



Night of victory

URBAN CURRENT

Remember His wonderful deeds which He has done" (1 Chronicles 16:12). Last March, our church family "remembered" 20 years ago...

"Have you seen this?" The student held up the flyer. "Meet at Armitage Baptist Church — Show Your Rage." I noted the sponsors, Refuse and Resist, Queer Nation, Sister Serpents. There were ten similar groups.

"Where did you get this?"

"They're passing them out on my campus." We had 11 days to ... do what?

We had been under attack for trying to save babies from slaughter. Tires slashed on a bus full of people at a red light. Glue in church door locks. An attempt to take over our Easter service. We knew what these people were capable of.

We infiltrated the suspected group. (Yeah, baby! Secret agents! Don't mess with the Baptists.) Our spies reported discussions of using super soaker water guns filled with AIDS-tainted urine and balloons filled with the same. We found a box of sharply pointed sticks stashed in the alley during a previous picket at our church. Hat pins were used on pro-life counselors in front of our local abortion clinic during crowded sidewalk activity.

They're passing these out on campuses? How do we prepare? Should we cancel prayer meeting? Can I put our people at risk? I can't guarantee their physical safety. I can't guarantee their cars won't be vandalized.

We decided we couldn't cancel prayer meeting. We had to mobilize and engage.

That Wednesday night, our membership rushed to the church building. We manned the parking up and down the side streets, the roof, the doors, the nurseries, and the kitchen. The worship team prepared to lead the service.

The demonstrators began to arrive. There were maybe 150 at most. Our security noted a number of out-of-state license plates on the streets around the church.

People streamed into the auditorium to pray. They prayed for the protestors, for abortionists, for pastors, for churches, for our city. They prayed for revival.

The auditorium was full. The front steps were occupied by 40 of our men. We didn't know if the protestors might rush the doors.

A big yellow bus rounded the corner, and another bus, and another bus, and another. Seven buses arrived filling the boulevard in front of the church. Police scrambled to direct traffic and guide the crowds disgorged from the vehicles.

"Oh no," one of the protestors cried, "they're bringing in the homeless."

No, it was Pastor James Meeks and Salem Baptist Church with his entire mid-week service, 600+ people from the far South Side. A tsunami of singing black Baptists swamped the protestors. Our front door security force was ecstatic, parting Red-Sea like for the guests, patting them on the back, shaking their hands.

There was not enough room for everyone in the first floor auditorium. A couple hundred moved to the lower level auditorium to pray.

John Leo, of *U.S. News & World Report*, flew in from New York City. He wrote in a column dated March 21, 1994: "The most common chant was 'Racist, sexist, antigay/Born-again bigots, go away.'"

"For 'born-again bigots,' the congregation has made an unusually successful effort to cut across racial lines.

"While the crowd chanted about racism, a group of young black men showed up wearing long red jackets that said 'SHS security.' They were from a South Side Baptist church, Sweet Holy Spirit, and had come to protect a fellow Evangelical church.

"Somewhat confused, the woman with the bullhorn tried to lead the crowd in singing 'Little Boxes,' a song about suburban conformity popularized by Pete Seeger in the 1960s. It was, without a doubt, the least appropriate

song anyone could have sung about this diverse urban congregation."

The Salem youth choir mounted the front steps. The demonstrators tried to drown them out — hoots, hollers, chants, beating pots and pans, blowing whistles. I just have to say, you can't blow a whistle very hard very long without fainting. You can't scream chants very long without getting hoarse. Pounding a pan pretty soon hurts your own ears.

The kids were too good. They understood this was spiritual warfare up close and personal. The protestors were done for. Soon they were just standing, listening to the choir. After a while, the protestors decided they had nothing more to give. The video shows them slinking off into the Chicago night.

Meanwhile, we figured we could get everybody from downstairs and outside into the auditorium if everybody folded up his or her chairs. We jammed everyone in standing. The room was packed solid.

The air was electric. You could have held the plug end of your toaster in midair and burned your toast. The presence of God was palpable. The glory of God was tangible. The youth choir, now accompanied by their band, led the congregation in victorious praise. I thought the building would explode.

The years give a little perspective. I don't think there had ever been a prayer meeting quite like this in Chicago history. Not this large, this diverse — African-American, Hispanic, and Anglo, city and suburbs. I think something broke in the heavens that night.

God showed up that night, and God is at work in Chicago today.

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