



## Soulforce

by Victoria Shannon

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Soulforce activists stand vigil at the United Methodist General Conference in Fort Worth, Texas, April 2008. Image courtesy Soulforce.

A nonprofit organization located in Lynchburg, Virginia, Soulforce was founded by Reverend Mel White and his partner Gary Nixon in 1999 to combat the anti-gay rhetoric and political actions of the religious right. Soulforce is named for Mahatma Gandhi's teaching of *satyagraha*, or "soul force," which he defined as a plan of action to transform society. The "soul force" principles of relentless nonviolent resistance were also practiced by social activist Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Workers Union in 1933, and by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

As the organization's vision statement emphasizes, "The mission of Soulforce is to cut off homophobia at its source--religious bigotry." It employs a "take it to the streets" style of activism to underline the connection between antigay religious dogma and the resulting attacks on the lives and civil liberties of glbtq Americans.

Nearly 5,000 people responded to Mel White's 1999 invitation to take the "Journey into Soulforce." Since then, Soulforce has recruited and trained tens of thousands of volunteers in the "soul force" principles of truth, love, nonviolence, and voluntary redemptive suffering through its educational program, Journey into Soulforce. The training program takes about eight weeks to complete; each step contains information and ideas, assignments for personal reflection and writing, and recommended readings and videos.

There is no formal membership for Soulforce; everyone is invited to participate regardless of sexual orientation, religious belief, or attitude towards homosexuality.

In addition to White and Nixon, Soulforce is staffed by an executive director (Jeff Lutes) and a small cadre of other officers who direct the organization's campaigns, outreach programs, and development activities.

Soulforce's website offers a plethora of resources, including articles, books, and videos, many of them free and downloadable from the site. Mel White's two books, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* (1999) and *Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right* (2006), are available for purchase, as are such works as *Soulforce: A Brief History, 1999-2006* (2007) by Kara Speltz et al., and *Christian Youth: An Important Voice in the Present Struggle for Gay Rights in America* (2004) by James Deaton, Jamie McDaniel, and Jacob Reitan.

### Vigils and Protests

Soulforce volunteers have participated in silent vigils and quiet, nonviolent protests at national conventions of the United Methodist, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic Churches in the United States and at the Vatican. More than 1,000 Soulforce volunteers have been arrested while protesting antigay policies and practices within those denominations.

In the first Soulforce action in 1999, 200 Soulforce volunteers spent an October weekend in Lynchburg, Virginia meeting with Jerry Falwell and members of his Thomas Road Baptist Church. Participants pledged

in writing to refrain from violent thoughts, words, and actions. During the weekend, Falwell promised to tone down his antigay rhetoric, an important concession from the right-wing leader, though he failed to keep his promise.

In addition to meeting with Falwell and his congregation, the Soulforce contingent raised \$22,000 toward building a Habitat for Humanity house in Lynchburg and \$877 for the local food bank.

In February 2000, Soulforce volunteers protested in Los Angeles, challenging the Fox Family Network for its daily airing of Pat Robertson's antigay rants. Soulforce had been trying to negotiate with Fox for over a year before the protest was initiated. When the protesters arrived, Fox Family officials decided to close the building rather than endure the negative publicity that would come from the arrest of two dozen pastors, priests, and rabbis. As a result of the protest, Fox Family agreed to negotiate, but Fox ultimately sold the channel.

In 2001, Soulforce representatives and DignityUSA volunteers took their message to the Vatican during the Vatican's "Year of Jubilee." For three days, participants stood vigil wearing T-shirts proclaiming "God's Gay Children Bring Gifts . . . Bless Them." No representative from the Vatican acknowledged the demonstrators. On the Feast of the Epiphany, the protesters kept a peaceful vigil for nearly three hours close to the Vatican's giant nativity scene. They prayed, sang, and told stories, and many people in the surrounding crowd joined them in the circle of prayer.

In 2002, Soulforce members protested at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D. C. Three Soulforce members entered the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and were refused communion. They returned the next day and were arrested for trespassing when they refused to leave the hotel where the bishops' meetings were being held. These three protesters became known as the "D. C. Three."

