

# **Voices: Sermons preached through community service**

February 19, 2024

More than 30 years of pastoring has affirmed to me pastors have a great calling. Though it is not always easy, it affords opportunity to serve with eternal purpose.

Preaching, teaching and equipping matter, but there are ways to “preach sermons without words.” So, when I was afforded roles in the community to be someone other than “the preacher,” I took them. I found God could use me to show his presence and message through me in unexpected ways when I wore other hats in the community.

## **Responding to the call**

A fireman’s helmet was one “hat” that meant a lot to me. While pastoring in Stamford, the new fire chief became a member of the church and, soon, a friend. A few others in the church also were firefighters. So, I was invited to serve as chaplain for the fire department.

I’d respond to accidents and fires where I would counsel victims and survivors and encourage the first responders.

One time, a truck hauling a load of dog food ran off the highway and rolled over. There were no other vehicles, and the driver was uninjured.

“Are you a praying man?” I asked him.

Standing next to his demolished truck, he blurted out: “I am now, preacher! I am now!”

Not every accident or fire ended that well. I learned we quickly cry out in faith when we are injured or grieving. There is no time for judging when people need help.

Soon, I dialed up my commitment when I completed training and became a firefighter myself. The chief taught me our objectives were to “save lives and property.” Often and heroically, we could accomplish both objectives. Regrettably and on rare occasions, we could do neither.

I would learn so much about the thin edge between safety and danger, life and loss I couldn’t learn in a seminary class or a church office.

## **Against the odds**

I also learned I could proclaim truth without preaching a sermon. Like many Texas Baptist pastors who oppose gambling, I advocated for the closure of the [eight-liner gaming](#) business in town.

Stamford straddles Jones and Haskell Counties. The business was in Haskell County, and the county attorney enforced the law to close it. But it reopened on the square in Stamford, which was in Jones County. The Jones County attorney was not as concerned as I was.

One day, the call came that a structure was on fire on the county square. It was the gambling den.

As one of the first responders to enter the business, we encountered a fully involved room. Our initial team of four—two two-man teams with hoses—saturated as much as possible, while trying to save the rest of the neighboring structures on the square—a museum and a law office.

A gambling machine fell over on one of our team, injuring him. Two of the team carried him out, leaving me alone and surrounded by smoke and flames. I quickly realized it was not a good place to be.

The chief radioed me to evacuate, which I did. A crowd had gathered, and as I came outside and took off my bunker gear, several of them began to laugh. They thought I'd be the last guy trying to save the gambling hall, but I was, literally.

Thankfully the fire, started by faulty Christmas light strands, did close the gaming business—at least for the rest of my time in town.

## **Connecting churches**

Another time—a Sunday afternoon—a grass fire approached the sanctuary of an African American church. So, I bunkered up over my suit and soon was next to the building saving the structure.

I didn't think much of it until months later when someone vandalized the school with a racist word. It was not a typical act in our town, but it made the news in Abilene.

The church that survived the flames hosted a meeting, and the pastor of that church invited me to attend. An NAACP representative came from Abilene and gave a good speech reminding us of the history of racial injustices endured and how they continued. It was truly moving and fiery.

After the message, the pastor of that church got up and expressed his appreciation for the remarks. Then, he told the story of how I had come from the pulpit to a fire hose to save their church building from burning while still wearing my "preaching clothes."

The pastor said, though it was sad one person expressed their racism, we should celebrate the ways our larger community worked together. Then, the pastor abruptly ended the meeting, by asking me to conclude us in prayer.

The representative and I both were caught off-guard, but I stood up and

prayed, and the meeting was over—except for the food and joy. Thanks to that pastor’s wise leadership, a potential “fire” was extinguished, and community health was gained.

## **Ministry outside the walls**

Mine is just one example, one way pastors can multiply their ministry in their community. There are many other ways.

Whatever opportunity you have to connect on a volunteer basis as something other than “the preacher” in your community, consider it. You never know how God will use it to show his presence through you.

It not only will open doors for community connection, but it also will fill a need in your “pastor heart” to make sincere relationships outside of your church position and congregation.

*Jay Abernathy is the senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Woodville and a member of the Baptist Standard board. The views expressed are those of the author.*