

CHURCH IN THE FIREHOUSE

Church pastor follows path back to his past



James M. Higgins, chief of West Chester Fire Co., chats with Pastor Schwartz at Fame Fire Co. Schwartz was recently named chaplain of the fire department.

Pastor Jerry Schwartz spent most of his adult years as a fireman in Baltimore, MD. Now in his new career as a pastor, he is back in the fire house — this time as the leader of a church meeting in the Fame Fire Company's engine room.

By DOROTHY McCABE
Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER — Pastor Jerry Schwartz thought he left the fire service behind in 1990. That was when he quit his job as a captain in the Baltimore City Fire Department to become a pastor.

After a year of preaching to his congregation in the West Chester Fame Fire Company's banquet hall, Schwartz volunteered to serve as chaplain of the West Chester Fire Department. "I never thought anything about how my fire department background would make a difference," said Schwartz, but it has opened

doors. When you touch a volunteer firefighter in any way, you touch the community because volunteer firefighters make up every segment of the community. And that's what we want to do, help people in whatever way we can."

During an interview in the church office next door to the Fame Fire Company on Rosedale Avenue, West Chester, Schwartz admitted he had no strong desire to serve God or be a member of the fire department while growing up in Maryland.

He graduated from high school and married in 1969 with "no specific career" in mind.

His father-in-law, an electrician, got him an application for an apprenticeship. His father, a Baltimore City firefighter, gave him an application for the fire department shortly after the age requirement was lowered from 21 to 18. "I figured whoever calls me, that's where I'm going," said Schwartz. "The electricians never called me and the fire department did.

I ended up being one of the first 18-year-olds in the Baltimore City Fire Department."

Entering the department in October 1970, Schwartz "absolutely fell in love" with firefighting, quickly rising to the rank

of lieutenant and then captain.

In 1987, Schwartz was featured in a cover story in the Maryland/Washington, D.C. area "Firefighter" magazine with his father, a former battalion commander after 40 years in the department, and three of his brothers who are paid Baltimore County firefighters.

"When I was in the fire department I absolutely loved what I did," he said, explaining that his career was spent in the busiest inner-city companies averaging 2,000 to 2,500 calls a year.

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"It was a thrill, a challenge to battle the blazes and save lives and do all those wonderful things that firemen do." Around 1978, Schwartz's wife, Nancy, then raising the couple's eldest two children, underwent a physical and spiritual transformation after developing a relationship with Jesus Christ. At first, Schwartz, who was "busy fighting fires and looking to be promoted to captain," wasn't interested. "We were raised Catholic, we knew about God, we went to church," said Schwartz. "I didn't think I needed anything else, but you could not argue with the change in her life." About nine months later, while lying in bed at the firehouse one night, Schwartz came to the realization that he, too, wanted a relationship with God. "Who do I think I'm kidding?" he recalled thinking, "Do I really think I can raise these two children, that I can really live this life without God directing my steps? That night at the firehouse, I said real simply, no religious thing, just laying in bed, my boots on the floor next to me, I said, 'Take over,'" said Schwartz. "That was it, that was my big prayer, and He did." The Schwartz's search for understanding led them to Bible studies in several denominations, including Methodist and Pentecostal churches. After fighting fires during the week in the inner-city, Schwartz would return to those neighborhoods on the weekend with the church groups armed with clothing and food. "The fire department was good training for the ministry," he said. It puts you in touch with people. In the fire department we were serving people in more of a physical way but it made for good training." A search via the Yellow Pages for a Christian school for their children brought the Schwartz's to a Rock Church in Towson, MD., a Baltimore suburb, where Jerry eventually served as an usher, a deacon and an elder before becoming an associate pastor in 1989. He was then approached about helping a

group start a church in Chester County. His "first thought was to say no." "I was happy fighting fires and being part of the church there," said Schwartz. "But my wife and I prayed about it and felt that was what God wanted us to do." At that time, Schwartz was captain of Steadman Fire Station, a super station near Camden Yards. He had been a firefighter for 19 years and three months – just nine months short of being eligible for a \$20,000-a-year pension. "Most people thought I was crazy, and still do when I tell them that story," laughed Schwartz. "But we knew we were being obedient." In 1990, Jerry and Nancy moved to Exton with three of their four children, Nancy, 22, Jerry Jr., 14 and Laura, 13. A daughter, Tracey, 20, remained in Baltimore to work. The church and a Christian school began in a commercial building on Village Avenue in Lionville. When an opportunity to purchase that property fell through in 1992, Schwartz, following his desire to pastor a church closer to a city, began looking in West Chester for a new facility. After searching in the area and finding nothing available, a church member recalled having attended a wedding reception at Fame. In July, 1992, the congregation began meeting there on Sundays. Schwartz has also found a permanent home with the West Chester Fire Department. Unaware of his firefighting background and without a department chaplain, Fame officials asked Schwartz to officiate at a truck housing and dedication ceremony. Prior to the ceremony, Kevin Corcoran, assistant chief of the West Chester Fire Department and a member of Fame, met Schwartz at a dignitaries' luncheon and was surprised to hear he was a firefighter. "Here's this minister who's going to give our blessing and invocation," said Corcoran, "and he's pulling out a Kodak book of photographs of these building fires." Coincidentally, Corcoran later realized he and several other department officers had traveled to Baltimore several years ago to tour the super station

where Schwartz was captain. The department had been without a chaplain since former chaplain, the Rev. Light, of the West Chester United Methodist Church, left the area several years ago. When Schwartz learned this, he volunteered to fill the position. James M. Higgins, chief of the West Chester Fire Department and a member of Fame, presented Schwartz with a letter stating the department would be "honored" to have him take care of the department's spiritual needs. "As an ex-fire captain he knows our needs," said Higgins. "Why not be a fire department chaplain?" Schwartz's firefighting experience makes him uniquely qualified to officiate at department functions and minister to the firefighters in times of tragedy. He also plans to make himself available to the firefighters and their families, whatever their needs. "I know what it feels like to be exhausted due to extreme heat; I know what happens when a hose line bursts; I know what happens when a truck crashes," said Schwartz. "More than that, I know the relationship firefighters have with one another. It's a family. And if you're hurting in one way or another you want someone from the family. You rely on each other at the fire scene and outside of that. "I have high regard, high respect for firefighters because I've been there," he added. "Anybody that takes on that responsibility is to be commended. To put your life on the line as a volunteer takes a lot. There's a thrill in it but there's also a great risk involved. I appreciate the fact that there are still men and women who are willing to really sacrifice their lives if necessary to save somebody's life." While some would say fate or coincidence brought Schwartz to West Chester, Schwartz believes he is "walking in the things God had intended before the world began." I had no idea the fire department even had an office of chaplain, but God knew," he said. "And God knew the firehouse was available for us to hold services in. It's started a real neat relationship there with the guys at the fire hall."

Whether by coincidence or design, Schwartz will soon be one step closer to his old firefighting days. With renovations due to begin on the banquet hall, Fame officials offered to let the congregation meet in the company's truck room.

"Preaching in a banquet hall over top of the firehouse is one thing, but to actually hold services with the fire trucks ..." laughed Schwartz. "That makes for a good story."