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Two USA Baptist Ministers Seek Belfast Reconciliation

by Jim Newton

BELFAST, Northern Ireland (BP)--After dragging a 200-pound cross throughout both sides of a no-man's-land dividing warring Protestants and Catholics here, two Baptist ministers from the USA sought to bring the reconciling message of Jesus to the people of the Belfast streets.

The response was "really tremendous" said Hollywood Baptist evangelist Arthur Blessitt, sometimes called the minister of Sunset Strip.

"We had opportunity after opportunity to tell them (the people on the streets) that the cross was the answer to the conflict," added Fenton Moorehead, minister to the generation gap at First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach, Fla.

During the five days Blessitt and Moorehead were in Belfast, they dragged the 200 pound cross on both the Protestant and Catholic sides of the no-man's land, something the British troops guarding the area said would bring sure death if they attempted it.

They were threatened at least three times, picked up by the British troops but quickly released, and were cheered by the crowds, both Catholic and Protestant, when they were brought back to the "peace zone."

They were not successful in bringing any barb wire down, nor in signing any peace treaties, or even enlisting Protestants and Catholics to form a "Jesus Peace Patrol" that would go up and down both sides of the line calling for reconciliation and peace.

"But I don't believe we failed because we were obedient to Christ," Blessitt said. He added that he went to Belfast after "the Lord got ahold of my heart" and he became "burdened about Protestants and Catholics killing each other."

Blessitt said that when he left for Belfast, he did not think the conflict was caused by religious differences, but he returned home convinced that it was.

He decried the lack of response of both Protestant and Catholic ministers in seeking to lead their parishioners to love and brotherhood instead of hatred.

"Religion is all over the place, but such a hatred and fear has developed that the ministers would not openly support us for fear that someone would know," Blessitt said. "Their people hate so badly, they didn't want to be associated with a peace effort for fear of their lives," he added.

Both Blessitt and Moorehead said they were amazed at the way "God opened doors" for them on the trip to Belfast.

Blessitt had originally planned to make the trip alone, but a Miami businessman, Fred Roach, offered to pay Moorehead's expenses to accompany Blessitt. The Hollywood minister's expenses were paid by the Ruggles Baptist Church of Boston.

Moorehead said that on the plane from London to Belfast, he met a Christian architect and hotel owner in Belfast. The hotel owner, a Mr. McAllester, took them to a forest outside of Belfast where they cut down a 50-foot tree to build the 200 pound cross.

Blessitt and Moorehead spent the first day trying to get permission from the British troops and the Belfast police to erect the cross in the center of the "peace zone."

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Permission was denied. The officials sternly warned the two of the dangers involved.

On the second day, without permission, Blessitt and Moorehead began dragging the 200-pound cross down the streets on both sides of the no-man's-land, a four-square mile acre bounded by Falls Road on the Catholic side and Shanes Hill Road on the Protestant side.

Blessitt said that the police told him it was impossible to cross from one side to the other. Moorehead added that the people on the streets were amazed with disbelief that anyone would cross the lines, saying it was a sure invitation to death.

"A lot of people commented on the tremendous weight of the cross and several offered to help us carry it," Moorehead said. "We responded by saying, 'Jesus had to really be a man to carry a cross, but his burden was not just a heavy cross, but the sins of the world.'"

The response was tremendous, they both agreed, with opportunity after opportunity to share Jesus with the people. "Instead of saying, 'Goodbye,' we would tell them, 'Jesus loves you,'" Moorehead said. "That would really freak them out."

Three times during the five days, their lives were threatened. One hefty man told them, "If you cross this street in our area, you'll never come out."

Another gave them three nails and told the Baptist ministers, "You'll need these in a few minutes," Blessitt said.

On the second day of their visit, while they were pulling the cross across the peace zone, the British troops ordered Blessitt and Moorehead to get into an armoured troop carrier.

Moorehead said he and Blessitt just kept on witnessing to the kids on the streets. Again, the soldier ordered them into the troop carrier. "I can't," Blessitt replied, "My cross won't fit into your jeep."

But they obeyed the order a few moments later. Once in the jeep, Moorehead asked the British soldier "if he knew Jesus." The soldier replied with a curse.

At the headquarters, the officer in charge was very apologetic and they were immediately released, Moorehead said. "Arthur and I have never been able to put our finger on why," he added. When they returned to their cross, the crowds cheered, he said.

From then on, the troops were very cooperative, and did not object when Blessitt and Moorehead erected the 13-foot cross in the middle of the peace zone, they said.

