

**A pastor with two flocks
loves all his sheep alike.**

**He is Mercer Island's
Nightwatch-man**

By



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

THE REVEREND Burdette R. Palmberg serves two congregations. The one that pays his salary is the 425-member Mercer Island Covenant Church, with a complex of brick and cedar buildings now covering the southeast corner of Mercer Island's understated business district. On Sunday morning's lineups of silver Mercedes, red Hondas and gold Oldsmobiles spill through the blocks around.

But the second flock is of black sheep: the homeless, penniless, drug and alcohol-addicted, soul weary outcasts who people the streets of downtown Seattle. This second congregation has no buildings, no confirmed congregants, and no

collection plate. It is served by a ministry which The Rev. Palmberg founded, Operation Nightwatch.



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

BUD – the name by which Palmberg likes to be known - acquired both his flocks at almost the same time.

In May, 1967, he was recruited by the remaining 35 members of a then declining Mercer Island Covenant Church congregation. No longer declining, the church today welcomes a regular 700 or more to a couple of Sunday services, and is considering running a

Palmberg baptizes Travis, son of Terry and Erman Martin, during a Sunday service.

third service on Easter, "or we'll have 'em hanging from the rafters," says the pastor



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

On Nightwatch a wanderer comes to Bud to pray.

Nightwatch-man:

his haunts are never dull

NIGHTWATCH'S FIRST NIGHT on the street, in July, 1967, was memorable.

"We were a mark for every con artist and shill," says Bud. "If you're a warm body, you're a mark. And the collar is a challenge to people.

"A hooker invited me 'to her place, 'because she'd 'never had a priest' and 'wouldn't charge anything.'

That was the wildest clerical discount I've ever been offered!

"Street people are there because they have been rejected by 'straight' society. Some are ex-cons, some are fresh out of mental institutions. Society's attitude is not to let them back in; but out on the street they are acceptable for what they are.

Two months after he arrived here, Bud met a young "fringie" up from San Francisco, Rick Cate, who claimed his drug habit had been cured by a "street priest". The latter concept - a cleric wandering nightly around a city's tough spots to listen, counsel and help - was new to the Northwest. Cate convinced Bud that Seattle should have such a program. "

Actually, Rick did his persuading at 2 in the morning, and I was so anxious to go home, I'd have agreed to almost anything," Bud recalls. Almost before he knew it, he had a program on his hands; ten Christian pastors and a crash course in how to handle emotional stress, suicide, stab wounds, and drug overdoses.

Of the original ten ministers, "two were freaked out by the training and by our meeting-place, which happened to be a gay bar," Bud says. Except for Palmberg, none of the charter members of Nightwatch remain; but in its almost-14 years, Nightwatch has acquired a hardy crew of around 40 clerics including two Catholic nuns, plus a fulltime director, The Rev. Norm Riggins. It is still funded entirely by volunteer donations, many of them from the participants' home churches like Mercer Island Covenant. And service clubs, principally the Mercer Island Kiwanis, have been principal "angels." "Every year, I hope the Kiwanians sell a lot of fireworks!" says Bud.



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

A street musician, seeing the cameraman, stops by to sermonize to Palmberg 'Look at the movie star! Why aren't you down at the Son Shine Inn, where the real action is?' He went through the usual routine, said Palmberg, which is first smart-aleck, then hostile, then 'down to cases'

"Straight society is the enemy, and in their eyes one of the straightest institutions is the church. I represent what they consider oppressive, so I am the focus for lots of hostility.

"At first, the street people didn't know what we were doing in their territory. Were we working for the fuzz, looking for sermon material, or just slumming?

"It took about four years to gain acceptance and support. And we've acquired real friends, bartenders, waitresses, cooks, 'regulars' on the scene who welcome us.

"We have demonstrated that we are what we say we are, that we will accept a person as he is and try to help him, without preconceptions of what he ought to be."



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

Palmberg talks with Mercer Island parishioners in the lobby of the eight-sided Mercer Island Covenant Church sanctuary after a recent Sunday service.

THERE-IS ALWAYS DANGER, although that has somewhat abated as downtown redevelopment removed many old haunts and the street people spread north to Belltown, south to Georgetown, and in some cases disappeared altogether. "The street that used to be jammed with action is quiet now," Bud observes. "And some of our ministry crosses 'chi-chi-ville,' the Pioneer Square shopping area.

Bud has been threatened with knives and jostled, and frequently in the early days street friends would leap to his defense -- for he was "their" priest, not to be harmed.

The closest he came to serious injury was about ten years ago when he was swung through a store window.

A man "was tripping out on some hallucinogen, yelling that he was being attacked by monkeys," Bud recalls. "and a crowd had gathered."

