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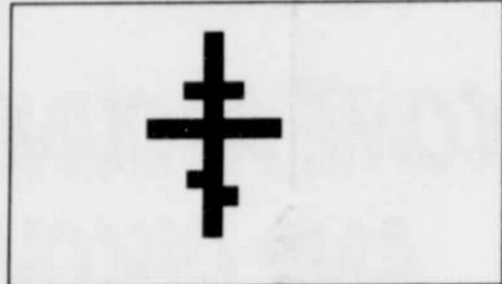
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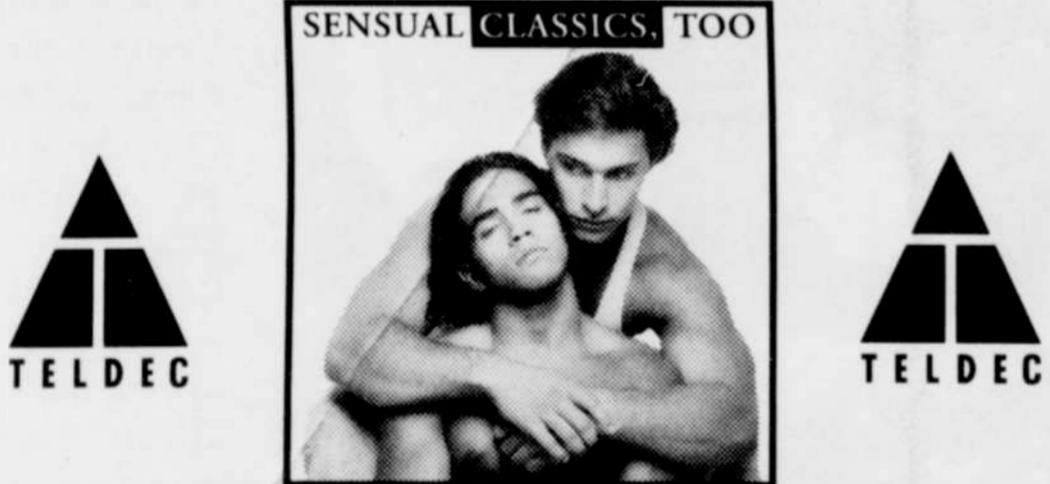
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## national news

# White goes free

Pat Robertson visits Mel White in jail and drops the charges against him

by Bob Roehr

**I**'m off the rock, hallelujah. I'm off the rock to stay." A joyous Mel White was released from the Virginia Beach City Jail late on the evening of March 8.

Pat Robertson, patriarch of the religious right—founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, the 700 Club, and the Christian Coalition—met with White.

White had begun a fast on Valentine's Day when he tried to meet with his former boss to discuss how Robertson's extreme rhetoric and untruths can lead to hate crimes against gay men and lesbians—and even death. Robertson refused a meeting, and White was ejected from the building at close of business.

White returned the following day and was arrested for trespassing. He refused to post \$2,500 bond. In the end, his fast would last for 23 days.

It was about 8:15 pm. "Five deputies were outside my isolation cell, my door was unlocked, and I went sprinting through the corridor," recounted White in an interview the morning after his release. The deputies took him to a cell where attorneys meet with clients.

"Next thing I knew, Pat walked in. And I just felt like screaming with delight." His spokesman Gene Kapp "plopped" a tape recorder down on the table. "Pat, would you like to lead us in prayer or would you like me to?" asked White.

Though he described the conversation as "cordial," the visitors never removed their overcoats in the dozen minutes it lasted. White asked Robertson, first, if he would "acknowledge publicly the rise of hate crimes against gay and lesbian people, and condemn anyone who commits or incites those crimes," and, second, to meet with a group from P-FLAG "to talk about the human side of this suffering."

Robertson responded that he had a busy schedule but would see what could be done. He repeated his view that homosexuality is a sin, handing White a letter outlining that position. He said he was making the visit at the request of White's parents, long-time Robertson supporters who in their will are leaving \$100,000 to one of his organizations. And then he left.

Sheriff Frank Drew soon appeared and said all charges had been dropped by Robertson.

White was both generous and gloating in his victory.

"It took a big man to take that step," he offered. "It is the first time he has ever agreed to meet with gays or lesbians, let alone gay and lesbian Christian activists."

