

INTRODUCTION OF MEL WHITE
A WITNESS TO TRUTH IN LOVE
THE LGBTQ-RAN GALA
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In his classic book, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*, the Reverend Dr. Mel White says, while “Conservative Christians (evangelicals, not fundamentalists) shaped the very core of my faith and passed on to me my love for Jesus, the Bible and the Church...., My spiritual heritage received its greatest influence not from any famous evangelist or pastor but from my ... grandma Noni. She was the matriarch of our little clan, ... determined from the day of my birth to pass (the) love for God to me.

“She ordained herself and followed her dreams. She preached the Gospel of faith in Christ alone For twenty-five years, (she traveled) Minnesota holding tent revival meetings and planting storefront churches....

“Grandma Noni saw herself as a witness to God’s ‘good news.’ She loved Jesus and talked about him to anybody who would listen.

“During my school days, I earned a lot of trophies, but Noni wasn’t interested in hearing about speech contests or debates I won, or the academic honors or the music awards or the athletic letters I received. ‘But have you witnessed today,’ she would say to me when I tried to share my own good news. To Noni, the only trophies (or honors) that counted were those souls I had ‘rescued.’”

From the 1960’s until the early 1990’s, Mel was immersed in the evangelical movement as an accomplished pastor, seminary professor, filmmaker and author of over seventeen books, including “autobiographies” he ghostwrote for Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and W.A. Criswell. All during this time, he struggled with his sexual attraction to men, believing it to be both a sickness and a sin. After desperately trying for years to change his orientation through counseling, shock-therapy and reparative therapy, with frequent thoughts of suicide, Mel finally accepted and affirmed his sexual orientation. Finally, he was free to truly be himself, a freedom he’d longed for but thought impossible. “I am gay. I am proud. And God loves me without reservation,” he would declare.

Along with this freedom, being a true evangelical in the best sense of the word, Mel embraced a new calling: setting free his queer sisters and brothers from the toxic anti-gay rhetoric of Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists. “My old clients on the religious right were misleading millions of Americans to fear and to hate gay and lesbian people, to discriminate and legislate against us, and inadvertently motivating extremist and crazies to terrorize, abuse, and even kill us,” Mel writes in *Stranger at the Gate*.

On Christmas Eve in 1991, in what Mel describes as his first “coming out letter,” he wrote to Jerry Falwell, warning him that his campaign of lies against gay and lesbian people was leading to suffering and death, and asking to meet with him. Falwell never replied. Mel also wrote to Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, James Kennedy and James Dobson, with the same request. None replied.

In 1993, Mel was installed as the Dean of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas. It was in this role that he took what he describes as “my first baby steps toward becoming an effective gay, Christian activist” when he was arrested in Washington, DC, protesting Bill Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. It was also in this role that he conducted funerals for gay people who died because of AIDS, who had killed themselves because they were gay or who had been the victims of hate-crimes because they were gay.

In February of 1995, Mel was arrested for trespassing on the campus of Regent University when trying to meet with Pat Robertson. Refusing bail, Mel remained in jail and fasted until Robertson met with him in the middle of the night on the 21st day. Mel lost twenty pounds. Because of their meeting, Robertson publicly stated he “despised violence against homosexuals.”

The Reverend Dr. James Lawson introduced Mel to the principles of relentless nonviolent resistance, following the teachings and examples Mohandas Ghandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1998, Mel and his husband, Gary Nixon, founded Soulforce based on these principles.

New York Times headline, September 5, 1999: Falwell and Allies to Meet Gay Rights Supporters, by Gustav Niebuhr. “If all goes as agreed, the Reverend Mel White, an outspoken supporter of gay rights, will take 200 people to Lynchburg, VA, next month, to meet with the Reverend Jerry Falwell, an outspoken critic of homosexual activity, and 200 people (Falwell) has invited. Such an encounter will certainly be unusual, perhaps even a first in the long, contentious debate over gay rights.”

And so began the extraordinary Soulforce crusade to end spiritual violence against transgender, bisexual, gay, lesbian and queer people because of misguided religious teachings, a crusade that continues to this day.

In its first seven years, Mel and Gary led thousands of Soulforce volunteers, who paid their own expenses, in nineteen nonviolent direct actions at United Methodist, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran and Roman Catholic national gatherings in cities all across the United States: Cleveland, Orlando, Long Beach, Denver, Washington, New Orleans, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Phoenix, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and Lynchburg, as well as two visits to James Dobson’s Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs and two visits to the Vatican in Rome. In each case, first calling on the respective church’s leadership to meet for dialogue and then, when the invitation was ignored or denied, conducting nonviolent direct actions that most often resulted in the arrests of hundreds of Soulforce volunteers.

Soulforce conducted nonviolent direct actions at the trials of four clergy, two for not complying with church policies forbidding same-gender covenant ceremonies: The United Methodist Church put me on trial in Grand Island, Nebraska, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) put Stephen Van Kulken on trial in Cincinnati. The other two trials of clergy were not for actions they committed contrary to United Methodist Church teaching and policy, but for simply being and affirming who they were, lesbians: the Reverend Karen Dammann in Bethel, Washington, and the Reverend Beth Stroud in Spring City, Pennsylvania.

In 2005, Soulforce launched the Equality Ride with forty-five young adults traveling together by bus to the US Naval Academy to stand against its policy of denying admission to openly lesbian and gay Americans. In 2006, thirty-four young adults spent two months traveling in a bus to eighteen Christian colleges and universities, plus the Air Force Academy and West Point, challenging each to reconsider its policies that discriminate against lesbian and gay students.

