

# WORDS FROM THE WILDERNESS

Establishing a Prayer Team To Share God's Heart to Reach the Lost

## “Mark, the SWAT Team Is Looking For You”

Those are not words I am used to hearing. So, when they were spoken to me, back when we lived in Maryville, Tennessee, they certainly got my attention. It turned out that a friend of mine, who was on the sheriff department's SWAT team, wanted to invite me on what he claimed was a ride-along. So I met with him and watched and interacted with the team the next day as they served a warrant for a special investigative unit. It was only later that I found that my friend lied to me - His invitation wasn't for a ride along...it was an audition. That investigative unit, which was the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force (think “Law & Order SVU”), wanted to check me out and see how I would react and interact around their work. But I only found that out when, the next day, they contacted me and invited me to join their team. They sent me to an (abridged) version of the law enforcement academy. And the next thing I knew, I was standing before a judge, sworn in, and made a full deputy. And so began eight years of me working with the Blount County Sheriff's Office, simultaneous with me being a pastor in Maryville.

The unit I was with actually operated as part of a larger federal task force, and it was their job to find predators and arrest them before they hurt more children. Sometimes it was the guy in the white van, loitering outside the elementary school. Sometimes it was the guy sitting in his mother's basement, collecting, receiving, and distributing pictures of children. And sometimes, it was interdicting and seeking to dismantle networks that trafficked images and children from Maryville, as far away as Seattle, something we were shocked to discover. Sometimes it was strangers. But sometimes, it was even family members who were doing these crimes. There were four detectives on the team - two “tech guys” who set up the online stings and then processed the hard drives and reams of photos and videos that were seized during the arrests, and the two detectives who were the “door busters,” actually going in and making the arrests of the predators (often with the SWAT team as backup for high risk warrants, such as when I met them).

I considered the guys I was working with to be heroes. Sure there were funny times, such as when the wife of a perpetrator we arrested showed up at the department the next day, not to bail out her husband, whom she was more than happy to let rot in jail, but seeking the return of their SUV and big screen TV, both of which had been seized as instruments used in the commission of his crimes. And my kids, who were little at the time, loved that I got to drive a county car with flashing lights, which they always wanted to play with when I had the car at our house. And it has been rumored that I once even pulled over a friend, just to mess with him, for the fun of it (I will neither confirm nor deny that rumor).

But these detectives had the hard, emotional task of dealing with the worst of the worst criminals - guys who were preying on and hurting children. They were willing to get down in the muck and to see things in dark places daily that the rest of us spend our lives not having to consider, and they did it to rescue children



who were being abused, and to keep monsters from abusing any more children. But how do you deal with walking in a world like that? How do you process seeing the worst of images and the vilest of crimes?

Lord willing, that is where I came in, and I pray to this day it is where I was able to bring some value to the team. Officially, I was there to be a liaison to the families we dealt with. When our team served warrants and made arrests, sure, sometimes it was on the guy living alone in a van down by the river. But often, it was men (or even women) who seemed to be normal, functional members of the community. They had jobs, and families, and homes. Once, we even arrested the most prominent attorney in Knoxville - the guy who's face was on all the billboards around town. It was my job, while the scene was being secured and the evidence was being collected, to interact with the spouses, the children, and the families to explain to them what was going on and why we were there.

But, I always felt my real job, my real opportunity for ministry, was to be there with and for the four detectives on our team, and to others who worked with us. One of them had been doing this work for ten years, and that was after working on the gang task force and with the DEA. Another was newer,



but had the burden of leading the team and dealing with that kind of work, while having small children of his own at home. And the two tech guys - well, they had it the worst: They had to meticulously categorize, notate, and describe *thousands* of photos and videos that had been seized and would be used as evidence for gaining convictions of the abusers the team arrested. But how does anyone really deal with that? How can you be exposed to such filth - and then go home at the end of the day and try to live as normal, without the emotional PTSD and nightmares that come with what these men were fighting?

So I began to try to draw very close to those four detectives. Lord willing, I became their sounding board, their listening ear, and the shoulder they could sometimes literally cry on. Whatever it took for them to be able to be unburdened. Heard. Healed. And able to continue to function - in their jobs, and with their families. It was there that I first began to learn, Lord willing, to listen well. And to weep alongside. And over time, it even opened the door to great conversations about the gospel. About how such evil and such brokenness can exist in this world. And about how we struggle to deal with it. And about the rescue and the restoration God has provided through His own child, His own Son.

## The Key To It All Was Being Embedded With Them

Our sheriff's department had chaplains - Local pastors who were trained and on call to help with crisis situations, or to go with deputies to make death notifications and other such things. Those guys did hard, important work. But a chaplain would have never been effective or even received with the ICAC team. Law enforcement officers are notoriously guarded and walled off anyway - Theirs is an unspeakably difficult job, and one that few people understand, and that was true ten-fold for these detectives. Their world was too different. Too dark. Too hard to understand to anyone who wasn't in it. What these men needed was someone who became one of them, who was with them day or night, who walked with them, who was touched by what touched them, and who understood the burdens and the grief they carried.