At their trial in 2003, Judge Mildred Edwards found the three defendants guilty, but in a move that surprised the protesters and outraged the prosecution, Judge Edwards announced that "I'm going to refuse to sentence you." When the prosecution argued that the three defendants should at least be barred from returning to the hotel, Judge Edwards replied, "No, they need to go back. The bishops need to hear their message." She then told the defendants, "Just do it legally this time."

A year later, Judge Edwards retired from her career as a judge and entered Washington Theological Consortium, a Roman Catholic school of theology and ministry. The trial of the "D. C. Three," Judge Edwards admitted later, had a profound influence on her decision to change careers.

In September 2005, Soulforce members returned to the Vatican to hold another vigil. They laid flowers and prayer cards near the obelisk in St. Peter's Square in memory of Alfredo Ormando, a Sicilian gay man who burned himself to death in St. Peter's Square on January 13, 1998 in protest of the antigay policies of the Catholic Church. Some gay Christians regard Ormando as a martyr.

In 2002, Soulforce founders Mel White and Gary Nixon moved from California to Lynchburg, Virginia, and rented a house across the street from Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church. That year the city also held its first Pride Festival in Rivermont Park. Hundreds of people showed up for the festival, which was called "Out and About in Lynchburg." Dozens of people from Lynchburg-area high schools and colleges joined residents and Soulforce supporters from as far away as Hawaii. The following morning 150 people stood in a silent prayer vigil outside the Thomas Road Baptist Church.

In May 2005, nearly 1,000 Soulforce volunteers went to Colorado to confront James Dobson and Focus on the Family. Soulforce named the day "MAYDAY, MAYDAY." Focus on the Family locked its gates on May 2 to keep glbtq individuals and families from entering its headquarters for the organization's public tour.

Soulforce's Youth Director, Jacob Reitan, and his parents, Phil and Randi, were arrested for trespassing when they attempted to deliver a letter to James Dobson. The story is featured in Daniel Karlake's documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2008).

### **Rapid Response Teams**

In November 1999, 60 Soulforce volunteers participated in the organization's first civil disobedience action at the trial of United Methodist minister Jimmy Creech in Grand Island, Nebraska. Creech was being tried for conducting a same-sex holy union, a "chargeable offense" for United Methodist clergy. The jury withdrew Creech's ordination to Christian ministry and revoked his license to preach, thereby ending his career as a Methodist clergyman. As Creech and his wife left the church, Soulforce volunteers, carrying lighted candles and wearing "Stop Spiritual Violence" sweatshirts, formed an honor guard around them.

In 2003, Soulforce established its Rapid Response Teams to react quickly to church trials being held throughout the country to punish glbtq and glbtq-supportive clergy charged with violating the official policies of their denominations.

The first Rapid Response Team action was at the Cincinnati Presbytery's trial of Reverend Stephen Van Kuiken, minister of Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church. Van Kuiken stated publicly that he would not abide by the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s prohibition against marrying same-sex couples. He was found guilty and defrocked, but he was reinstated a year later when he won an appeal. The appellate decision stated that the Presbyterian Book of Order does not specifically bar ministers from marrying gay couples, nor does it call for disciplining ministers who do.

In 2004, Soulforce Rapid Response Teams were called to the trials of two United Methodist pastors. In March, Soulforce volunteers blocked the entrance to the church where the trial of Reverend Karen Dammann, pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Ellensburg, Washington, was being held. Dammann had come out to her bishop and to the United Board of Ordained Ministry, saying "I can no longer live the life of a closeted lesbian clergyperson." Dammann was found not guilty.

In December of 2004, Soulforce's Rapid Response Team appeared at the trial of United Methodist Minister Reverend Irene Elizabeth Stroud, pastor of Philadelphia's First United Methodist Church of Germantown. Stroud had come out as a lesbian in a sermon the previous year, revealing that she and her partner had celebrated their relationship in a commitment ceremony in 2000. Stroud was found guilty at the initial trial, but that decision was overturned on appeal. However, the denomination's judicial council reinstated the trial jury's verdict in 2005 and removed Stroud's ordination credentials.

