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A MIRACLE OF FAITH

The classroom is squared. The walls are a dull yellow. They're scuffed and dirty. The light fixtures are ragged with loose wiring hanging from two that don't work. The neglect is obvious, almost overwhelming. An old rusty heater sits alone in the back of the room. The wall behind it is blackened where the flames once jumped from it and lapped at the wall like the devil's breath. A blackboard no longer hangs from the wall. It sits on two broken desks. Someone left a passing message, "Jesus Saves" on the board. There are more than two dozen desks in the classroom. Most sit in disrepair. Graphic symbols and crude words carved in the tops of most. Prisoners are creatures addicted to graffiti.

Education is no longer taught in the classrooms of the Main Prison's Education Building. The prison's educational program belongs to the outcamps. The classrooms are now used by various inmate organizations, including the church groups, to conduct their weekly meetings. A handful of select inmates make a nightly pilgrimage to these classrooms either in search of knowledge or simply to escape the dormitories. These prisoners are not fused into the routine and vice of the night life in a prison dormitory. They don't like seeing a man act like a woman, or listening to a loud argument or a poker game, or seeing two inmates huddled in a corner puffing away on a marijuana cigarette, or hearing the same repetitious crime-ridden conversations. They want something different, particularly a small beacon of hope to guide them through a brutal prison situation. They find a measure of it in the dilapidated classrooms of the Education Building.

The Education Building is the loneliest looking place in the prison. One of its classrooms is an unlikely place for a miracle. But it is said that one took place there not long ago. It was a regular meeting night for the Church of God In Christ. The miracle happened to Elijah Victor Pickett, a Big Yard resident serving a 25-year armed robbery sentence. Before the miracle, Pickett was a sick man who suffered from epilepsy and an abdominal disorder. He was on a diet of raw fruits, raw vegetables, juices with little or no acid content, and protein foods. Every day he trekked to the hospital to take his meals. He was weighing less than 120 pounds. He required constant medical attention. That is, until the miracle.

On the night of the miracle, Rev. Allen Brown, who ministers the gospel to

RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

the Church of God In Christ members, noticed that Pickett seemed burdened. Brown directed his sermon directly to Pickett. "I said, 'Lord, there's one here who has a problem,'" Brown told THE ANGOLITE, explaining his sermon. "I began to pray in my heart that the Lord would heal him, meet his needs. I don't know what it was but I could tell the Lord was telling me to speak directly to Brother Pickett. It was at this time that a demonic power lifted Pickett straight up and threw him backwards. He was picked up, in his chair, about six feet and he was flung all the way back against the wall - and all the while I was pleading for the blood of Jesus on him. I knew that God was going to meet my prayers."

The congregation stirred emotionally at this unexpected event. They did not know what was going on. Some rushed over to Pickett to put their hands on him and commenced praying over his contorted body. The whole scene turned chaotic, even comical. "I stepped out of my room," one source told THE ANGOLITE, "and I saw all this flippin' 'n floppin and praying and shouting goin' on. It was the darnedest commotion you ever saw. I knew I ain't had no business sticking my nose in that. I stepped back in my room and shut the door."

"With all this disturbance going on," Brown added, "I told several members of the congregation to take Brother Pickett out in the hall. It was at this time that a lot of other people from other call-outs started coming out of the other rooms trying to see what all the commotion was about. A security officer walked up and started asking what was going on. We tried to explain that a demon was being driven out of Brother Pickett's body - but it was hard because I had to keep going back into the church to keep things in order in there."

Alice Billodeau is an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God church. He's known Pickett for several years and he tells a slightly different version of how the miracle developed. "I was the one who kicked it off," Billodeau told THE ANGOLITE. "I guess you could say that I'm the one who started it. What happened was he was sitting in the back of the room and we went downstairs to count and then we came back upstairs. And when he went back into the room, he fell down by the chair - and they picked him up and they put him back in the chair. So I got out of my chair and I put my hand on him - and I went to praying for his healing and the spirit of the Lord. The Holy Ghost told me that I had to rebuke the devil in him. So I did - and when this happened, he fell out of his



