Pastor/policeman carries a Bible, wears a badge

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By Greg Garrison

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS)—Police Officer Marvin Anthony Neal patrols the streets of Birmingham most mornings, but on Sundays, he patrols the pulpit at Galilee Missionary Baptist Church in Alabaster, Ala.

Neal became pastor in August but works as a patrol officer on the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift in Birmingham's south precinct.

Marvin Anthony Neal, pastor of Galilee Missionary Baptist Church in Alabaster, Ala., also is a police officer in Birmingham, Ala. (RNS photo by Frank Couch/*The Birmingham News*)

“I’ve seen him work a beat all night Saturday night and have to go in the pulpit on Sunday morning,” said Timothy Woods, pastor of Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church in North Birmingham, who is one of Neal’s mentors. “I pray for him.”

Members at Neal’s church tend to see him as pastor, not policeman, but they respect his other job.

“He’s an inspiration to the church,” said Danny McKnight, a trustee for Galilee Baptist.

Neal grew up in Detroit and moved to Alabama as a teenager. He was on the wrong side of the law as a juvenile with a misdemeanor theft charge.

“I stole something, and they caught me,” he acknowledged. Neal was sentenced to two years’ probation as a youthful offender. “My life turned around then.”

Neal decided to pursue law enforcement as a career, but the theft charge almost kept him from getting work, even though juvenile records usually are sealed.

“I had to go back to the courts and have them expunge it,” he said.

He went to the police academy and worked for the Alabama A&M campus police from 1994 to 1997. He also felt called to ministry. In 1997, he was licensed to the ministry and ordained—the same year he joined the Birmingham Police Department. Working as a patrol officer, he has responded to hundreds of violent incidents, including homicides.

“It gives you a deeper insight on death because you see it so often,” Neal said. “The death part is final. You see them take their last breath. It gives you a sense of the magnitude and importance of life.”

Neal also serves as a police department chaplain. He has never hesitated to share his faith with fellow officers.

“People have come to Christ right in the cruiser with me,” he said.

He also preaches to people he meets on the street.

“I’m trying to offer something other than a ticket and a gun,” Neal said. “I’ve had crack addicts and alcoholics throw their crack pipes away when I pray for them.”

Neal first served as a pastor in 2003. That’s when he began frequently alternating between a police cruiser and the pulpit.

“He’s trying to hold up what’s right, and justice,” Woods said. “They can

really work hand in hand. He’s responsible for the lives of people with both professions.”

There’s no conflict in carrying a badge and a Bible, Neal said.

“You’re trying to keep people from jail, and on the other end you’re trying to keep people from hell,” Neal said. “I’m always preaching about staying right—civically, socially and spiritually. I thank God for both jobs.

“It’s enough to keep you praying. I wouldn’t trade it.”

Greg Garrison writes for The Birmingham News *in Birming-ham, Ala.*

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