Later that year, Soulforce launched the Right to Serve Campaign, opposing the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. In 18 cities, young adults who were rejected at recruitment centers when they attempted to enlist as openly gay held sit-ins, refusing to leave. Fifty-four were arrested and went to jail in their hometowns.

The Christian Century characterized the Soulforce direct actions as merely “media driven street theater.” Mel embraced the disparagement, saying that because the religious right had millions watching their TV shows daily, “There was no way we could compete to tell the truth. Our only hope was to get media coverage of our own. Nonviolent direct actions that led to arrest were still being covered by the media...”

Volunteers came from all over the United States to be part of Soulforce direct actions. Rodney Powell, MD, a civil rights hero from the 1960’s, came from Honolulu, Hawaii, explaining: “As a gay African American man, at age forty-one, it was compelling for my personal integrity and honor to have the courage to fully accept my sexual orientation... (Now,) I am going to Lynchburg because I believe the redemptive power of love and nonviolence is the best way to overcome and transform conservative Christian homophobia and oppression of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.”

Dottie Berry from Lexington, Kentucky, said, “After being arrested at the Southern Baptist Convention and spending thirty-six hours in the Orlando jail, I don’t know if I touched or changed one single Southern Baptist person. But I do know that I was changed by the experience. Personal transformation is what Soulforce is all about and thereby, changing society.”

The Reverend Phil Lawson, United Methodist clergy and lifelong civil rights activist from Richmond, California, said: “The struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality runs parallel to the civil rights struggle. The major difference is that we had the church and we

had our families, LGBT people have neither. This is why I am part of this movement for equality for all God's people.”

Bill Carpenter, an event planner based in Tampa, Florida, said, “Like many folks, Mel saved my life with *Stranger at the Gate*.” (It) gave me confidence that I was on a true and right path for myself.” Bill recalls going with Mel in 2001, prior to the Soulforce direct action in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, to try to meet and dialogue with Cardinal Ratzinger, the future pope Benedict XVI, and getting thrown out of his office for not having an appointment. Bill once told Mel, “You know, I've spent the first forty years of my life trying to stay out of jail and ever since I met you, I've been arrested four times.”

Kara Speltz, a Roman Catholic from Oakland, California, explains why she went to Lynchburg: “I believe that being a follower of Jesus means that we take seriously the role of peacemaker and servanthood.... As a lesbian, I believe that (I have) a deeper understanding of others' oppression.” Today, she says, “I've decided to carry (Mel's latest book, *Storming the Gate*) in my backpack each Sunday (so when Bishop Barber, who is antigay serves the eucharist), I will ask him personally to read it.... I believe (it) is going help him rethink his position...”

Jeff Lutes, a psychotherapist based in Austin, Texas, and the person who would immediately follow Mel as executive director of Soulforce, says: “Thank you, Mel, for your courage and conviction in showing me and countless others how to speak truth to power, and in the process, heal our own spirits.”

Chuck Phelan, Soulforce volunteer from the beginning based in Los Angeles, California, recalls: “In January at Epiphany 2001, we followed Mel to Rome to protest the teachings of the Catholic Church in St. Peter's Square. We wore shirts in both English and Italian proclaiming ‘God's Gay Children Bring Gifts’ and asking the Roman Catholic Church to bless them. The only problem was that the Italian translation read, ‘Children of a Gay God Bring Gifts,’ which got quite a few chuckles from the crowd. No one laughed though when two women from Dignity, the LGBTQ Catholic organization, blessed communion in St. Peter's Square. Many Italians came forward to receive that gift, no doubt the first communion received by them from a woman.” “

Richard Murphy, based in Miami, Florida, reflects: “I'm sure everyone will say that meeting and ‘doing justice’ with Mel was life, soul and spirit changing... He motivated and taught me and countless others how to effectively confront untruths and injustice through case building, nonviolent resistance, direct actions and hopeful positive resolution.... If ever angels walked this earth, then surely Mel White walks among them.

In 2006, Mel stepped down as the executive director of Soulforce and was named president of its board of directors. While continuing to help guide the mission and activities of Soulforce, he devoted his time to writing, publishing *Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right* in 2007; *Grace and Demion: A Fable for Victims of Biblical Intolerance* in 2014; and,

Clobber the Passages: Seven Deadly Verses in 2020. Mel's latest book, just recently published, is *Storming the Gate: Fighting Religion-Based Oppression with Soul Force*.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Soulforce. It has evolved and expanded as the Reverend Alba Onofrio, the current Executive Director of Soulforce, describes it “into a thriving global community of holy troublemakers and spiritual resisters against the forces of Spiritual Violence and white Christian Supremacy.... Even after being at Soulforce for almost a decade, there still is rarely a place I go where someone does not tell me how Mel and/or his book saved their life. There are so many stories about lives saved and lives changed by Mel. We at Soulforce in 2023 feel so grateful for the courage, the integrity and the perseverance with which Mel and Gary have lived their lives out loud and in public. We live daily into their legacy of addressing religion-based violence head on with steadfast dedication and spirits unyielding. And like Mel always said, our primary sphere of influence is tackling the internalized violence against ourselves and addressing weaponized scripture and fundamentalist theologies with eyes wide open. We are the living legacy of 25 years of work to stop Spiritual Violence. Thank you, Mel for the time, energy, bravery and love.

So, we're here today to honor Mel White, and grandma Noni's question echoes from the past: “But have you witnessed today, have you rescued any souls?” And, we answer her emphatically: Yes! It's because Mel has been a witness that we honor him; a witness to truth in love with relentless nonviolent resistance to the Religious Right's spiritual violence against transgender, gay, bisexual, lesbian and queer people. A witness to the truth that all are beloved by God without reservation. A witness that has done more than rescue souls; it has saved lives!