

# The FRONT PAGE

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## A Meeting in Lynchburg

**Historic Meeting of ministers in Virginia offers hope and controversy**

By David M. Baker  
Contributing Writer

The name Jerry Falwell has come to have an odious ring for many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. In his many years behind the pulpit at the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., the 68-year-old Southern Baptist preacher has earned a reputation for having a less than positive view of homosexuality.

On October 22, amidst protests by both gay and anti-gay activists, an interfaith delegation of 200 gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender persons and their supporters arrived in Lynchburg to meet with Rev. Falwell to discuss the words he chooses when speaking his conscience about homosexuality. Leading the delegation, called Soulforce—which gets its name from Ghandi's teaching of satyagraha, or "soul force," a form of non-violent social activism—was former Falwell ghost writer Rev. Mel White.

Raised as an evangelical Christian, White attended Fuller Theological Seminary which, according to its website, is "an evangelical community dedicated to the preparation of men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church." After completing his studies at Fuller, White went on to teach there for more than a decade and would later ghost-write books for Falwell as well as fellow evangelicals Jim Bakker, Billy Graham, and Pat Robertson.

White wrestled with his homosexuality for many years and employed a wide array of strategies in attempting to overcome it. Over the course of two decades, he tried prayer, exorcism, therapy, and even electric shock treatments to no avail. Finally, in 1993, White came out publicly after being installed as dean of the Dallas Cathedral of Hope of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches—a Christian church founded by Rev. Troy Perry in 1968 with a special outreach to gays.

White, who says he has been inspired by the writings of civil rights leaders Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., started Soulforce with his partner Gary Nixon this year with the intention of taking the lesson of non-violent social activism and applying

it to the fight for gay and lesbian equality. The three day sojourn to Lynchburg provided the perfect test for White's ambitious plan.

### The Gathering

On the evening of October 22, under the watchful eye of the Lynchburg Police Department—whose constant presence throughout the weekend was at once comforting and alarming—the Soulforce delegation gradually arrived at First Christian Church on Main Street. Over the next several hours, nearly 200 men and women of all faiths and sexual identities from as far away as California and as nearby as down the street came together for an evening of preparation for the days to come. Pervading every corner of the red brick church was a commingled spirit of hope and expectation.

Karla Fleshman, a delegate from the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pa. who is about to be ordained as an MCC minister, said that hope is what brought her to Falwell's home town.

"You do a lot of tilling before you see the fruit," said Fleshman. "We're tilling here." Fleshman's hopefulness was amplified by the welcoming remarks of Mayor Pete Warren who was on hand for the weekend's commencement.

"When I met Mel in August, I knew that the event being planned here in Lynchburg would be a very positive one," said Warren. "[I]t would be good for relationships with one of the main forces in the city of Lynchburg, Rev. Jerry Falwell."

White added that Falwell had demonstrated that same spirit of change earlier in the day during an interview with Diane Sawyer on Good Morning America. After being pressed about his "definitive stance on homosexuality," a document that claimed gays were more prone to disease, depression, and addiction and which appeared on his website, Falwell apologized and said that he had allowed a small percentage of gays and lesbians, to whom he referred as extremists, to define his perception of the overall community. Falwell has since changed the "definitive stance" and has removed any derogatory comments about gays.

By offering an apology in front of millions of television viewers, said White, Falwell set an example that others could follow.

The evening ended with a candlelight  
continued on p. 16



## Guild House Nears Completion

By Paul Lee  
Senior Staff Writer

The Triangle Business and Professional Guild has nearly completed the construction and fund-raising phases of its Habitat for Humanity house.

Wanda Williamson, the home's future occupant, will be in her new house by the end of the year, according to Chris Musselwhite, fund-raising chair for the project.

Finishing work is all that remains in the construction phase of the house. While painting is complete, interior components such as carpeting and kitchen cabinets remain to be installed. Outside the home, landscaping and minor finishing work is still to be done.

The Guild has raised more than \$23,000 of the \$25,000 it committed for the Habitat for Humanity house, Musselwhite said. The Guild chipped in 10 percent of that goal. Additional funds will be accepted by calling the fund-raising chair at 919-233-2221.

Financial and volunteer support has come from the Guild, Imani Metropolitan Community Church of Durham, the Gay and Lesbian Attorney's (GALA) of North Carolina, the Front Runners, IBM Eagles, Lambda Youth Network and the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

Williamson, the mother of two children, looks forward to the completion of her house.

At top: In a photo taken last July, Wanda Williamson and a Guild member work outside the house. (Photo by Paul Lee)



**Dykes To Watch Out For, p. 30**