

# Secret Lives of Pastors

**Mark Dowell**  
Minister of Martial Arts

*Maybe you only see your minister on Sunday morning, but for these four pastors, there's a lot more going on behind the scenes*

**KNOXVILLE, Tenn.** – When the Rev. Mark Dowell came to the Holston Conference from Louisiana in summer 2000, he had three years of karate experience under his belt and a passion to minister to inner-city kids.

Within months, he was driving around the crime-ridden area where his church is located, passing out flyers to kids and inviting them to Lonsdale United Methodist Church for free karate lessons.

It wasn't exactly smooth sailing. While handing out flyers in one neighborhood, the minister was "rushed" by about seven teens with guns. "I don't know what they wanted to do. Rob me? Shoot me?" Dowell managed to drive away before finding out, but the experience rattled the pastor and his congregation, nonetheless.

Once the karate classes started up, about 30 kids from the community showed up for the first lesson. But Dowell was disappointed when many lost interest and the class dwindled to three students in a few short weeks.

By **Annette Bender**

"They quickly learned that karate is not Bruce Lee on TV, but it's about hard work and discipline," he said. The pastor also talked to his students about substance abuse and other life issues, finishing each lesson with a Bible verse.

Gradually, attendance in the karate classes increased, as local kids and teens heard about the martial-arts minister and got curious about what he had to offer. By fall 2001, Dowell had to split his growing group of 30 into two classes. About 10 of his students are church members, which helps them get to know their neighbors.

Not that Lonsdale UMC is a stranger to inner-city ministries. Besides providing new coats to area school children, the church also sponsors a food bank, after-school tutoring, scout troops, and will open a children's library later this year. Members also invested \$2,000 in karate uniforms and equipment for the children. Lonsdale has an average worship attendance of 95.

Parishioners seem to be especially proud of the commitment shown by Dowell, who has progressed from red belt to black belt since moving to Knoxville.

"Rev. Dowell took his own vacation time to take the necessary tests to be qualified to teach the class," says Lonsdale member Kathy Mays. "This, to me, is dedication."



▲ **Julie Collins:** "I'm encountering a lot of people that I wouldn't have in my ministry."

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▲ **Mark Dowell:** "These kids can't afford karate lessons, and I really felt it could be a good ministry."

**Julie Collins**  
Pastor with a Badge

**KNOXVILLE, Tenn.** – It's her first year as a police chaplain, and the Rev. Julie Collins has already worked on the scene of a fatal pedestrian accident; delivered death notifications to two families; and ridden along with officers on domestic abuse calls.

Friends and family worried that police work would be too rough for such a "gentle," "feminine" person, Collins says with a grin.

"I've responded differently than I thought I would. I don't know if I should say this, but it's actually been pretty exciting."

After all, the minister got involved with the Knoxville Police Department in the first place because she wanted to "spice things up a bit." Minister of congregational discipleship at Washington Pike United Methodist Church, Collins was intrigued last year when the police department called to say they were looking for young female candidates. How the KPD got her name is a mystery. "But I was looking for a way to expand my ministry so I was pretty interested," she said.

After 70 hours of training, Collins graduated in April 2001 to become one of the city's 40 volunteer police chaplains. In addition to "ride-alongs" with officers, Collins is required to be on call for 24 hours once each month and participate in regular training sessions. When she's on duty, she carries a badge and drives a police car. Among her newly acquired skills are negotiating hostage situations, responding to bomb

threats, and helping officers get descriptions of suspects from people who only speak Spanish.

"This is a very difficult task we're asking chaplains to do," says Officer Savannah Ayub, who coordinates volunteers for the KPD. Besides ministering to citizens in distress – by being present after a car crash, house fire, or murder, for example – chaplains also serve as confidantes and spiritual leaders for police officers.

Collins is up to the task, says Ayub. "If we could clone her, we would. The feedback I get from officers and the community is that she's sensitive, caring and dependable."

Collins, who's expecting her first baby on July 4, is enthusiastic about further opportunities to connect with the public.

"I'm encountering a lot of people that I wouldn't have in my ministry," she says. "This is a great way to get involved in the community."



