden-Arcade. There are more than two thousand businesses in the area that employ nearly 50,000 people.



As a Christian since my youth, I believe that Christ has a vital interest in what goes on in the Arden-Arcade communities, as He does every community. Hence, I believe the

church must play an active role in confronting crime and related quality of life issues in the community.



Shortly after I was asked to start this division, I began to seek out local pastors and enlist their support by meeting with me on a regular basis to pray over the community. Specifically, we prayed:

- God bring peace and restoration in the lives of those who do not know him.
- Help us partner with churches to pray over and minister to the community.
- God deliver those who commit crime

into the hands of our staff.

- God give wisdom and protection my staff.

I also provided specific information about areas where crime is a particular problem and in need of intercessory prayer.

The first pastor I contacted was Earl Heverly of Christian Life Fellowship. I had never met this pastor, but I felt prompted to stop by his church unannounced early one Friday morning. He was there, greeted me at the door and invited me in. As I shared with him my desire to enlist pastors and churches to pray for my department, and me, he sat listening intently. Finally he said, “Merle, your visit this morning is an answer to prayer. I’m never here Friday mornings, but I stayed after my men’s group to pray. I have been meeting with several pastors here in Arden-Arcade and have been praying, asking God to show us how to partner with our local Sheriff’s Division. We would be honored to pray with you.”

I met with these pastors a few days later, and they decided to name their group the Arden-Arcade Pastor’s Association as a way to begin laying the groundwork for churches in the area to work together. I met with them on a monthly basis and was very appreciative of their support.

Additionally, at the beginning of each month, I e-mailed a list of prayer requests and crime statistics to many of the pastors and other interested believers. This information was in turn shared with prayer warriors in the churches. It was not unusual to find them conducting prayer walks through these areas. I supported this, but encouraged people to do so in a safe manner.

I started a Community Action Panel (CAP). This group of ten people was selected because of their ties to different segments of the community, one of whom was a pastor who represented area churches. This panel worked with me in two primary ways. The first was to identify and prioritize the crime and related quality of life issues from a

community perspective. The second was to develop and implement strategies targeting those issues of greatest community concern.

I have found this to be an effective way to partner with the community in order to deal with issues that are of greatest concern to the community. In another area, I coordinated a similar process that resulted in the opening of the North Area Teen Center operated by Campus Life. Many churches and community groups got behind the effort and helped raise nearly \$100,000 to open the center. God moved in a great way. The teen center has been open for more than ten years.

In the fall of 2000, we started Quarterly Zone Meetings to facilitate dialogue with the community in each of our four zones. Each zone represents a geographic area equal to about one-quarter of the Arden-Arcade area. At these meetings, different staff members were introduced, crime statistics were presented and crime prevention tips were shared.

However, the core purpose is to provide an opportunity for the community to share what crime and related quality of life issues are of greatest concern. We asked those present to identify specific problem areas and prioritize them. Our staff began working on the problems, sometimes within hours. At the next meeting, the staff reported what they did about the problems. This resulted in great dialogue with the community and helped us focus attention on the specific concerns.

CAP members attended many of these meetings. They also developed a survey to gather additional information from people in attendance, as well as from the community at large. Nearly 600 people were surveyed with about half of these being high school students.

Both adults and youth identified traffic, drugs and property crime as the most pressing problems. CAP worked on developing possible strategies to address these problems. Many of us prayed that God will give them wisdom beyond their means in coming up with strategies that will make a difference in this community.

One idea the Lord gave us was coordinating Community Pride Project Workdays where groups of Arden-Arcade neighbors would join the Sheriff's staff in giving a "community hug" to neighborhoods in the area that really needed it. The first one occurred in August 2001.

The area selected has a history of prostitution, gangs and the related kinds of public nuisances. For more than a year, my staff focused a variety of enforcement efforts on this neighborhood just a few blocks long. However, it was on my heart that we be seen as more than just "enforcers."

On the appointed date, members of several other public agencies showed up wearing their work cloths. Pastors and/or members of four local churches showed up to work, as did a number of residents and apartment owners. In total, more than 100 people worked at hugging this neighborhood. At noon, other churches members showed up with delicious sack lunches for all of the workers.

During the course of the day, workers picked up trash, removed weeds, trimmed bushes, planted twenty-six trees and painted red fire lane lines. An estimated eighty-five to one hundred thousand pounds of trash and trimmings were hauled away. By the end of the day, the area looked great. Many of the residents were thrilled with the new appearance. Pastors and parishioners wanted to know when the next Community Pride project would be held. It was an awesome day. Throughout the day, I thought of the verse in Matthew 25 that says, "...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

In spite of the sizeable business population, there was no local Chamber of Commerce, only a small business association that represented a small number of businesses. For more than two years, I promoted forming a business association that would represent all the businesses. Finally, we were able to kick off the Arden-Arcade Business Association under the umbrella of the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. Though I was asked to be the first president, I declined. I saw my role as a community facilitator. I felt strongly that the Association needed to be owned by the business community, as it is to this day.

Over the span of twenty-eight years, I had many wonderful opportunities to serve the community and my profession in a variety of capacities. One of the highlights was helping to start the Sacramento Valley Fellowship of Christian Officers in 1979.

In 2004, my wife and I felt God calling us to pursue my passion for leadership on a full-time basis. I have been blessed to speak at numerous conferences across the United States, publish numerous leadership articles, and coach leaders one-on-one. I have also been privileged to provide training and team building workshops for many law enforcement agencies, other local and state government entities, and non-profit and for-profit organizations.

Serving God in my vocation has been exciting and rewarding.

God bless you!

## **Bio**

Dr. Merlin Switzer works exclusively in the field of leadership. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership with an emphasis in Leadership Coaching. Dr. Switzer is a leadership coach, consultant, trainer, and conference speaker. He has worked with numerous leaders and organizations across the U.S. to help leaders be more effective. More recently, he has worked with leaders in Ecuador and Cambodia.

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