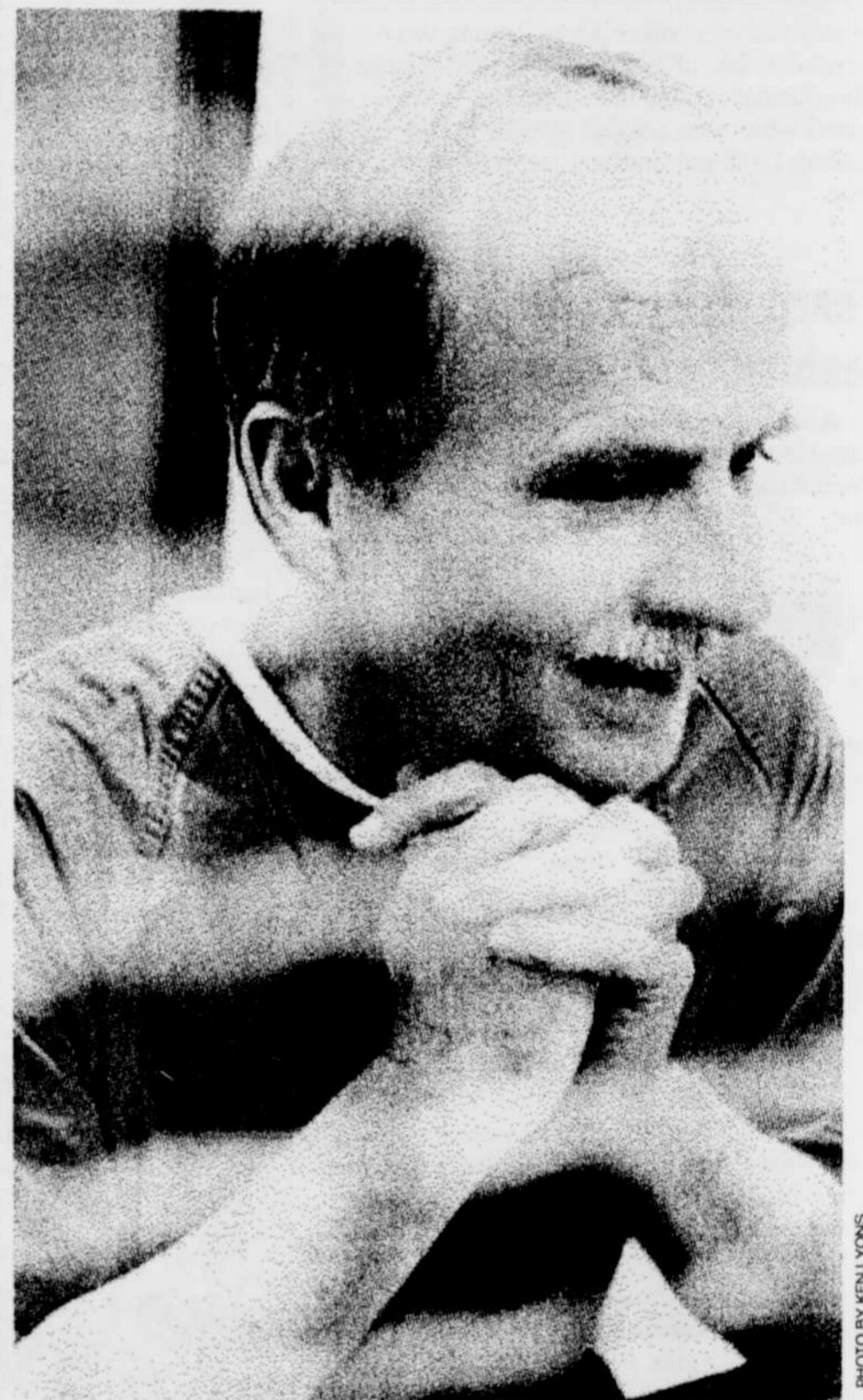
"Just to meet with Pat has to make a certain kind of compromise that says we exist. It is very

much like recognizing a country he has never recognized before."

Yet, at the same time, he recounted "tactical blunders" Robertson had made throughout the whole process. "Pat didn't want them dragging me out of there [jail] on a stretcher. That would have been a terrible mistake on his part."

But White concluded, "Whether he came out of compassion for me or out of being wise and political, it doesn't matter folks—he came."

The stay in jail and the fast have taken their toll on White. "I felt so ugly when I looked in the



Mel White

mirror," he said. His gaunt face was now framed by a beard, the result of choosing not to use the lone razor inmates of the jail must share.

This normally thin man had shed 15 pounds, leaving prominent bones and little padding.

White is still on "the adrenaline rush" of Robertson's having "made a pilgrimage to see a gay man in prison." But he admitted to "a kind of hollow sense that the energy is not up to what it used to be."

He plans to stay several days in Virginia Beach, "celebrating" with the community that supported and sustained him, then he longs to go home to be with Gary and the dogs. But he is ready to return should there be a need. "If we don't face oppression every time it raises its head, oppression will win."

PHOTO BY KEN LYONS