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national news

The haunting of Robertson

Mel White, a ghost of Valentine's past, vows to keep returning to CBN headquarters until Robertson grants him an audience

by Bob Roehr

Pat Robertson, the most powerful of religious right political and media figures, is declining to meet with Mel White, Minister of Justice for the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Church. White wants to discuss how Robertson's extreme rhetoric and untruths can lead to hate crimes against gay men and lesbians. He has begun a fast and has vowed to keep returning to Christian Broadcasting Network headquarters until the meeting takes place.

The story has garnered continual front page coverage in Robertson's home base of Virginia Beach, Va.

White began talking with local gay and lesbian leaders last fall and agreed to participate in their Winter Pride activities in mid-February. He knew the area from a dozen years ago, before he came to terms with his homosexuality, when he ghost wrote one of Robertson's books.

He faxed his old boss a letter, again asking to meet privately, just as he had several other times since publicly coming out 20 months ago.

This time Robert-son responded. "We are told in the Bible to love all people including those who sin against the Lord. For this reason I must have love in my heart toward homosexual and lesbian people." But he declined to meet, writing that homosexuality "is the last stage in the decline of a population."

"This is unprecedented," said Pat Heck, chairman of the state lobbying group Virginians for Justice. He called it a "tactical error" by Robertson.

Riding in from the airport with Heck on Feb. 10, White was startled to learn that his correspondence was splashed across the front page of the local newspaper. It blared from the dashboard radio. "Call in and tell Pat Robertson why he should meet with Mel White," urged the resident talkmeister.

"Whenever you get this type of publicity you have got to rethink your strategy," recounted White. "This story will be old news the minute I leave."

He and local leaders had planned this as a get-acquainted meeting, but the weekend took on a life of its own.

"Valentine's Day, love letters to Pat," thought White. "Why don't we just deliver a letter and ask for a meeting." The community embraced it.

Several dozen supporters assembled at midday on Feb. 14, at a restaurant across from the entrance to the Christian Broadcasting headquarters.

White carried a box of a dozen roses and a letter to Robertson, as he and 12 members of communi-

ties of faith crossed Indian River Road toward the compound.

Gene Kapp, spokesman for CBN, and a significant body of security personnel met them at the gate. Kapp discouraged them from entering the property but did not try to block entrance to the compound as it holds several public accommodations, including a hotel and restaurant.

The party walked more than a quarter mile to the central administration building and entered the lobby. White went to the bookstore and purchased a copy of *America's Dates with Destiny*, the book he wrote under Robertson's name.

The electronic media had been barred at the gate, then the print media was asked to leave, and then the dozen supporters were peeled away until

White was left alone. Security prevented all but approved personnel from entering the lobby area.

"They brought me all of their smiley folk," White said. "Finally the chaplain, Mark Johnston, came over. He was very solicitous. He said, 'Mel, you represent the cult of death because you don't procreate. Pat can't see you, for he will add credibility to your movement.' And I said, 'That is exactly the type of extreme rhetoric I am here to talk about. Ask my daughter or my son if we don't procreate.'"

At 5:30 pm they again asked him to leave and when he refused, "in the spirit of civil disobedience and nonviolent resis-

tance," security personnel grabbed him in a wrist hold and hustled him out the back door, locking it behind him.

White vowed to keep returning every day until a meeting was arranged. Convinced that Robertson can change, he said, "In the spirit of Martin [Luther King Jr.] I have to say, if Bull Conner can become an integrationist, you have got to believe that Pat Robertson can realize his mistake, say he is sorry, and help us stop these hate crimes. I have to believe that."

"Pat Robertson is not the enemy, it is his misinformation. So I am not after Pat Robertson, and I don't want to demonize Pat Robertson. I say everything I can positive. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, separate the person from the policy. Gandhi said, keep truth on the table. And the truth is, there are hate crimes and there are people who commit them."

The next day White returned to the CBN compound and was arrested when he refused to leave. He will be arraigned in March and remains incarcerated at the Virginia Beach jail. He continues to fast.



Mel White

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