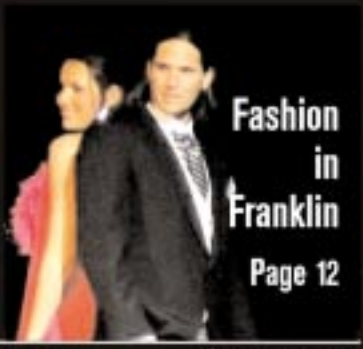


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## Faithful Witnesses Deliver a Message

by Joyce Arnold Ph. D.

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# Faithful Witnesses

## Deliver a Message to the SBC



By Joyce Arnold Ph.D. • Photos by Tim Toonen

“I came here because I’m angry, and I don’t want to be angry.” Marsha was one of the participants in the Faithful Witness protest that occurred Monday night in front of the Gaylord Entertainment Center. Though the annual meeting had not yet officially begun, there were many messengers, as those attending the Southern Baptist Convention’s (SBC) yearly gathering are called, going in and out of the Gaylord. “I just moved here, to work here,” Marsha explained, “and ended up being turned down for a job explicitly because I’m a lesbian, and because it had to do with the Baptist Church. And I thought, well, I really don’t want to be mad, but be loving, be an example.”

Multiple reasons were given as to why those who participated in the peaceful demonstration chose to come. LGBTQ and supporters were present, and multiple faith traditions were represented: various Christian denominations, Roman Catholic, Unitarian Universalist, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and some who simply identified themselves as “spiritual.” They gathered on the sidewalk across the street from the Country Music Hall of Fame, and after a few words from organizers—the Reverends Jim Hawk and Greg Bullard—they began marching around the Gaylord seven times. “Why seven times?” someone asked during the brief instruction period. Bullard explained, “Seven represents...marching around the walls of Jericho, to bring down the walls of hurt, pain and shame.”

### Hide it in a closet? NO! I’m gonna let it shine.

Holding candles, walking, singing, praying and silence were the primary “tools” of Faithful Witness. The participants seemed par-

ticularly to enjoy singing a slightly re-written version of “This Little Light of Mine,” in which “hide it under a bushel” became “hide it in a closet.” The enthusiastic “No!” response was accompanied by some laughter as the protestors dispersed, a few minutes after a crowd of messengers began exiting from Gaylord.

The good spirits did not ignore the kind of hurt Bullard identified. Marsha’s explanation of why she came was clearly painful, even while it pointed to another frequently expressed reason for being there: it’s more about speaking up than speaking against anyone. “I’m not here to protest Baptists,” Kris Mumford said. “I’m here to stand up and say, I’m a person, and to recognize humanity in all people.”

While there were varied responses as to why individuals came, all seemed to recognize both the “walls” and the importance of speaking out. Charles Jones said, “There’s a tremendous amount of oppression in this country, and it’s been increasing. Somebody’s got to step up and say, ‘Enough is enough.’ I’m one of these.” Sean Rodriguez told us: “I’m really concerned about religious intolerance, or just intolerance in general. I think that one of the things we stand for, the country, is freedom, and I see that being taken away. I also see an element of hypocrisy going on in our country. For example, we’re telling countries, like Iran, that they need to separate their religion from their government, but I think we’re back-sliding.”

One frequently expressed concern regarded the lack of alternative voices to that of the SBC, or to “religious conservatives” in general. “I’m here to make a statement that the Southern Baptist Convention does not have a monopoly on religious thought in this country,” Carter Witt said. Lloyd Lewis expanded on that

idea, saying, “I think it’s important to show the Southern Baptist Convention that they don’t have a corner on religious values in the culture, and that not everybody agrees with their stands on women, homosexuality, the acceptance of people who are not Christian, and it’s about time they understand that they can’t live in a past that really didn’t exist in the first place.” The protest, as organizers explained, went beyond the SBC positions on homosexuality.

A few more responses illustrate that the protestors were a diverse crowd. Meredith Green said, “I’m a...Buddhist, and I believe in human rights. And I feel like, it’s not working, in the kind of climate we have now.” “I’m a member of the Greater Nashville U(nitarian) U(niversalist) Congregation. It was announced in church yesterday, and I thought, hey, I’ve got to be out there to support this,” said Jennifer Cates. “I’m with Soul Force,” Chris Elkins told us, “and we’ve been at the Southern Baptist Conventions since 2000...when I read the article about Faithful Witness, I was so thrilled that somebody beside Soul Force is waking up and realizing that we’re losing our country to the right wing, and they have to start speaking out.”

