

opinion

Falwell/White anti-violence summit sets new tone for gays

BY CHUCK COLBERT

It's been extraordinary spiritual journey for Christian evangelical minister Rev. Mel White, a former ghost writer for Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

That spiritual journey took an unprecedented turn recently when White and 200 of his delegates from 30 states sat down for a conversation with gay-rights opponent and morality crusader, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, and 200 members of his congregation at the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA.

This unusual gathering focused on turning down the vitriolic rhetoric that far too often frequents the national public discourse about homosexuality.

White's path to Lynchburg includes a three-decade long battle with homosexuality — trying everything from electric shock treatment, exorcism, and therapy to prayer and fasting. White was able to reconcile his Christian theology with his sexual identity. "I am gay. I am proud. God loves me without reservation," he said in 1993.

The following year, White declared his sexual orientation to the nation in his autobiography *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*. White became a celebrated gay rights advocate by protesting at religious broadcaster Pat Robertson's television station, where he was arrested in February, 1995. In the Virginia Beach City Jail, White staged a 22-day hunger fast. Robertson visited him there and went on TV to say he

"abhorred the growing violence against gay and lesbian people."

Falwell followed an equally celebrated path to the Lynchburg gathering. In 1979, he founded the Moral Majority, a high profile, now defunct political organization, dedicated to advancing the participation of Christian conservatives in politics. What appealed to religious conservatives was Falwell's outspoken stridency against gay rights.

Last year, Falwell became the object of a media buzz for allegedly saying that Teletubby star Tinky Winky — who is the lavender color of gay pride and carries a purse — was gay. In reality, Falwell had not made such a statement. But the misinformation served to heap even more ridicule on a man already vilified within gay community.

That turn of events bothered White. In June, he wrote an open letter to Falwell. In fact, a series of back-and-forth open letters between the two men — letters that White posted on his Web site, www.sourforce.org — resulted in the anti-violence summit.

During the past five months, White openly challenged Falwell's anti-gay rhetoric, or hate speech, through the open letter series. Falwell had made numerous untrue statements about gays over the years in fund-raising letters for his organization. For example:

- "Those perverted homosexuals ... absolutely hate everything you and I and most decent God-fearing citizens stand for."

- "Homosexuals want to

use the power of the federal government to force this nation to adopt homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle and homosexuals as a bonafide minority—which would mean hiring quotas, affirmative action, and ultimately forcing churches to hire homosexuals on their staffs."

Playing back those false allegations — what White terms hate speech — he assured Falwell that gay Americans "do not hate what decent God-fearing citizens stand for" or "demand homosexual quotas or that churches hire homosexuals."

More important, White defined hate speech in terms that even Falwell seems to understand. Hate speech, White wrote, is "untrue words that lead to fear, hate, and even acts of violence." Hate speech is "unloving words that lead a majority to hate a minority and the minority to hate themselves." Hate speech is "words that don't need to be said, but that for some reason or other, you go on saying them, even if they lead to tragic consequences in the lives of those who hear them," he wrote.

The open letter series, the pre-summit negotiations, and the gathering itself all paid off. "It is wrong to hate homosexuals, and those who lift a violent hand against them invite the wrath of God upon themselves," said Falwell in Lynchburg.

"We have not liked what you've done, and we've been so loud and vocal and articulate about it that we've convinced you that we don't like you, either. Well, I want to tell you

we apologize for that, we are sorry," he said.

For his part White apologized for the actions of some gays who sent Falwell HIV-infected urine and desecrated houses of worship.

Yes, Falwell still clings to the adage "hate the sin, love the sinner," language that gays consider to be violent talk, even spiritual abuse. Falwell still compares homosexuality with alcoholism, drug addiction, and pornography.

But Falwell did say that if one of his sons were gay, he would "love" him "uncondi-

tionally." On balance, that affirmation, as well as his apology are small but significant steps in the right direction.

More important, both men have begun using the language of hope, the language of redemption. They are courageous. They are peacemakers. Amen. ▼

Chuck Colbert, who serves on the board of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association, is a graduate student at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass.

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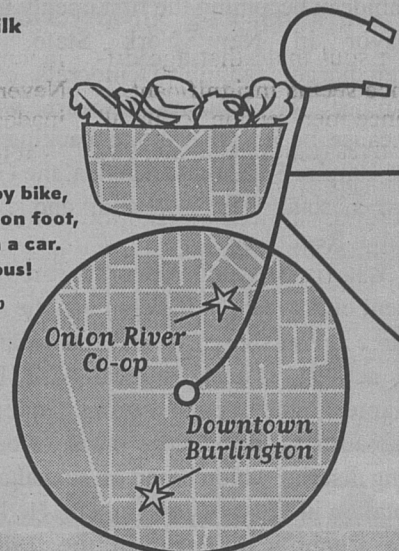
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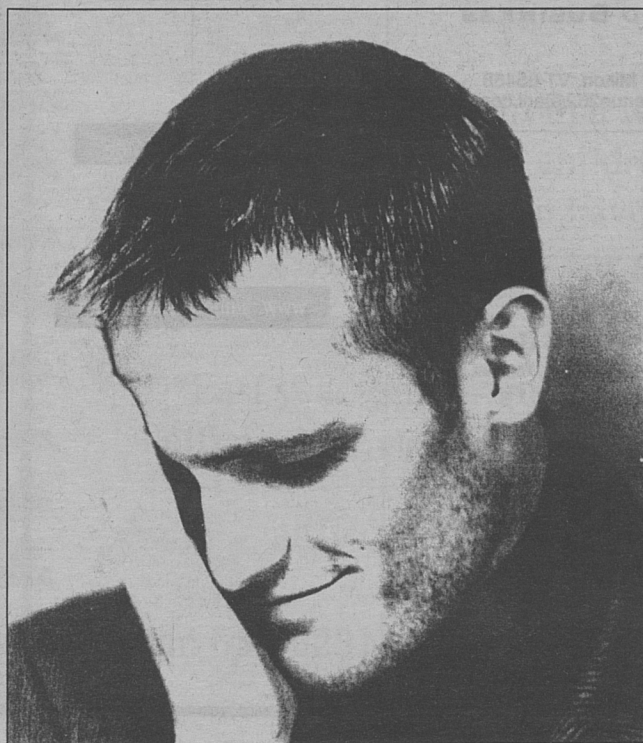


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