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## Anti-abortion minister urges action by African Americans

By Gerald Korson  
Voice correspondent

After having served 18 days in prison, the Rev. Walter Hoyer is a free man and will remain so — as long as he doesn't come within eight feet of anyone who is about to enter an Oakland abortion clinic.

That hasn't stopped the 52-year-old minister from returning to the public sidewalk outside the Family Planning Specialists Medical Group building near Jack London Square, the site of his arrest last May that resulted in his incarceration at Santa Rita Jail in Dublin earlier this year.

Hoyer, executive elder of the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church in south Berkeley, is on a mission not only to save unborn children and offer abortion alternatives to women, but also to inspire religious leaders — particularly African-American pastors like himself — to take up the pro-life mantle within their congregations and local communities.

"The women going into this clinic are not fully informed on this issue because our pastors have been horribly silent on abortion," he told The Catholic Voice. "They'll preach about the cost of discipleship, but in America today you've got to be willing to pay the cost of discipleship."

That "cost of discipleship" — a term borrowed from theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose open criticisms of Adolf Hitler led to his execution in a Nazi concentration camp — is a real risk for pastors in many Protestant churches where "you can get voted out of your pulpit on the same day you preach," Hoyer said. "So when I talk to these pastors, I know what I'm asking them to do. I'm asking them to risk their jobs."

Yet there is much more at stake. African Americans, he pointed out, are the "number one customers" of abortion clinics today. Although blacks account for only 12 percent of the U.S. population, 37 percent of all abortions in this country are performed on black women. With a live-birth rate lower than the mortality rate, Hoyer said, there will be no black Americans left by the year 2100.

"Between 1882 and 1968, the Klan lynched 3,446 black folk. Abortion kills more than that in the African-American community in just three days," he stated.

"When I explain to the brothers that abortion kills more of us than heart disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS, and violent

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The Rev. Walter Hoyer, who was convicted of violating Oakland's 'bubble law' and served 18 days in prison, is particularly concerned about the high number of abortions among African American women.

JOSÉ LUIS AGUIRRE PHOTO

crime, they begin to realize that this is the number-one issue facing the African-American community today.”

“I’m not using terms like ‘holocaust’ and ‘genocide’ to get a response,” he explained. “We’re literally killing ourselves.”

Unlike most black Americans, Hoyer said he was “horribly disappointed” and “heartbroken” about the election last November of Barack Obama, who openly supports pro-choice positions and legislation, as the nation’s first African-American president. Most blacks “put their Bible down when it came to that election” and voted on the basis of the color of his skin, Hoyer said.

Nevertheless, he places responsibility for the abortion issue squarely on the shoulders of Christians. “This is a moral issue; it’s not a political issue. It’s not in the White House; it’s in the church house,” said Hoyer. “Until we stand up as Christians and look at it as a moral issue, we’re not going to be effective in taking a stand against abortion.”

Hoyer began his sidewalk-counseling efforts in 2006 with a low-key, peaceful presence outside the abortion clinic at 200 Webster Street in downtown Oakland, often accompanied by two elderly ladies from his church. Holding a sign that says simply, “God loves you and your baby — let us help,” he would say to those entering, “Good morning. May I talk with you about alternatives to the clinic?”

#### **Clinic employed escorts**

At first, no one paid Hoyer much attention at his weekly visits. Then the police started to show up periodically, and the clinic began employing escorts to help usher the women past him and into the facility.

In January 2008, the Oakland City Council passed a new “bubble law” ordinance barring the “non-consensual and knowing approach within eight feet” or “harassing” of any person seeking to enter an abortion clinic.

It further defined “harassing” to include the acts of handing out literature, displaying a sign, or engaging “in oral protest, education, or counseling.”

“Essentially, it’s like Daniel,” Hoyer said, comparing himself to the Old Testament prophet. “They couldn’t find Daniel guilty of anything but praying, so they made praying illegal.”

Soon clinic personnel began taking more extreme efforts to keep Hoyer from communicating his pro-life message to clinic patrons. Two or more orange-vested employees would stand and walk on either side of him, blocking him with their bodies and raising blank signs to block his own sign whenever another person approached the clinic.

