

# RELIGION

## Fasting Pastors For Peace Win Release of Computers

BY ASKIA MUHAMMAD

Republican Presidential candidate Bob Dole easily made headlines in Miami recently by promising to "bring Fidel Castro down and end his reign of terror." Less than a week later, a Black Baptist preacher and two companions ended a vigil in near obscurity, literally in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, claiming victory in their effort to help Mr. Castro's island nation.

At midnight, May 25, the end of Day 94 of their "Fast for Life," the Rev. Lucius Walker, Jr., leader of Pastors for Peace, Lisa Valanti and Jim Clifford savored a rice broth at a special service of thanksgiving surrounded by religious leaders, congressional staff aides, and members of their support team.

At that moment 374 computers destined for Cuban hospitals and health clinics were being released to the custody of the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church at a private storage facility maintained by the U.S. Customs Agency in San Diego.

"We are thankful to God and to the hundreds of thousands of supporters who never gave up the struggle to free the computers," the Rev. Walker said as he ended his fast. The hunger strike had begun Feb. 21, to protest the seizure of 397 outmoded and obsolete by U.S. standards "286" and "XT" computers by Customs officials in late January.

"Together we have made an effort to appeal to the soul and integrity of our nation," he said. "Our efforts have not been in vain, but much work remains. The new broad coalition which has grown around the Fast will keep working to send these computers on to Cuba. And as the coalition grows, we will keep working together for a more humane policy toward Cuba."

"The release of these computers was made possible by the active support of hundreds of thousands of people of conscience in all parts of the U.S.," the Rev. Walker said, expressing "special gratitude for the committed work of Congressman Charles A. Rangel (D-NY), whose tireless advocacy helped seal this

victory."

Just one week earlier, 23 other computers were released. All of the first machines released are of Canadian origin and are stored in Mexico in preparation for shipment to Cuba.

Treasury Department and Customs officials had insisted that PFP or some other group apply for and receive an export license, even if the Rev. Walker and his group refused to do so. The agreement for their release calls for a coalition of national church partners to store the computers in the U.S. pending completion of arrangements to transfer them to Cuba without requesting a license. The coalition includes six national mainline denominations and the National Council of Churches.

"We are optimistic that this medical aid will soon be exported for humanitarian use in Cuba," Dr. Thom White Wolf Fassett, General Secretary of the UMC General Board of Church and Society, said.

In a May 17 letter to Rep. Rangel, who mediated the dialogue between PFP and the government, treasury Secretary Robert Rubin expressed concern for the welfare of those participating in the fast and said that within the existing laws, there are "Procedural avenues" available for the Rev. Walker to achieve his goals, and end the fast.

"The U.S. government has pursued a policy of death pursuant to Cuba for more than half of my life," the Rev. Walker said, at a Capitol Hill press conference May 2, explaining why he was so adamant. He was flanked by Reps. Charles Rangel (D-NY), Sam Farr (D-CA), Esteban Torres (D-CA), William Coyne (D-PA), and by staff members from the offices of Reps. Ron Dellums (D-CA) and Bobby Rush (D-IL), some of more than 70 members of Congress who signed letters to support the "Fast for Life."

"People have to make a decision whether or not they will be complicit with the policy of death toward Cuba. I refuse to be complicit. I would rather give my life engaging in this simplest act of kindness, rather than lose my soul," he said.

The donated computers will be

used to help build an on-line medical information network for the island nation, which already boasts a health care system that is considered a "model" by health professionals. The exemplary medical system may be one reason why U.S. officials have been so inflexible, according to one health source.

"It is often said that Cuba is no longer a threat to the U.S.," Diane Kuntz, Staff Associate for International Health for the 50,000-member American Public Health Association (APHA), said in a statement. Cuba, she said, "is a threat. The threat is the example Cuba offers of a country

that's one of the reasons he refuses to comply with the U.S. embargo by applying for an export license for items intended for humanitarian aid.

On five previous occasions the Rev. Walker has waged the same struggle with federal officials. The last confrontation was resolved in 1993 when the government relented after PFP staged a 23-day hunger strike on board a little yellow school bus. Customs officials had seized the bus at a Texas-Mexico border crossing as the group attempted to ship it to a church in Cuba.

"It's like Dr. (Martin Luther) King, (Jr.) and the civil rights movement

interview, because the majority of the Cuban population is actually Afro-Cuban. The majority of the politically influential anti-Castro Cuban exile community in Florida, he insists, is made up of white Cubans who fled when Mr. Castro took power. "If Cuba were white there would not be a blockade. If there was one, it would have been over years ago."