“I’m here,” Gene Floyd, a “PFLAG Mom,” said, “because I love God, and I want to speak for the gay and lesbian community, who are who they are.” Sonya told us, “I’m here because I’ve been with my partner for 19 years, and it’s all about love, and nothing more. I just want to be able to love.” Scott Douglas talked about the impact of playing the Ned Weeks character in the play, “The Normal Heart.” “I’ve never been much of an activist,” he said, “because of my experience of being brought up in a Christian church, even after I came out, I have kind of hidden from who I





**Right:** Rev. Greg Bullard greets a woman at the protest

**Far Right:** Rev. Jim Hawk prays with others near the end of the protest

**Opposite page:** 100 plus people sing a slightly re-written version of "This Little Light of Mine" after their fifth time around the Gaylord Entertainment Center

**Above:** A banner with the phrase "Peace on Earth" was carried around the Gaylord Entertainment Center seven times by protesters

was, and this play has just stirred up so much pride in me....I was brought up Christian," and then he went on to tell a story that will be familiar to many of the LGBTQ communities. "I tried everything short of shock treatment...trying to change myself. And I couldn't do it. Sexuality is not a choice, you know? And that's why I'm here, just to say, not all of us, but some of us believe in God, too, and we're humans, we're just like you are."

Anna Potter came from Germany, about 25 years ago, and has become a U.S. citizen. "I'm a little bit disconcerted, concerned...that the confrontation(al) mood in this country has (increased) ten-fold, even in the last 25 years." She cited a relatively new book by Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, as she said that "values should not be issues." Dan Rosemergy is minister of the Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Congregation, which he described as "a welcoming congregation. I just feel very strongly that while the (SBC) has a right to meet and to express their belief, that they do not represent all Southern Baptists, all Christians or all people of faith. I am deeply committed on equal rights for all peoples, regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation. It's important for the community to know, that we are out here, representing thousands of people of faith."

From conversations with those participating, it was clear many recognized the need for such representatives, that there were those who could not come, for fear of losing a job or family. And it was clear that they recognized that, among other things, Faithful Witness was also a media event. Nora Diehl, who said she was from West End (United) Methodist Church commented, "I would hope that we could gain a little media presence to contravene the extreme weight that the conservative right gets."

There was one or two television cameras present, and all three local LGBT publications were there. At least one correspondent with the Associated Press checked out what was happening. There may have been others as well.

### Messengers & Messages

Estimates of those participating in the action ranged from "more than a hundred" to "about 150." During the hours of the protest, 7:30 to about 10:00 PM, several hundred messengers saw the participants as they proclaimed their own message, marching around the building, or stopped in front, to sing and pray—carefully staying on the "public sidewalk," as instructed by Metro Police. The most obvious response from those going in and out of the Gaylord was to ignore what they saw and heard. Or to stare as they, primarily, kept on walking. A few stopped several feet in front of the protestors to stand and stare, for several minutes. One man and one woman stood that way, while eating their ice cream cones. Another (apparent) couple laughed and chatted as he took photos of the silently praying crowd, and she moved closer, apparently simply observing. But in general, the majority of the Faithful Witness participants had no direct conversation with the Southern Baptist messengers.

There were exceptions. A few onlookers were heard to ask participants what was going on. When told, most had a short "Oh," response, and moved on. CSFP's David Pearce said one man made a "Don't walk away from me, you queer," comment. There were a few other, somewhat belligerent sounding "What are you doing here?" moments, and one, "It figures that those people would make a spectacle." But those seemed to have been the rare excep-

tions, and participants simply turned away from any potential confrontation, as organizers had asked. On the other hand, Rev. Bullard said that he was able to talk with several messengers and pastors, and while they didn't agree, they were cordial, and he was glad for the opportunity.

As the protestors dispersed, Hawk told us, "Hopefully now, the next time that something happens, and we need to speak out, there will be more people who have the strength to come out. I mean, there are people here tonight that risked their jobs. They're the heroes of the night." He laughed as he said, "Greg and I are paid homosexuals," referring to their positions as pastors. "It was a wonderful event," Bullard said. "I'm so proud of the people who came out."

Monday night, in front of the Gaylord (and the irony of that name did not go unmentioned), it was apparent that there was more than one message, and more than one group of messengers, present. One group was considerably larger than the other—several thousand Southern Baptist Convention messengers will fill the Gaylord, while up to 150 spent several hours of their evening getting their own message across. Faithful Witness organizers emphasized that they weren't there to try to "change" the SBC, and it's very unlikely they did. However, based on the comments from those participating, it seems safe to say that something important was accomplished. And even though the SBC messengers primarily responded with stares, or pointed attempts to ignore the presence of group that was praying and singing, it seems a safe bet that a message was delivered by the mere presence of the diverse individuals who came. As one person said, "They see us. That makes a difference."