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Front Page January 3, 2008

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Who helps the helpers?
 Clergy standing by for police, fire, victims
BY MELISSA MCKEON MMCKEON@HOLDENLANDMARK.COM



Holden firefighters observed a moment of silence during a ceremony at the station last spring.

HOLDEN - It's an unfortunate fact: tragedy brings awareness.

And while Holden has experienced few of the public tragedies that create change, the community is still part of a larger community that has endured much.

The February, 1994 murder of Paxton Police Chief Robert Mortell, killed while aiding Holden in the pursuit of some breaking and entering suspects, was in Holden Police Chief George Sherrill's mind when he asked St. Francis Episco-be the department's chaplain.

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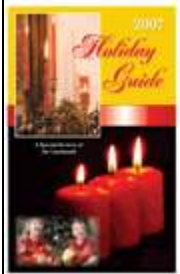
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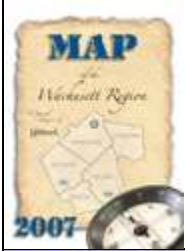
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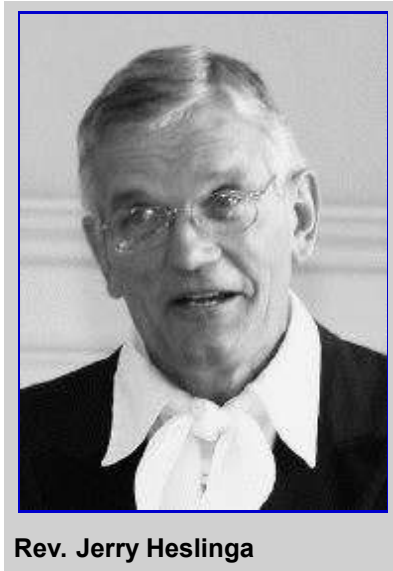
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The national tragedy of September 11, 2001, spurred then Holden Fire Chief Ed Stark's request to First Baptist Pastor Jerry Heslinga to serve that department.

Both events were part of a growing acknowledgement that the helpers need help, for themselves and for the victims in the communities they serve. How they get that assistance was motivated by yet another tragedy.

"Really, it's been since the Worcester [Cold Storage] fire [in 1999] that chaplaincy emerged across the state," Heslinga says.

In summer 2002, Heslinga came to First Baptist Church in Holden from New Jersey, where, in addition to his parish, he'd served as chaplain at a local hospital and at the jail in Cape May County.



Rev. Jerry Heslinga

The next year, he held a memorial service on September 11, and invited local fire personnel.

The service sparked something for Stark, who later asked Heslinga to come on board as the volunteer fire department chaplain.

Though the chaplain's role had no formal job description when Heslinga took it, he and Stark agreed they'd start to feel their way along to form one. Since then, Heslinga has found himself blessing new trucks, and conducting short services when events around the world require some ceremony of acknowledgement. He points to the day last spring when he held a service to remember the families and firefighters who perished in a high-profile fire in South Carolina.

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He has needed to be aware of how the slightest tremor in the fragile web that unites the brotherhood of public safety personnel is felt far and wide.



Above, firefighters bow their heads in memory of firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty in South Carolina in June. The ceremony was conducted by Heslinga in his role as chaplain to the Holden Fire Department. File photo

Heslinga views his role as helping both the victims of fires and the emergency personnel who respond to them - wherever his presence is most needed.

He visits victims of injuries in the hospital, acts as liaison for those displaced by fire to find food and shelter, and he stays with victims to offer comfort.

He also addresses the needs of the emergency workers, who sometimes face massive stress in addition to whatever their daily lives might bring. Since many firefighters are call personnel

who have other jobs as well, they bring the pressures of those lives to the task of fighting fires, attempting rescues, and arriving at accident scenes that are sometimes gruesome.

"It is a high-stress job," Heslinga says. "Even though Holden doesn't have that many fires, when the alarm goes, the adrenaline goes."

Down the street at the police station the adrenaline is the same, but it's generated by different circumstances.

Local police are often asked to go to the home of family to notify them of the death of a loved one, an emotionally draining situation.

"Every officer hates to be making that 3 a.m. knock on the door," Sherrill says.

It's an area for which officers receive virtually no training. And it's where the department's chaplain, Rich Simpson's on solid ground.

"That's when it's fairly clear that it's helpful to have a chaplain," Simpson says.

The job will evolve as he gets to know the needs of staff and those they serve, he says. But one thing is clear to him after just a few months working with the police department: this ain't Mayberry USA.

"Underneath, there's a lot of serious stuff," he says.

After years in Holden, Simpson thought he had a good take on the community's character and its problems.

After taking over as department chaplain last spring, he learned there's a lot more going on out there than he'd realized.

He's done his homework by going on ride-alongs with officers, taking the passenger seat in the cruiser and facing whatever patrolmen face during their shifts, which runs the gamut. They have to be prepared to deal with just about anything.

"I thought I understood more of what police really do," Simpson says. "I think I came in more aware than most, but I'm still surprised."

Simpson has developed more respect for what police officers do daily, and for the differences between his position in the community and theirs.

"They have the same concerns for Holden that I do," he says. "We may live those out differently."