

News

Robertson rebuffs Gay minister

Televangelist's former speech writer arrested at CBN headquarters

by Sheila Walsh

With white roses in hand, a dozen pro-Gay religious activists daily visit the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN) in Virginia Beach, Virginia, to ask for a meeting with its founder, Pat Robertson.

But Robertson, who shares his belief that homosexuality is sinful with millions of CBN viewers, keeps refusing the offer. As he told Metropolitan Community Church official the Rev. Dr. Mel White in a Feb. 7 letter, he doesn't plan to change his views on homosexuality. The religious magnate believes those views are "framed 100 percent on the Bible."

Despite Robertson's initial refusal, White and a dozen religious activists visited CBN headquarters Feb. 14 to demand a meeting. CBN officials refused to let the group meet with Robertson that day. Since then, activists have returned every day to repeat their request.

White told CBN officials Feb. 14 he would sit in their lobby until Robertson would agree to a meeting, according to Dawn Rankin-Phelps, a spokesperson for the coalition of protesters. White waited until 5:30 p.m., until he was removed by CBN officials, according to press releases from both Rankin-Phelps and CBN. At that time, CBN officials warned White not to return because he would be considered a trespasser.

Virginia Beach Police arrested White the next day when he returned to CBN headquarters and refused to leave. According to the local sheriff's office, White was charged with trespassing. His bail is set at \$1,000.

White said he began fasting Feb. 15 in hopes of "an understanding" between himself and Robertson. According to Major W.T. Mann of the Virginia Beach Correction Center, White is being held in separate quarters from the jail population because medical specialists are observing the fasting man 24 hours a day.

In a Feb. 15 letter to Robertson, White explained why he wants a meeting.

"We don't come to change your mind about the nature or theology of homosexuality," wrote White. "Our primary concern, Pat, are the hate crimes against us increasing at an alarming rate in numbers and in brutality all across the nation. You have a national news service at CBN. We thought you would be interested in the anti-gay hate crime statistics we have gathered. And because we know that you deplore violence, we wanted to demonstrate to you how, inadvertently, your false charges against us contribute to that violence as they are repeated endlessly on the 700 Club, in your fundraising letters, and in the materials of the Christian Coalition."

CBN officials dismissed White's actions as a "publicity stunt."

"His actions today only confirm what we believed from the beginning: that Mel White was only interested in attempting to create a media event to publicize himself. His actions and comments indicate White was not interested in genuine dialogue, but rather to impose an unwarranted meeting demand upon Mr. Robertson," said CBN spokesperson Gene Kapp, according to a Feb. 15 press release.

"This is not a publicity stunt," said White, according to a press release. "Innocent gay and lesbian Americans face suffering and death because of Pat's false and misleading rhetoric. We must take our stand against this toxic flow of misinformation ..."

"This is not a media event," said Rankin-Phelps. Though the activists fax press releases around the country, she said they have received very little press coverage so far.

Prospects for understanding are dim — judging from Robertson's tone in the Feb. 7 letter to White.

"There is nothing you could say and nothing you could do which would make me believe you more than I believe Moses or the apostle Paul," wrote Robertson. "For this reason, I do not wish to meet to debate the merits of homosexuality. You have chosen your lifestyle and I hope that God will reveal to you one day what His Word says about it."

"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 towards homosexual and lesbian people, and to the best of my knowledge, we are able to minister to about 2,000 of these people every month," wrote Robertson. "On the other hand, the Bible indicates in the book of Romans that 'God gave them up.' It is the last stage in the decline of a population. In the Old Testament the statement is clear: 'It is an abomination for a man to



Mel White is led away by police officers.

by Kathleen Vickery/Our Own

lie with a man as with a woman."

By seeking a meeting with Robertson, White says he is merely following Jesus' word. He cites a verse in the Gospel of St. Matthew: "If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault."

White, a former ghostwriter for Robertson and other religious right figures, said he first began asking Robertson for a meeting two years ago — shortly after he came out as a Gay man. Now White serves as minister of justice for the Metropolitan Community Church, a Christian demonination for Gays.

Religious activists who returned to CBN after White's arrest included the Rev. Robert C. Bradford, a retired Presbyterian minister; Michael Barber, an ordained United Church of Christ deacon who is openly Gay; Ann B. Carlson, convener of Integrity/Tidewater, (Va.), an Episcopal ministry for Gays; Vincent G. Connery, a former Roman Catholic priest who resigned in 1987 after he publicly challenged the church's position on homosexuality; Alice Taylor, a Presbyterian Church elder involved with Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns; and the Rev. Carol Wier, a pastor at New Life MCC of Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Va.

A Virginia Beach Police spokesperson said Feb. 22 there have been no additional arrests in connection with the protests.

The Rev. Darlene C. Garner, pastor of MCC of Northern Virginia, brought a delegation of 12 to CBN headquarters Feb. 17 in another attempt to get a meeting with Robertson. Garner did not return a *Blade* reporter's phone call by deadline.

The Rev. Meg Riley, head of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Office of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay concerns, said she used her clergy credentials to visit White at the Virginia jail.

"What is exciting about this is that the religious community is really gathering around the hypocrisy and gathering faith to propel us forward with courage rather than to criticize or reject somebody's point of view," she said.

The CBN action, said Riley, also calls attention to Gay-bashers who use religion to justify their actions.

Although Riley says it is unlikely the activists will change Robertson's mind, she believes the CBN action is significant because it could motivate people of faith.

"To me, the success is in getting people involved, not necessarily in reaching Pat Robertson," said Riley. "In the Holocaust, it was the silent majority that was the most damaging. If this mobilizes some of the people who are silent — whether by shaming them or exciting them, however it mobilizes people of faith — then it was a success."▼