I'd been on the street long enough to lose that nervous edge, so I went running to him, got too close, and he grabbed my raincoat. I guess I looked like the biggest monkey of all, for he started trying to swing me around, sort of 'crack-the-whip'.

"He swung my 190 pounds toward the big plate-glass window of a dirty-book shop. "I felt if I tried to stop myself, the glass would crash onto me, so I relaxed and sailed on through. . "

I fell onto a rack of books whose titles would overpower your imagination....they'd make Penthouse look like a Sunday School publication.

"I startled a bunch of browsers. I've often wondered what went through their minds when a guy in a clerical collar crashed into their bookrack. One old man looked like he'd seen Jesus Christ himself."

NOT ALL STREET MINISTRY is that dramatic, although it is seldom dull.

A night on Nightwatch typically begins at 4th and Yesler in the program's office in the Reynolds Hotel, "where the saint of an owner, Mary Ima, refuses to accept a penny's rent."

Bud picks up a Bellboy, communications device, trades questions and instructions with the volunteer on phone duty, then checks the log. A Nightwatch colleague has noted sensitive areas, hostile people who "don't want us around just now," particular problems to look out for. "I note that a few nights before a street priest 'met Stumble Eddie at Mr. D's bar.' Stumble Eddie is separated from his wife who, he is sure, is shackled up with Crazy Joe, but he can't find them. Eaten up with anger and grief, Stumble Eddie obviously needs us, and I will try to find him.

"Then I hit the street.

"I walk down Yesler to First Avenue, check on some of my friends living on benches and under bushes around Pioneer Square, then head up First to Pike, climb the hill toward old Hooker Heaven, past the last porno theater on the right, then left on Seventh and north to the Greyhound Station.

"A bus station - and I check Trailways as well is what a railroad station used to be: a place where there are people and it is warm, a place where some try to crash on the benches. The security officer has to hustle them out every so often.

"At a bus station you find unbelievable things. Here's an elderly couple from Idaho who arrive here expecting to be met by their son --only they're a week early. They're disoriented and confused, so I get them some coffee, make jokes with them, and try to locate the son. And here are a couple of sisters hitchhiking home after a camping trip to Canada they've used up their money. I buy them tickets, and sometimes even get reimbursed in this case, the money arrives a month later, with a warm note from the parents. And I find a runaway who's having second thoughts.

"Here's a family of four, parents and two small children, they've heard there are lots of jobs in Seattle with Boeing hiring, dad will make big money, so they packed their belongings into cardboard boxes, tied them with rope, and spent their last cent on tickets to Seattle. Here they are at midnight, and where's Boeing? Security is in a quandary - he can't throw them out in the rain. So I get them a place to sleep, a coupon so they can eat the next day in some greasy spoon, and put them in contact with our director, Norm Higgins, who has contacts you won't believe. Higgins can't exactly work miracles, but he can find some way to help. If they're hopeless, with no more skills than to buy a bus ticket, he'll try to find them a way back home, if there's somebody there to receive them.

Nightwatch-man:

'Our purpose is spiritual'

"Our goal is to help everybody take the next step toward responsible living. That might just be staying sober for 15 minutes, or maybe not turning a trick tonight, or maybe going eight hours without popping an upper or blowing snow."

Unfortunately, Bud says, Nightwatch's most important business has become emergency housing. "We're getting shoved into it. Can you believe we sheltered 600 people in August alone, and that was in good weather! Seattle keeps knocking down and burning down the flop-houses, until there's almost no place to go. In the Morrison Hotel ballroom they stack people like cordwood, and yet there still are some sleeping in parks...and with bad weather yet to come. Every night we have a lineup at the Reynolds, people just looking for a place to crash.

"Our purpose is supposed to be spiritual. We try to meet physical needs so we can get past those barriers to the root, spiritual needs, but we spend our time pushing for crashes. "I continue to walk the streets usually, until about 2. Lockup time usually varies, and soon you can predict if there'll be a flood of problems hitting the streets when the bars close, or if all's quiet. Occasionally, I get home just in time for my first morning appointment!

AS NIGHTWATCH WALKS, people come up to talk. A stranger will ask, "If you're really a priest, what are you going in a place like this?" so Bud gives them his "15-second commercial .about Nightwatch, and then lets it sit.

"Some say, that's great, it's about time the church does something .

"Or some say, would you be willing to try and help me? And then you're into their need, which runs a wide gamut. They want me to go with them to the police. They want me to take them to detox. They want me to go with them to their room or apartment or house, and try to talk to a wife or a husband, bring about a reconciliation. They want me to go to a hospital and visit a friend who has overdosed. They want me to buy them a jug of wine. They want to sell their body. Or, sometimes, they had a call from God and want to share their vision ... and I mean a vision-vision-vision, a Technicolor, muscatel-inspired vision.

