

The pastor and the witch

“Bring drums, rattles, whistles, and noise makers of all types. Dress to shock and/or impress. Come in costumes and show your rage.”

So trumpeted the handbill promoting what was being called a “Pro-Choice Rally” in front of Armitage Baptist Church, “a base for anti-choice activities.” The flyer stated the event was sponsored by a coalition of ten groups including: The Fight Back Network, The National Committee to Free Puerto Rican POWs, Queer Nation, Refuse and Resist, and Sister Serpents.

Sister Serpents. Hmmm.

The first time I saw this flyer I was standing at the auditorium door after the morning service nine days before the date advertised. My immediate thought was “Oh my! Quite a collection of anarchists, sexual libertarians, and occultists. How many kooks, radicals, and crazies are there in Chicago?” The person handing the circular to me was a young student. It had been put in her hand at her campus. My mind raced. “On how many campuses are they distributing these?” I wondered.

Better be safe than sorry, I thought. We organized our men to function in various roles related to security. People associated with the rally sponsors had already attempted to take over one of our Easter services, put glue in our church door locks, slashed church vehicle tires (while they were filled with people), graffitied our building, and plotted to attack us with AIDS-tainted, urine-filled super soakers. (How do we know this? We had a secret agent in their planning meeting. Oh yeah, serving Christ in the city is an adventure.)

I knew we couldn’t count on the local cops. We put about 40 men in front of the entry doors so we wouldn’t get rushed. We had people on the roof, the highest point in the neighborhood,

monitoring surrounding streets. My house was guarded. I mean we were ready to rumble. We mobilized the rest of the body for a concert of prayer. We planned to pray for revival and the souls of our attackers.

The local Christian radio station somehow got wind of what was taking place. They allowed us to invite believers from across the city to come and pray. I had no faith this would produce much response given the low spiritual temperature across our metropolitan area.

The night of the demonstration, the motley throng massed in front of our building. Our front door security force witnessed a self-proclaimed witch clutching a doll she was calling Charles Lyons. Gleelessly she jabbed it with hatpins. This was hardly shocking among the lesbian kissing sessions, sundry lewd chants, and the beating of pots and pans accompanied by blowing of whistles.

At one point the crowd took up the cry, “Feed Charles to the lions.”

A black youth choir from a sister church took over the front steps. They rocked it, singing the boisterous crowd into reluctant listening. Inside, hundreds prayed for the demonstrators and revival in Chicago. The glory of God was all over the block. This took place in 1994.

Several years later, church member Ron told me Melba, the witch, had died. “Remember?” Ron said, “She was the one in front of the church the night of the demonstration.”

I knew right then I needed to go to the funeral home. I couldn’t imagine what I might find. I could not picture Melba the witch or Sheila her lover of 17 years. I don’t think I’d ever met them. Ron tells me they had lived right up the street all this time. I had no idea.

That Friday night, I navigated crowded city streets to the funeral home on Diversey Avenue.

I have been there many times. The quiet of the chapel makes the street ruckus in front of our church building during the demonstration seem a million miles away. Sure enough, the remains of Melba the witch rested in the casket. She did not look very old. I found out later she was 51. She died in her sleep.

I am in funeral homes way more often than anybody should have to be. I rarely go to the casket unless it’s with a family member. After signing Melba’s guest book, I stood before the casket several moments, head bowed, praying that somehow, some way, God would use our contact and our witness to bring her friends to Christ. I lifted my head and turned away when a lady, I’m guessing in her late fifties, steps forward.

“Pastor Lyons?”

“Good evening,” I reply.

“I’m Sheila, Melba’s roommate.”

The most incredibly gracious conversation followed. Sheila introduced me to some mutual neighbors who approach during our conversation. Sheila thanks me several times for coming. She said Melba had become a Catholic in the last year, “looking for faith.” How tragic, I thought, after living 50 years to begin looking for a way to God and possibly not find it.

We shook hands. I turned to go when Sheila called me back. “Oh, I just wanted to tell you this. You have been such a good neighbor.”

I’m stunned. “Thank you,” I replied. “We really try hard.”

A few more brief words. I said good evening again. I walked out into the balmy evening.

I am so sad. Tears came to my eyes as I wrote this. I wish, oh, I wish I had assurance Melba was in heaven.

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CRY **“FEED CHARLES TO THE LIONS.”**

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