

Confessions of a Clan Chaplain

Loving God, Games and the Gamers Who Play Them

My name is Rob, and I've got a secret: I'm a 30-year-old gamer. Ever since Frogger, I've been hooked. Side-scrollers, roleplaying games, adventure games, first-person shooters, simulations, massively multi-player online games, I love 'em all. But that's not my secret.

I'm also a pastor, a youth and family minister, to be exact. Over the years, people have asked me when I was finally going to become a "real" minister. I usually just laugh and say, "I'm very happy where I'm at, thank you." Inside, it ticks me off. But that's not my secret, either.

Ministering to a Community

Like most secrets, mine started small. I was bored one day, and broke, so I searched the Internet for a new game, something fun and free. I stumbled on what I still believe is one of the greatest games ever made (gamers can find out more at freeallegiance.org). I tried it, loved it, and joined a squad.

For the non-gamers, the difference between squad games and pick-up games is like the difference between church-league softball and AAA Minor Leagues. Squad members discuss tactics in online forums. They schedule practices to improve skill and teamwork. What started as a simple distraction had turned into a commitment.

You know what the greatest part was? I was one of the guys. When someone swore, they didn't apologize to me. When I got angry, they didn't lecture me. And best of all, no one assumed they knew me just because they could label me. It was a meritocracy of

humor, intelligence and skill.

Finally, after a year, I took the big step. I told them I was a minister. What started as a commitment had become a community.

Members joined and members left, but the core became fast friends. We shared family pictures and work frustrations. We argued philosophy and politics. And because they trusted me, occasionally they would come to me with a question or a problem or even a prayer request.

"I show them as much love as I'm able. When they ask why, I tell them stories."

Another year passed, and I posted a poll in our forum volunteering for clan chaplain (*clan* instead of *squad* because the connotations hinted at the family we had become for each other, and *chaplain* because our community was so diverse). They overwhelmingly accepted, and dubbed me "Padre." What started as a community had become a ministry.

Cyber Padre or Suburban Pastor

So now you know. My big secret is out. I'm a shepherd with two flocks. I

minister to kids in a suburb of Milwaukee. I also minister to a misfit band of gamers from L.A. to Slovakia to Australia and points in between.

What surprises me every day is how much these two groups have in common. They like Jesus and hate church, which means I can't hold a service and wait for them to show; I go to them. When they cry, I mourn with them. When they laugh, I dance with them. When we talk, I try to listen as much as I speak. I show them as much love as I'm able. When they ask why, I tell them stories. ("Did you hear the one about the guy with two sons?")

That's real ministry even if the guy you're praying for is a computer programmer from Germany. That's real ministry even if the girl you're counseling has braces and ADHD. It's ministry because Christ is present, transforming us. These glimpses of the coming/present kingdom remind me that God is here, too—inescapable, relentlessly loving, even on the Internet.

Why would I give that up just to be a "real" minister? 

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