Finally, on May 13 of last year, two clinic employees accused Hoyer of harassment, and he was arrested by police. A judge quickly slapped him with a restraining order preventing him from returning to the clinic.

In January of this year, following a 13-day jury trial, Hoyer was found guilty of two misdemeanor violations of the new city ordinance and faced up to two years in prison and \$4,000 in fines.

When a judge sentenced him in February to a fine and a three-year probation including a promise to stay 100 feet from the clinic, Hoyer declined the terms and asked instead for “straight time.”

On March 20, the same judge sentenced Hoyer to 30 days in prison. He served 18 days and was released April 7.

The guilty verdict came despite the fact that no clinic patron had ever complained, hours of videotape revealed no harassment on his part, and even the clinic escorts said he was “nice” and never bothered anyone, Hoyer said.

He said he turned down the initial sentence and asked for a jail sentence because “I’d rather serve the time and then be entirely free to continue to do what I’m doing outside the clinic.”

In the meantime, his attorneys have appealed his conviction and have filed civil suit challenging the constitutionality of the city’s “bubble law.” Both issues are expected to get their day in court soon.

Calls to clinic director Jackie Barbic were not returned by press time.

At the time he entered prison, Hoyer had already begun a radical fast as part of the 40 Days for Life campaign against abortion, and jail cuisine didn’t provide him the nutrition he needed to stay healthy, so he became ill and weak.

Nevertheless, he maintained a steady, virtually round-the-clock prison ministry.

“I was having so much success witnessing for Christ in jail, I led eight men to Christ,” he said. “I led prayer there like Paul and Silas. I must have answered a zillion questions about abortion, marriage and relationships. The men just kept coming all night and all day and say, ‘Can we talk?’ It was simply amazing.”

In the final days of his prison stay, Hoyer had a “special visitor” in Bishop Salvatore Cordileone, who at the time had been appointed but not yet installed as bishop of Oakland.

They enjoyed a long visit together, shouting to each other through the thick glass of the visitation booths because the phones didn’t work.

“Getting a visit from him did my heart so much good,” Hoyer said. “I am in love with the Catholic Church, I’m in love with this bishop. We had a tremendous visit.”

Bishop Cordileone told The Catholic Voice afterward that Hoyer told him about “his high respect for the Catholic Church because we have been defending the sanctity of life all these years, and he even apologized for Protestants being late in the game.”

#### **‘Highest respect’**

The bishop said he had the “highest respect” for the Baptist pastor for “what he was willing to suffer to bear witness to the sanctity of human life on this very contested issue, this very politically uncomfortable issue.”

Hoyer’s ministry is designed in part to discomfort the comfortable.

After a month of recovery from his prison ailment, Hoyer was back in front of the abortion clinic on May 7, this time with what he called his “potted plant stance” — standing in one place with his sign and his literature, offering help to the women who approach the clinic. He doesn’t think he actually needs to say anything.

“As soon as they see me standing on the sidewalk with my sign, the sisters know exactly why I’m there,” he explained. “Just my standing there is a powerful witness, and much of it is because I’m an African American and I’m a pastor. Some of them probably know me, and it’s difficult to walk by your pastor into an abortion clinic.”

That’s why his presence so offends the clinic staff, he said.

“They know that even if one African-American pastor is standing against them, he has the potential of waking up other African-American pastors — and I spend a lot of my time doing that,” said Hoyer.

For Christians, especially black pastors, there’s still that matter of discipleship.

“If we consider the sacrifices we were making in the 1960s in order to use a restroom, a water fountain, go to a restaurant, sit on a bus, why aren’t we willing to make these sacrifices when we’re talking about our own children?” he asked.

“I would imagine that we would value our own children more than we would value a latrine, a urinal, or the right to drink out of a water fountain.”

He challenges all pastors to join him in educating the public about abortion and paying the cost of discipleship.

“Once we start paying the cost, the people will follow,” he said, “and we’ll see the end of abortion in America.”

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