"What crime has Cuba committed? Is it that the first act of the Cuban government under Castro's leadership was to officially outlaw racism? Was its sin that it put the Mafia out and wouldn't let them rape an exploit the poor? Or was its sin that it decid-

plified by the (1993 and 1996) tightening of the embargo--is out of step with the changes occurring in the world. The embargo's interference in the Cuban people's access to food and medicine is tantamount to the use of food and medicine as a weapon in the U.S. arsenal against Cuba," APHA concludes in its report "The Politics of Suffering: The Impact of the U.S. Embargo on the Health of the Cuban People."

By contrast, the Rev. Walker compares China's status as a Most Favored nation trading partner, despite the tens of thousands of casualties China inflicted on U.S. troops during the Korean War, and the fast track toward diplomatic and trade normalization for Vietnam, despite 58,000 body bags containing U.S. military personnel sent back from that conflict.

There have been no U.S. casualties in the U.S.-Cuban conflict, he said. "When Black folks realize that this blockade is racist, and that it affects our 'Uncles' and 'Aunts' in Cuba, and then start writing (President Bill) Clinton... when our Black organizations--the NAACP and Minister Farrakhan--stand up for Cuba, that will make the difference."

The Fast for Life, the Rev. Walker said, gained many allies in the Christian community, drawing support from many mainstream denominations. Representatives of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, the Alliance of Baptists, the American Baptist Churches/USA, the Episcopal Church, the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. have all signed letters of support.

"There should be more Jews out here. There should be more nuns out here. There should be more Muslims out here," Rep. Rangel said at the Capitol Hill press conference. "We need more religious people out here to do the right thing for Cuba. Our government should not be in the business of denying humanitarian support to sick people."



L-R Rev. Lucius Walker, NY, Jim Clifford, Louisville, Lisa Valanti, Pittsburgh, Bill Hill, Tucson, Emile Milne, (Aide to Cong. Charles Rangle, Jim Mellor, N.Y.)

with the political will to provide good health care to all its citizens.

"The U.S. is fighting this threat, using food, medicine and medical supplies as weapons. The computers that were confiscated are vital components of Cuba's health care system. Many of the computers were donated by members of the American Public Health Association."

Racism, plain and simple, is at the root of U.S. hatred of Cuba, the Rev. Walker, Pastor of Salvation Baptist Church in Brooklyn, NY, insists, and

not being willing to comply with Jim Crow laws," the Rev. Walker said of his adamant stand. "I do not apply (for export licenses) because I do not want to break the law...the higher law, the moral of the universe."

The U.S. he said, is signatory to the Geneva accords--the Universal Declaration of Human Rights--which says that food, medicine, medical supplies, and other humanitarian aid are not to be used as weapons.

"This war against Cuba is a race war," the Rev. Walker said in an

ed to give universal free education to all Cubans, including Blacks? Was the sin that it decided to give universal free health care?" he asked rhetorically.

"What did Cuba do wrong to deserve this? If these acts are sins then the U.S. should commit the same sins." The U.S. travel ban, he said, is designed to keep people in this country, especially Blacks, from seeing these truths for themselves.

The APHA agrees. "The U.S. national grudge against Cuba--exem-

### Marylhurst Faculty Member Wins Award

Martha Gies, an adjunct faculty member at Marylhurst College, came home recently with an award for writing. She was awarded first place for Feature Article, Special Interest Magazine, in the annual competition of the Associated Church Press (ACP) at its annual meeting in Phoenix in April.

Her article, "Heart of Wisdom," was entered in the ACP competition by the editors of the Chicago-based magazine, Second Opinion, which originally published the essay a year ago.

In citing "Heart of Wisdom," which chronicles the spiritual faith which sustained Gies's younger sister after she received a terminal diagnosis of cancer, the ACP

judges wrote:

"A gripping evocation of events that involve pain and loss, gained wisdom and faith. The writing is excellent, capable of enticing the reader into its informational and atmospheric web. Amid the sad events, on captures a sense of triumph. Because the writer has understood, the reader can."

ACP is an organization of some 200 religiously affiliated publishers from Canada and the United States.

Gies has taught short story writing at Marylhurst since 1990 and is scheduled to teach a new course in writing the personal essay this summer.

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