### **The Equality Ride**

The Equality Ride is a student-led campaign directed at institutions of higher learning, especially Christian colleges and universities, that discriminate against glbtq people. The Soulforce riders (known as Soulforce Q) visit campuses around the country to initiate conversations with students about faith, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Some colleges allow the conversations between the Equality Riders and students; some do not. When access is denied, the Equality Riders stage nonviolent civil disobedience demonstrations.

In 2005, Soulforce began preparations for its national Equality Ride campaign in 2006 by conducting two student-led "test runs" at Liberty University in Virginia and the U.S. Naval Academy in Maryland.

The "test run" at Liberty University was held in April 2005. More than 50 Soulforce riders participated. At first, they were received hospitably by Liberty students who offered them muffins and engaged in informative conversations with the riders. Unfortunately, Liberty's chancellor, Jerry Falwell, intervened,

announcing, "Contrary to what others may think, this is not gay day at Liberty."

After eating lunch with students in the school cafeteria, the riders held a press conference to explain to the media that they were there to talk about the need for academic freedom and personal safety for all students at Liberty. At that point, campus security announced that the riders were no longer welcome and would be arrested if they reentered the campus. The riders left, believing they had already accomplished what they had hoped by talking to students and sharing stories.

The second Equality Ride "test run" was held in October 2005, when forty-five young adults from the Washington, D. C. area traveled to the United States Naval Academy to take a stand against the military's policy that bans openly gay Americans from enrolling at any of the military academies. Prior to the riders' arrival, the Naval Academy officials announced that Soulforce representatives would be arrested immediately if they tried to enter Academy property.

For half an hour after their arrival, the Soulforce group stood in silent vigil outside the Academy holding signs that read "Lift the Ban" and "Hear Us Out." After the vigil, Soulforce held a press conference featuring Reverend Tommie Watkins, a former midshipman who was discharged from the Academy in 1997 when it was discovered that he was gay.

After the press conference, the Soulforce group lined up to enter the Academy, assuming they would be arrested. Instead, the marines guarding the gate allowed them onto Academy grounds, and the Equality Riders and the midshipmen ate lunch together. After lunch, the Equality Riders, wearing their rainbow shirts, formed a line as the midshipmen left, shaking hands with those who were willing.

In 2006, the Soulforce-supported Equality Ride was divided into two groups (eastern and western), each group visiting 15 to 20 Christian colleges and universities.

In 2007, Baylor University in Waco, Texas, Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and Brigham Young University-Idaho in Rexburg, Idaho resisted the presence of the Soulforce Equality Riders on their campuses. Six young people were arrested at Baylor, four at Covenant, and eight at Brigham Young for "trespassing." All of the arrests were peaceful.

At Baylor, a Southern Baptist-affiliated university that aspires to membership among the national research universities, officials refused Soulforce's request to distribute literature on campus, making the university appear anti-intellectual and provincial. The arrests were prompted by Soulforce participants writing messages with chalk on campus sidewalks (a common practice on the campus), including Bible verses and other phrases such as "God loves you just as he made you." The six members were held overnight in the McLennan County jail.

## **The Future**

Under Mel White's guidance, Soulforce has had a profound impact on many people who have heard its message of love and acceptance through education. White believes the only way to combat the religious right is "to take it to the streets," and that is exactly what Soulforce volunteers will continue to do so in order to challenge church policies of intolerance.

While Soulforce's work with Christian colleges and universities and its witness in support of clergy in mainstream denominations who are willing to reject institutional homophobia will continue, projects in the future are likely to focus on marriage equality, on family reconciliation, on support for the survivors of "ex-gay" reparative therapy, and on dialogue with the congregations of the so-called "mega-churches."

In April 2008, Soulforce celebrated its tenth anniversary with a reunion and gala while protesting at the United Methodist Church's General Conference in Fort Worth, Texas.

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