

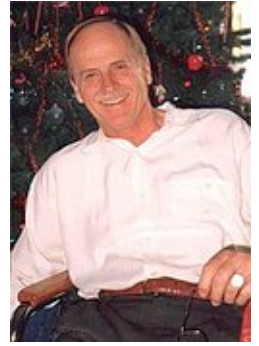


White, James Melville "Mel" b. 1940

by Victoria Shannon

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Mel White, co-founder with his spouse Gary Nixon of the nonviolent, direct-action organization Soulforce, which is dedicated to securing justice for glbtq individuals and families, spent over thirty years serving the Evangelical Christian community as a pastor, seminary professor, author, filmmaker, and ghost writer for such religious and political figures as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, and Pat Robertson. After struggling with his homosexuality for many years, White finally came out, broke his ties with anti-gay religious leaders, and became a glbtq activist.



Mel White, Christmas, 1995. Photograph by Alan Light. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution License v. 2.0.

In July of 1993, when leaders of the gay and lesbian community gathered in Washington, D. C. to protest President Clinton's announcement of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy, White, the newly appointed Dean of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas, made his first public appearance as an activist. The exhilaration he felt was mixed with fear over his imminent arrest and incarceration in the Anacostia police substation. As White sat in his jail cell later that night, he decided that his life from then on would be dedicated to fighting the poisonous rhetoric of the religious right. As he put it, "I felt God's call to do some justice on my own."

James Melville White was born to strict evangelical Christian parents on June 26, 1940, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Soon after he was born, his family moved to Santa Cruz, New Mexico where he attended public schools and was deeply involved in the Youth for Christ organization. He and his two brothers and sister attended a small conservative Protestant church on Sunday for service and Wednesdays for Bible study.

In high school, White was active in sports and served as student body president. In 1958, he began dating Lyla Lee Loehr. They married in 1962.

White attended Warner Pacific College in Portland, Oregon from 1958 to 1962. After his marriage, he and Lyla moved to Portland where White worked for Portland Youth for Christ. He also attended the University of Portland, where he received his M.A. in communications in 1963.

During this time, White hosted a weekly NBC television series, *The World of Youth* (1959-1966). He also made his first Christian film, *Dream Island*, about two teenagers struggling with the issue of premarital sex. In 1965, White founded Mel White Productions, Inc. and over the next twenty years produced 53 film and television documentaries, several of which won prestigious prizes.

After White graduated from the University of Portland, he and Lyla moved to Los Angeles where he pursued his Ph.D. in communications and film at the University of Southern California. Soon after their move to Los Angeles, White visited a Christian psychologist and confessed that he was a homosexual.

As soon as he returned home, he made the same revelation to Lyla. Thus began White's twenty-five-year

struggle as a homosexual man, the father of two children (one of whom is actor Mike White), married to a heterosexual woman. Throughout this time, Lyla remained by his side, encouraging him to do what he had to do to be happy.

White insisted that he wanted to remain married and to fight his sexual feelings, which he believed incompatible with his religious beliefs. Over the years he sought out numerous forms of "reparative therapy," ranging from psychiatric counseling and prayer to fasting, exorcism, and electric shock treatment, in an unsuccessful attempt to destroy his homosexual desires.

In 1965, White entered Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California to begin his theological studies. Not only did he receive a Ph. D. in religious studies from Fuller, but he taught there for over a decade, serving as professor of communications and preaching. In 1973, he became senior pastor of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Pasadena.

Meanwhile, he continued to make documentary films and television specials and to write syndicated columns and books (including *David* [1984], co-authored with Marie Rothenberg, the story of David Rothenberg, a young man burned by his father; *A Gift of Hope: The Tony Melendez Story* [1989], the story of a thalidomide baby who became a composer and guitarist; and *Aquino* [1989], the biography of Philippines president Corazon "Cory" Aquino). He also became increasingly involved in the Evangelical Christian political movement.

In 1979, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, and the Christian right movement took off like wildfire. White worked with many of the main players during this time, ghost writing biographies of Jerry Falwell (*If I Should Die Before I Wake*, 1986, *Strength for the Journey*, 1987, and *Falwell: An Autobiography*, 1987), Pat Robertson (*America's Date with Destiny*, 1986), and his hero, Billy Graham (*Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 1985).

However, even as he was involved with some of the most bitterly anti-gay religious figures in America, White was painfully coming to terms with his homosexuality. After a suicide attempt in 1984, his wife encouraged him to come out, "You know, you really have a life of your own," she told him, adding, "I like gay people, but I just didn't want you to be one."