BROWN & FELLOW INMATE PREACHERS

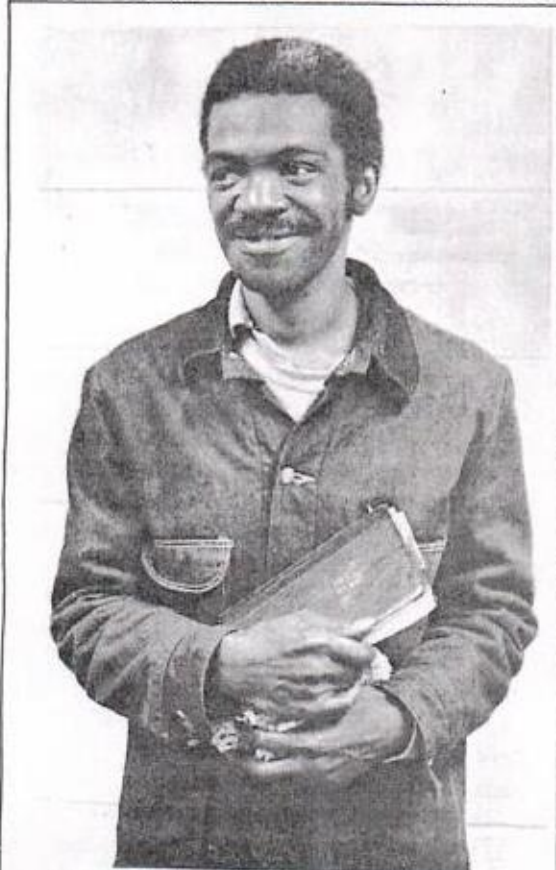
RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

chair and some of the others thought he was having a fit. That's when they went to get the free man and brought him downstairs to take him to the hospital."

Billodeau explained to THE ANGOLITE that the moment Pickett accepted the Holy Ghost, the demon had to leave his body; that the Lord and the devil cannot share the same body. A conflict erupts when the Lord drives the demon from the possessed individual. Billodeau is unwavering in his belief that the Holy Ghost evicted a demon from Pickett's body.

"The demon talked to us," Billodeau told THE ANGOLITE. "His name is - let's see if I can pronounce how he said his name - his name was Abu-duchi or Abu-dochi, or something to that effect. He talked to us through Brother Pickett. Brother Mitchell was the one that asked him his name. He said, 'Devil, what's your name?' and the devil said, 'my name is Abu-duchi or Abu-dochi' or something like that. Okay. So Pickett was moaning and groaning or whatever. Okay. You couldn't hardly hear him and then I bent down by him and I said, 'What you said your name is devil?' and he said it a little louder. So I stood up - and I said 'you tell us what your name is devil' and he said it loud enough for all of us to hear it again."

Gradually order was restored. The inmates drifted back into the different classrooms. The skeptics laughed, the cynics cursed, and the faithful praised the Almighty. Two of the church's elders took Pickett downstairs to give him some water. All the churchmen accepted the incident as an act of God; that Pickett had been delivered from the demon who had possessed his body. But the security officer took it a little differently. He wrote a report to the chaplaincy department explaining what he saw transpire. Several days later Brown was called to Chaplain Joseph Wilson's office. The prison's senior chaplain, Wilson wanted an explanation of the incident. It was a sensitive area - the right to religious freedom in possible conflict with the natural security problem of inmates being allowed to tout "faith-healing" powers over other inmates. To make matters even more controversial, Pickett declared himself healed and immediately gave up his diet and medication. Wilson had a difficult task before him. He also had to weigh whether the inmates were interfering with Pickett's medical treatment prescribed by the prison's hospital.



PICKETT - CENTER OF CONTROVERSY

"I feel that Chaplain Wilson was concerned that we could be charged with practicing medicine," Brown told THE ANGOLITE. "I've read some cases where evangelists have been called in about the same thing. I explained to Chaplain Wilson that we didn't

RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

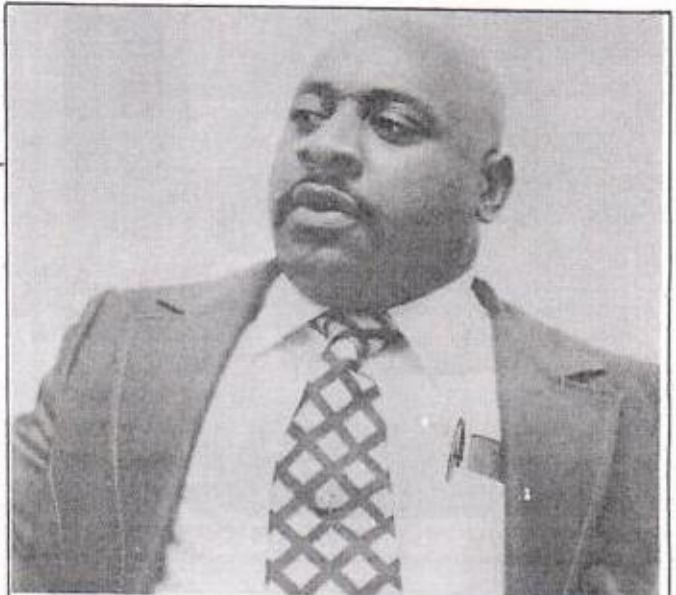
tell Brother Pickett that he should not go to the doctor. That night Brother Pickett told the security officer and two of my ministers that God was healing him. We didn't have anything to do with the healing. It was his faith and the blood of Jesus that healed him."

Wilson cautioned the inmates, advising them that they were dealing with a sensitive area. Wilson told THE ANGOLITE that his primary concern is that adequate medical supervision is not available during such faith-healing sessions. A controversy started to simmer. The inmate preachers felt that the chaplaincy department was trying to regulate the tenets of their religion. The outside sponsors for the Church of God in Christ, Rev. Louis Harrell and Rev. Earl Leveige of New Orleans, drove to the prison to meet with Wilson. The sponsors wanted to nip in the bud any possible misunderstanding brewing between the church and prison authorities. The meeting took place in one of the classrooms in the Education Building. Sources close to THE ANGOLITE said that the discussion among the religious leaders, including the inmate ministers, at times was heated and raised voices could be heard in the hall.

"It was just a simple misunderstanding," Harrell told THE ANGOLITE after the meeting. "There's no problem. Some of the brothers said something that another brother misunderstood, and by virtue of him misunderstanding what he perceived was said, he in turn spoke something that was disagreed with. I can tell you that there is no issue as far as what the Church of God In Christ stands for. We believe in faith healing; we believe that the word of God is the healer. We practice that. We stand on that promise - and the church did not do anything out of order. Nor was it insinuated that we did something out of order. Like I said, it was a misunderstanding between the inside sponsor and the church, but it's all been resolved."



WILSON - DEALING WITH SENSITIVE AREA



HARRELL - JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING

RELIGION IN PRISON (Cont.)

THE ANGOLITE sought out the church's inside sponsor, Connie Jones, for a statement. Jones said he wouldn't comment on what he heard said at one of the meetings - a statement that caused him enough concern that he contemplated resigning as the church's sponsor. "Well, my talk about resigning was related both to my health and what was said in the church meeting," Jones told THE ANGOLITE. "But I don't care to comment on what was said." Jones did add that his concern was related to the faith-healing incident, even though he is an ardent believer in faith-healing. As we go to press, he is still inside sponsor of the church.

THE ANGOLITE turned to Chaplain Wilson for an explanation about the controversy surrounding Pickett's faith-healing. "As for myself," he told THE ANGOLITE, "I am not in a position to be able to legislate what a particular faith or faith group can or cannot do. I can see some dangers possibly in the way some people may handle things and it's these dangers that I'm concerned about. The dangers pertaining to how a situation would be handled. For example, you have an epileptic and the people who are performing this religious rite do not know about his medical background - if they get him excited, he would go into a seizure and my concern is that they do not know how to handle the seizure should he go into one. There is a need to have someone there who could provide responsible leadership should a medical problem exist."

As for Pickett, his weight shot up to 141 pounds and he feels fine. He was given a medical checkup and ordered to see a psychiatrist. He no longer has a



"no-duty" status. He is on regular duty. He feels he was healed - and as we closed out our interview with him, he let us know that we hadn't covered all bases: "I think a point you should have asked me - do I believe that Jesus helped me, because this much I know - and the other point, I think Jesus showed most of the sinners that He is here. He knows the Christians preach that He is here, but He shows the sinners that He's here. It's just that they don't have the eyes to really see just what He be showing in front of them a lot of times. Jesus comes for the sinners - that's the ones He's really after and He gives them all the breaks there is."

Despite the controversy and the skeptics, Pickett and the Church of God In Christ believe that he was healed. They stand on that belief.

SATISFIED, THEY STAND ON THEIR BELIEF