Moorehead related that one 14-year-old highly intelligent boy who was present at the time they were released became tremendously interested in what they were trying to do. He said he was a Communist, and had been sneaking across the lines to attend Communist rallies on both the Catholic and Protestant sides.

By the time Blessitt and Moorehead left, the boy had committed his life to Christ, Moorehead said.

Both Blessitt and Moorehead said that they had no idea how many people they led to Christ during the five days, but they were constantly telling people of Jesus' love.

Generally, the response was cordial and courteous, they agreed, especially among kids, ages five to 18. At night, they would sit beneath the cross, pray and teach the kids choruses and the Bible.

Adults would bring them blankets and tea at night, and stay to pray for peace. They would admit they hated Protestants (or Catholics), but they seemed to love us, Blessitt said. "We never had any trouble at the cross," he said.

Blessitt added that they were greeted with less ridicule in Belfast than in the United States, when last year he pulled a cross from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. "I got more put-downs on Hollywood Boulevard than in Belfast," Blessitt said. "Nobody

sneered at us or called us dumb fools,"

Blessitt added that the trip to Belfast helped him to better understand his own country. "It convinced me that prejudice and hate rule out intellectual discussion."

He said there was a parallel between the hate and prejudice between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and between blacks and whites in the United States. The same parallel could be drawn between long hairs and short hairs, left wingers and right wingers, straights and swingers, he added.

"Once people become so imbittered with hate they cannot sit down and intelligently discuss their differences, then they've reached chaos," Blessitt said. "America is going that way as fast as it can toward irreconcilable differences."

In Belfast, hatred and prejudice have been fanned by the church, both Protestant and Catholic. From their pulpits, Protestant ministers criticize the pope and Catholic tradition. And the Catholics do the same sort of thing, Blessitt said.

Blessitt said he and Moorehead did not talk to either Ian Paisley, leader of the Protestant forces, or Bernedette Devlin, the primary Catholic leader. They avoided taking a political stand, and identified themselves only as "Christians" who were committed to Jesus Christ.

Moorehead said that if Protestant and Catholic ministers would get out of their churches and go into the streets to tell the people of the love of Christ, it might change some things. But most are too afraid, both he and Blessitt said.

Blessitt said one of the most ironic things he had seen was a cross on a steeple of a Catholic church and a cross on top of a Protestant church, each just two blocks from their own cross in the center of no-man's-land. "Yet those crosses did not represent the same thing," Blessitt said.

He added that in between were machine guns, pill boxes, barbed wire and armed troops, trying to keep Protestants and Catholics from killing each other.

"Perhaps in the middle of that deep hatred, we brought one drop of love that can perhaps become a flood of love in the weeks and months to come," Blessitt said.

He added that he and Moorehead left their 13-foot cross standing in the center of no-man's-land as a symbol of the unity that Christ could bring to Belfast if the people would only accept him and his love instead of fanning hatred and prejudice.

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Dallas Baptist Church
Wins Award for Growth

5/19/71

DALLAS (BP)--Hampton Place Baptist Church, which has added 782 new Sunday School members in six months, has been named winner in the National Sunday School Association's 1971 attendance growth campaign.

The award is both international and interdenominational in scope.

The Hampton Place Church, located in a declining area of Dallas' Oak Cliff section enrolled 173 new Sunday School members during the judging period consisting of four Sundays in March.

Its percentage of gain in attendance was 54.7 per cent compared with 44 per cent for the second place church. Its Sunday School has a cross section of Anglos, Mexican-Americans, Negroes and Orientals.

Also during March, said the church's pastor, James D. Springfield, there were 58 candidates for baptism and 114 additions through church membership.

"The results during March were part of our continuing program of outreach for Christ," said Springfield. During the past six months, the 3,224-member church has added 782 new Sunday School members, and has had 220 professions of faith in Christ and 121 additions by church membership.

The main reason for the gains, said Springfield, was an outreach program undergirded by a strong public relations program. The church's 216 Sunday School workers made

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16,464 visits during March. An average of 368 church members took part in the visitation program each week.

Also the church expanded its bus ministry, bringing 429 people to Sunday School and worship services on nine buses the last Sunday in March.

During March, the church started 17 new Sunday School classes and one new department.

Since the Hampton Place sanctuary only seats 1,050, it has become necessary to hold three worship services simultaneously. Two of these are children's services, conducted by some of Hampton Place's 40 special service volunteers.

Springfield will receive an award for the church from W. Joseph Hamphill, executive director of the National Sunday School Association at the annual meeting of the organization in Chicago, Oct. 20.

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