I have heard some visions. "One night, a guy came up and said he wanted me to join him in being a survivor. Gamma rays were about to start bombarding Earth, he said, and this meant that only those adequately protected would be saved. Nobody would listen to him, but he had seen the generating stations while traveling on a starship, and because we're strategically positioned between the Bremerton Naval Shipyard and Boeings, Seattle will be one of the first areas incapacitated by the gamma rays, which produce sterility, senility, and insolvency. .

"As we walked along people would stop me to talk, and he'd back off and look them up and down before discussing with me whether or not that person should be chosen as a survivor.

"Why have you chosen me?" I finally asked.

"He said I looked like a man who would understand. (I hate to think what that might have meant!)

"And then he said he would show me how to protect myself. He opened his shirt, pushed up his sleeves, and rolled up his trouser- legs, and showed me that his entire body was wrapped in aluminum foil.

"He said he had another roll of Reynolds Wrap that he was willing to lend me if I'd join him and be a survivor.

"I told him I didn't know if I wanted to survive in a world full of sterile, senile and insolvent people. He said he understood, and then he left.

"That was really a walk on the wild side. Nightwatch frequently is.

WHEN HE COUNSELS OTHERS, one phrase Bud Palmberg doesn't use is, "When I was a boy... "

When he was a boy, Bud Palmberg was an actor, trumpet~ player, singer, and hell-raiser. It was not until his senior year at the University of Nebraska that he was "born again' ' as a Christian, thanks mainly to tremendous respect for his devout parents, a home pastor, and a woman who is now Donna Palmberg.

Bud's father, an Aurora, Nebraska, automobile wholesale parts supplier, had "a very virile faith. His theology wore overalls," says Bud. "Dad was a tough businessman, but he walked tall with integrity and with clear witness as to his love for Jesus Christ.

"Man, how I respected him! He was no pushover, but a Christian businessman with everything that possibly implies.

"We weren't always close, and during high school and my early college years we were distant. I discovered, though, if I was distant from my dad I wasn't walking with God, because Dad and God walked together and I couldn't be away from one without losing the other.

"In my senior college year, when I got squared away spiritually, Dad and I got together again as though we had never been apart."

"I want that legacy for my children. I want my children to know that when they walk with God they're right next to their dad." The Palmberg's have two children: Jeff, 17, and Chrisi, 15.

"Last December," Bud continues, "Dad and Mom celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, and all four of their children with all the grandchildren met at home to celebrate. We stayed up most of the night and reminisced and laughed and sang and prayed and goofed and argued. We all had a super time.

Nightwatch-man:

A "Bible Beater who's a liberal"

"Six weeks later, Dad was dead from an aneurism of the carotid artery."

The family met again for the funeral.

"I took my children, so they could see Christian grief up close. Mom was superb. People would say something to trigger more tears, and she would run into another room, wipe them off, and

come back in and join the party. ·

"At the memorial service, the only appropriate music was the Hallelujah Chorus. And that organ almost knocked the church over."

HE SECOND INFLUENCE on the young Bud T Palmberg was "a pastor at my home-church whom I'd treated abusively and who loved me with what I term a tough love. He just never gave up on me. He never condemned, and he never blew my cover."

The third person with terrific impact was Donna, now Mrs. Palmberg.

"I had traveled one summer with a quartet, singing bass and playing trumpet. Her parents invited me to stay at their home in Traverse City, Michigan, when we played at the Covenant Church there. Donna had just graduated from high school, and I thought then and I still think, she's the cutest girl I ever met.

"I'd reached the point where I realized, it was like in Luke 15, the Prodigal Son leaves his father's house and goes to a far country. He's starving, and says to himself, 'This is really dumb. The meaning and purpose and abundance of my life is to be found in Jesus Christ, so why in thunder am I messing around trying to stuff my hungers with the husks that the swine did eat?'



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

Palmberg's strong bass voice, that once sang with a dance band, now leads the hymns at Mercer Island Covenant Church.

"So I went home to my father's house, and he was waiting like in the scriptures.

"Within the week I applied for seminary. It blew my buddies away. (Some high school friends still find it difficult to believe that I am a minister.)

"It wasn't because thought God wanted me in the ministry. I just didn't know. I had my degree in education, I had some opportunities in the theater, but I just felt I needed to check it out."

He enrolled in North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, married Donna, and went out on internship to a small town on the Gulf Coast of Alabama.

"I still didn't know," he recalls, "if I was supposed to be a minister. I served from September through January with no assurance that this was where I belonged. I was just doing a job, that's all. I had no sense of divine call or anything like that.

"Then, on the first Sunday in February, 1958, the town's top athlete got up in church and made a commitment to Christ and said it was because of my ministry. That night I went for a walk through alpine forest, for I don't know how far or how long, and although I didn't see any bright lights or hear any bells, I came on the realization that hey, the peace I'd been chasing all these years is mine, I've got it, I've had it for quite a while.