In the end, I hope and want to believe that this ministry made me a better pastor. At first, the elders of the church I was serving in Maryville were understandably nervous - I had my own flock to tend to, and they were worried about me being spread too thin. I loved those brothers, and to this day, I am grateful for how they looked out for me, but working with the sheriff's office, becoming a deputy with them, allowed me to minister to men who needed someone to come alongside. It allowed me to enter in, to understand, and to minister, Lord willing, in ways that I never could from afar or in brief "step in and step back out" kinds of interactions. And I hope that, in some small way, I was able to point those men toward the love and grace of Jesus - the One who truly and totally understands our burdens, our sin, and our struggles.



## Being Embedded Is What the Gospel Is All About

Jesus is the ultimate One who left heaven, with all its glory, to come be "Immanuel" - God with us. He felt everything we feel. He was muddled. And bloodied. And He knows. He knows our weakness, our struggles, our fears, and our pain. And, able to understand and sympathize like no other, He became our advocate - paying our penalty, and now always living to intercede for us before the Father, who is the One who first sent Him to rescue us and to save us. There is nothing we experience that we can say, "But Jesus, you don't understand." He knows. He listens. And He rescues.

By God's grace - This is what we are seeking to establish, model, and build upon in Ocean Springs. First, with our beginning core group of believing Christians, we are bringing the message: Look what Jesus has done for you to make you His Bride, His people. He has done that for you and in you - and now He wants to do that through you.

And it is what we are trying to do with evangelism, finding our spheres of influence by which we can be embedded among the lost people of Ocean Springs. For me, it is often among the bars and the people of Government Street. In the Lord's grace, I am seeking to be among them, to be one of them. To gain their trust, as one of their tribe. If I came in as a chaplain - stepping in and stepping out, but remaining untouched, they would never trust me or receive me. Far more importantly, they would never receive the gospel. Neither would evangelistic "raids," just coming in and handling out tracts and inviting lost people to come to church, work. But, Lord willing, by being where they are, day after day, and night after night - like a tribe learning to trust and outsider, they slowly begin to let down their guard. To allow me in. And then to share their stories, their hurts, their fears with me. And little by little, through the power of a God who runs to lost people and who opens doors for the gospel, I am praying that I, and the team God is creating here with me, will have the ability, the precious opportunity, and the sacred privilege to be there with them when they need us most, to understand like others do not — And to then speak to them of the light, the hope, and salvation that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring them. The people here know they are lost. Please pray with us that we will be able to walk in the footsteps of Immanuel, of God with us, to show them and to tell them that there is a Savior - and that He is for them.



## Will You Go With Us In This Adventure?

- Will you pray for the **lost people** that I am encountering and walking among? Pray for the gay bartender, who is deeply into new age theology, but who is sharing his story of father wounds with me. Pray for the rock musician I spend time with each week, a man who calls himself a reluctant atheist, and who is angry at the church for the abuses he has seen perpetrated there. Pray for the man whom I spent an hour with last Thursday, who moved to the coast when his life fell apart. He is a former pastor, who has left the faith. But he and I have become friends, and he asked me to come and sit with him for an hour while he and his family were eating dinner at the bar. And pray for the many others who are here, who are lost, and who need Jesus.
- Will you pray for the **core group** God is building here? It is a fledgling group we pray becomes a church - A church known for radically loving each other well in the gospel of Jesus, and then offering that love and that gospel to all of those around us. Pray for them to hear the call, to catch the vision, and to find their own places of being embedded!
- Pray for the **spiritual battles and opposition** we encounter here - for to be embedded with the lost for the sake of the gospel most certainly means to draw fire from the enemy. We have seen that, over and over.
- And will you pray for **others to join this team for Ocean Springs - and beyond!** Residents, disciples, and teams of people who might catch the vision for walking in the footsteps of a wounded Savior, and being His embedded ambassadors in a community full of lost people. And who in turn might be part of planting other churches on the coast. And of taking a vision for embedded ministry and evangelism to the lost back to their own spheres and places of ministry.

## Thank You For Praying - Will You Consider Giving?

**Would you consider making a financial investment toward the embedding of the gospel in Ocean Springs?** Whether it is a first time gift or as an ongoing supporter - Your gift will make a difference! Here is how you can give:

- Use the QR code to the right, or visit <http://give.pcamna.org/to/1749>
- Checks can also be sent payable to "Mission to North America"  
PO Box 890233  
Charlotte, NC, 28289-02333  
(Write "Mark Horn, Ocean Springs Church Plant" on the memo line)
- And finally, more information for all of this and updates on our Ocean Springs story can be found at our website: [www.PlantHopeOS.org](http://www.PlantHopeOS.org)!



**Thank you, Friends. Thank you for being part of what God is doing to bring His story, His glory and the hope of an embedded Savior to the coast.  
God's love, grace, and presence be with each of you!**

### A closing encouragement:

"We do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. Rather, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, for He always lives to make intercession for them."  
- Hebrews 4:15 & 7:25