

The Universal Life Church of Santa Cruz

By

T. Mike Walker

It was 1974 and controversy raged just about everywhere about just about everything. A hayseed preacher named Kirby Hensley had challenged the State over his ability to license and sanction ministers in his church. He won that battle, although he lost his fight for his ministers to be able to write off their house & car payments, phone bill, as tax deductions, which all other ministers can legally do. So Hensley had argued that all churches should be taxed, since all of them were businesses. He lost that one too, at least for all of his ministers except him, but that was much later.

Hensley was slated to speak up at UCSC and Ralph Abraham decided to invite a few spiritually seeking members of the community to a dinner with the preacher after his speech. I was one of the many invited fellow teachers, ministers, lawyers, psychologists and others who might be interested in meeting the notorious (sort of) Kirby Hensley.

So I went, and that night changed my life. I won't say that he saved me, because I wasn't lost, but he did empower me in an unexpected way.

When I arrived at Ralph's old Mansion on California Street (the Dr. Otis House), I could already see many people milling around in the large interconnected living & dining rooms, talking and laughing. The room felt open and inviting and very telepathic.

I said hello to Ralph, who pointed out an elderly gentleman in a badly fitting gray suit. Hensley looked every bit the Hayseed from Modesto that he was, but he was also a straight talking, grandfatherly guy who talked with a drawl and punctuated his sentences with grand gestures and knowing winks.

I was especially interested when Hensley spoke to the group after dinner, The reason I don't have a congregation is because I'm here to create ministers, not followers. The minute you put up a minister or an idol or anything else between you and God and expect that one to do your praying for you, you're in a whole lot of trouble. Never give over your power to speak for yourself. So when people become members of my church, they become ministers. That way they don't have any excuses; if their prayers don't work, it's their

own damn fault, not mine! As far as being a minister in my church, my only requirement is that you know what's right and you do what's right. That's right enough for me. If any of you are interested, just put your name and address down on this little list I'm going to pass around. And just so you know, there's no charge for this ministry and it's perfectly legal. Thing is, it cost me about \$5 to print up and mail all the information, so if you want to contribute that amount to the church either now or later I would appreciate that.

When the list came to me there were two or three other names on it already, including Ralph's, so I signed too. I still don't know why, but I agreed with his concept of taking full responsibility for results in our spiritual as well as in our physical life. And saying yes to responsibility for my own prayers felt right, too. I put a \$5 bill in a bowl that Ralph passed around for donations to help Kirby on his way, drank another glass of wine, and went home.

The next day I returned to teaching at Cabrillo and promptly forgot all about it.

About two weeks later a large package was delivered to my house by the US Mail. Inside was all the information I would ever need to start my own church, maintain records, and instructions for forming a non-profit board. There was also information on all the study programs and advanced degrees the Universal Life Church offered for higher fees (with higher degrees, of course). For \$50 dollars more I could become a Bishop! Most interesting of all was an official looking minister's license with my name on it. I was amazed. I was officially a minister! But I was also the father of three children, a full time Creative Writing teacher at Cabrillo College, and I had no interest in starting my own church.

So I put the papers in a box and filed the box under the bed, forgetting it again.

Not long afterward I got a call from a UCSC music teacher who had attended Hensley's dinner. She asked if I had heard anything regarding the minister's license I had applied for. I said that yes, I had received it, and she wondered if I would be willing to perform a wedding ceremony for her and her fiancé. Their regular minister wanted them to hold their ceremony in the church, but they wanted to hold it on their land, right on the spot where they planned to build their house. Their minister had refused to cater to such a reckless scheme, so they were looking for someone more flexible to perform the ceremony who could sign the legal documents.

I told her I didn't even know if my Universal Life Church minister's license was legal and that I'd

check on it first before I agreed to work with them. I took the license down to the County Building and showed it to the clerk in the license bureau, explaining that I wanted to perform a ceremony, but I didn't know about the legal end of it. She promptly recorded my name & license number, and then initiated me into the legal mysteries of signing a marriage license, which entails writing inside the proper boxes and guarding against errors.

Five minutes later I was ready for business.

I called my friend and told her yes and a few weeks later I performed my first wedding ceremony. And I loved it! It combined many of my talents creative writing, acting, public speaking, and agent. I was selling a drama (the ceremony itself, with its beginning, middle, climax and end) in which I was a co-writer, co-director and one of the stars. Eventually, I even got paid for it, which interested me even more.

Over the years I have been coached and supported by many excellent wedding coordinators at resorts and wedding sites all over the San Francisco and Monterey Bay Areas. Many resorts have me on their preferred vendor list, and my son helped me put up a web page loaded with stories and information that hundreds of people have enjoyed. Now that I have retired from teaching, I write, rehearse and perform between fifty to sixty weddings a year.

Since I started performing ceremonies 28 years ago, I have created over a thousand non-denominational, secular yet spiritual weddings. The weddings are all fresh and unique, no two alike. They are usually held outside, in nature, in beautiful locations I would never have seen or experienced if I wasn't open to adventure and the unknown. Through my work, I strive to keep alive the spirit of diversity, good humor, and openness from the sixties and seventies.

So far it still works!