"Since that time I have never had reason to question whether I should stay in the ministry.

"There's lots of hassle, there's lots of pain. I become frustrated with my own inadequacies.

"People's expectations are high, and if I can't come up to my own, how can I come up to theirs?

"But I know myself well enough to know I'm grateful for the grace of God.

"I feel good about myself, but I don't have illusions about myself not many, anyway.

"So when people ask, 'What right do you have to be a minister?' I reply that I don't have any 'right' to be a minister or a leader or a man of God. That's partly why I go by 'Bud' Palmberg, rather than 'Reverend' or some fancy title. I'm 'Bud,' the guy with the same needs and the same Lord that my people have. I just have a little bit different job, that's all. And God expects as much from them as He does from me.

"The Old Testament tells us that God spoke through Balaam, the prophet's ass. So I guess He can speak through me.

BUD IS AN ENIGMA to some. "Theologically, you're a real Bible-beater," people have told him, "but socially, you're a liberal."

Bud says those descriptions shouldn't be incompatible. He's involved in civil rights issues and with the state's ethics committee, and is active in community service, whereas the traditional picture of an evangelical implies "sort of an isolationist policy," in his words.

He sees nothing in the scriptures that would withdraw him from the world. "I believe," he says, "the gospel should translate into everyday life; it's not a case where, 'in an emergency, break glass God is-the lord of my life, and He should make a difference in the way I relate to my neighbors and my family and my pets - and to my enemies.

"We are called upon to be the salt of the earth, and salt does no earthly good stuck in a saltshaker. It's got to be spread, to keep things from rotting and to add zest. The role of a Christian is to be the salt of society.

"And I try to be understandable," he says. "I don't come across as an intellectual, although I don't think I'm unintelligent.

"The business of a ministry is to communicate good news. "To communicate, you have to be understood. "I try to express myself in thought forms and language that are understandable to everyone, young and adult, rich and poor, educated and otherwise. I want everyone to know what I am saying.



Photo by PEGGY REYNOLDS

The Palmberg family gathers for "our Sunday dinner that has to be fried chicken from Albertson's deli." From left to right, Donna, Bud, Jeff, 17, and Chrisi, 15. Under table is Bear, a poodle-Maltese whose mother, Daisy, is hiding behind the camera.

Nightwatch-man:

'On Skid Road or on Poverty Rock, people are the same'

"And I listen, as well as talk.

"If I didn't, I'd get up there and fire away at targets that haven't been raised for years!

"I've got to spend time with my people counseling, hearing, listening, to know where their pain is, or their need is, so scriptures can be applied.

"Otherwise, I'd be scratching where nobody's itching.

MERCER ISLAND AND SKID ROAD they're worlds apart, but "I haven't dealt with a problem in one that I haven't seen in the other," says Bud.

"Drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, alcoholism, loneliness, alienation, fear, anxiety, meaninglessness. . .they're the same everywhere.

"On Skid Road or on Poverty Rock men and women are the same, their needs are the same, their hungers and hopes and ambitions are the same.

"The difference is that on First Avenue they don't have entry into the system; those on Mercer Island do, subject to the inaccuracies of all generalizations.

"Another difference is that on First Avenue the needs lie out there on the street, ready for anybody to recognize, whereas on Mercer Island they're wrapped in a \$100,000 mortgage.

"I'm not denigrating Mercer Island. I love it, and I feel extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to minister here. "I am not saying Mercer Islanders are rich bums.

"What I am saying is, there are no bums.

"There are simply people who have had an opportunity and blow it; there are also people who have had opportunity and maximize it.

"On First Avenue, people express their needs in a lot more direct, and sometimes more colorful, manner.

"But we all have need of the basic necessities of living, and we all have need for the basic meaning of living." On First Avenue the primary need often is, can I keep living?

"On Mercer Island, it's, why am I living?"

"I think the Mercer Islander and the First Avenue derelict would each be able to answer the other's question if they could just exchange situations.

"The answer to both questions is, 'Yes, you can keep living, and I can help you. And yes, there's reason to be living.'"

"The author Rosalind Rinker once wrote, 'A minister is one beggar telling another where to find bread. '"

NIGHTWATCH isn't all giving, Bud says. "I view Nightwatch as a ministry to the ministers," he says. "It would be easy for me to stay on Mercer Island and just get cozy and comfortable, with nice people in nice houses that smell nice.

Our Lord didn't spend his time this way.

"If I were still serving a church like my first, where most of the congregants were on the raw edge of poverty, I wouldn't need Nightwatch. But here, spending all my time on Mercer Island could bring on organizational hardening of the arteries.

"And so I have Bible, will travel!"