In 1984, he met Gary Nixon at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, where White served on the vestry and Nixon sang baritone in the Coventry Choir. A property manager for the Weyerhaeuser Corporation, in charge of corporate properties across Southern California, Nixon shared White's religious convictions but not his tormented attitude toward his homosexuality. The two men soon fell in love.

In 1986, the Whites divorced, but they remain in close contact with each other to this day. As a measure of her support, Lyla wrote the introduction to White's autobiography, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* (1994).

At last reconciling his homosexuality and his religious faith, White was ready to take another challenge, one that would place him in the center of the gay and lesbian community's battle against the religious right, the very movement with which White had been so closely associated. It is worth noting that even when White was struggling with his homosexuality and ghosting the books of Falwell, Robertson, and Kennedy, he refrained from the vicious rhetoric that they so often used.

In 1992, White sent letters to over 5,000 Oregon pastors and church leaders, asking them not to pass Measure Nine, legislation that would take away anti-discrimination protection for gay men and lesbians. He also wrote to every major Christian fundamentalist he had worked with in the past, including Falwell, Robertson, Graham, Kennedy, and James Dobson, effectively severing his connection with the religious

right.

In 1993 White accepted the invitation of Reverend Michael Piazza, pastor of Dallas's Cathedral of Hope, to become dean of their new cathedral. Now affiliated with the United Church of Christ, the Cathedral of Hope was then the largest congregation of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. It remains the largest Christian church in the world with a primary ministry to lesbians and gay men and their friends and families. At his installation, White declared "I am gay. I am proud. And God loves me without reservation."

White's public coming out triggered a media frenzy. His story was featured in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*, and he was interviewed on hundreds of radio and television broadcasts including *Larry King Live*, National Public Radio, and the BBC. In 1994, White, Nixon, and Lyla were featured on *Sixty Minutes*.

Later that year, White released *Stranger at the Gate*, which became a best seller. The autobiography chronicles his years in the closet, and encourages gay and lesbian Christians to come out and confront the anti-gay rhetoric of the religious right.

During his first year and a half as Dean of the Cathedral of Hope, White and Nixon traveled to 35 states, speaking, organizing, and protesting injustice. On January 1, 1995, White was appointed national Minister of Justice (an unsalaried position) for the Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Churches.

Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the denomination, asked White to represent the denomination's 300 churches in the struggle to combat bigotry, hatred and, as White calls it, the religious fundamentalists' "urge to purge."

In February of 1995, White was arrested for "trespassing" at Pat Robertson's CBN Broadcast Center. He began a 22-day prison fast that made news across the United States and prompted Pat Robertson to visit him in prison. During that visit, White convinced Robertson to go on the air to announce that he "abhorred the growing violence against gay and lesbian people."

On September 1, 1996, White and Nixon began a two-week Fast for Justice on the steps of the United States Senate in an attempt to block the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), inviting people of faith across America to join in a prayer vigil that God would change the minds and hearts of the Senators. When the Senate overwhelmingly passed DOMA, White and Nixon moved the protest to the sidewalk in front of the White House, where they and others were arrested while praying. At his arrest, White asked, "How can we stand by in silent acceptance while the President and the Congress sacrifice lesbian and gay Americans for some 'greater political good?'"

In 1997, White was awarded the ACLU's National Civil Liberties Award for his efforts to apply the "soul force" principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. to the struggle for justice for sexual minorities.

In 1999, White and Nixon founded Soulforce, Inc., an organization whose purpose is to confront the anti-gay words and actions of fundamentalist Christians. Soulforce operates on the principle of "soul force," Gandhi's term for nonviolent resistance.

Thousands of Soulforce volunteers have participated in silent vigils and nonviolent protests at national conventions of the United Methodist, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches in the United States and the Vatican. More than 1,000 members have been arrested in nonviolent direct actions protesting anti-gay policies.

From the first "journey to Lynchburg" in 1999 to confront Jerry Falwell to the 2006 Equality Ride and the 2008 direct action at the United Methodist Church conference, Soulforce volunteers have tirelessly confronted religious fundamentalists, determined to end the suffering of gay men and lesbians and to educate anti-gay religious leaders.

White now takes his message to college campuses across the country. After twenty-five years in the closet trying to change his sexual orientation, he now also directly confronts ex-gay ministries that try to "cure" lesbians and gay men.

Campus Crusades for Christ and other conservative religious organizations have attempted to disrupt White's appearances, sometimes even taking over the microphones at Soulforce events. But having dedicated his life to a ministry of change, he persists in delivering his message of love and acceptance. "Until this nation accepts God's gay and lesbian children as full members of the human family," White has declared, "we must go on telling that truth in love, whatever it might cost us."

White and Nixon were married on June 18, 2008 at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, soon after same-sex marriage became legal in California.

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