**Dennis Loy**  
Reverend Thespian

**BLOUNTVILLE, Tenn.** – A few years ago when the Rev. Dennis Loy took his children to see the film "Hook," starring Robin Williams, one of the character's lines left a big impression on him.

"The wife, Moira, tells Robin Williams,

"Your children are growing up fast, and you're missing it,"" said Loy, pastor at Wheeler United Methodist Church. "At the time, I was working harder as a pastor than I ever had. It was a real wake-up call for me."

The wake-up call not only inspired him to spend more time with his kids, it also lead him to a ministry involving needy children and unchurched actors.

A former actor, Loy started taking his children to auditions for local plays. He ended up auditioning, too, after learning that kids enjoy theater more when their parents are involved.

To the minister's surprise, he tried out for a pirate part in the Theater Bristol production of "Peter Pan" and landed a leading role as Captain Hook. He was surprised again – pleasantly surprised – when his role provided opportunities to mingle with children following after-school performances. Kids ended up climbing into his lap, "telling me their stories," and Loy was thrilled.

"Many of these children were from single-parent homes, in the poorest schools in Bristol," he said. "They needed a hug from someone important. It was a powerful experience for me."

On Sept. 11, he was rehearsing for another role in "Sweet Charity" when other adult actors started asking him about things like the Bible, angels and God.



▲ **Dennis Loy (as Eeyore):** "I left the theater alone for 20 years because I thought it wasn't compatible with ministry."



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▲ **Rochelle Maxwell:** "If that's your life and that's your belief, that's how you conduct your classroom."

"Suddenly, I was the theologian in residence," said Loy. He realized that many of the actors were unchurched and felt freer to talk to him in a non-church setting. "They sure did have a lot of questions."

Now that the minister has finished another role – as the lead in "Eeyore's Christmas Present" in November – Loy delights in knowing he's found a way to be with his children and reach out to the community at the same time. Daughter Elizabeth,

14, and son Ben, 11, seem to like being in plays with Dad, who has rediscovered a lost love.

"I left the theater alone for 20 years because I thought it wasn't compatible with ministry," said Loy. "But now I think it's good for clergy to have avenues for reaching folks outside the institution."

**Rochelle Maxwell**  
Preacher Teacher

**GATE CITY, Va.** – On Wednesday nights and weekends, the Rev. Rochelle Maxwell is pastor at Pruitt Hill and Tate Chapel United Methodist Churches in Greeneville, Tenn. On weekdays, she's a special education teacher in Gate City, Va., and has been for 31 years.

After years of lay work at her hometown church, Hales Chapel United Methodist Church in the Big Stone Gap District, Maxwell decided to enter the ministry in 1998. She didn't know then that her first appointment as a part-time local pastor would be a 50-minute drive to another district.

"After a time of prayer, my husband and I thought it would be feasible," she said. "How could we say 'no' to the Lord for this?"

So for the last two years, Maxwell has lived in her church parsonage in the Morristown District on weekends, returning to Gate City on Sunday night. On Monday morning, she's teacher to 27 learning disabled or mentally handicapped students at Gate City High School.

Her dual roles are demanding, Maxwell admits. But each job seems to have equipped her for the other. At school, she's more conscious of dealing with students' problems from an emotional and spiritual level as well as from an academic approach. "We're legally bound not to put any religious opinions out there at all," she said. "But if that's your life and that's your belief, that's how you conduct your classroom."

Maxwell also finds that having more than three decades' experience with "challenging situations" has primed her for the challenges of being a new pastor. "It's instilled in me a sense of not being defeated," she said. It also helps to be involved with the public on a daily basis. "So often, you want to look out at the community and not get involved, but working in the community is already part of my work."

Since Maxwell arrived at Pruitt Hill and Tate Chapel, worship attendance has doubled from about 20-30 in each church to about 50-70. The Rev. Richard Patterson, Morristown District Superintendent, says it's because she excels in interpersonal skills to individuals as well as to the congregation as a whole.

"I've worshipped in her church, and my perception is that she's an outstanding communicator and has really worked hard to become a part of the community where she preaches," he said. "I appreciate her driving that distance to do it." ■