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ST. CLAIR RELIGION

Simple man, simple mission

Gabe Carpenter
05-18-2005

Travelers witnessed an unusual sight along U.S. 231 last week. A man in white robes walking barefoot and carrying a Bible in his arms. Drivers waved and some pointed, but the walking man only waved back and offered a gentle smile as he padded his way through St. Clair County from Ashville to Pell City.

He wasn't Jesus, of course, but considering the common physical interpretations of the man, the mistake might be understandable.

James Joseph wears a white robe, a thick beard and shoulder-length hair. He carries only a blanket, a Bible and a bottle of water. The soles of his feet have been made hard by his 14-year trek across 13 countries and 47 of the United States.

Joseph's purpose is to spread the gospel.

"We as a society are becoming more distanced from God, each other and nature," he said. "We're caught too much in the busyness."

But he made it clear that he is under no illusion that he is Jesus.

"I don't think that I'm Jesus," he said. "But I try to live a lifestyle like Jesus and the apostles."

The basis for this lifestyle comes from Matthew 10: 9-10 in which Jesus sends his apostles out to evangelize, instructing them to carry no money, food or extra clothing. God will provide for his servants, the second verse said.

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And, Joseph believes, God has provided.

As he sat beneath the shade of an oak tree near the high school, three people came offering sacks of food and support for his mission.

"I just wanted to give you that in the name of the Lord," said Monica Mann as she handed Joseph a sack of sardines, Vienna sausages and bottled water. "I just thank God for you."

Mann had recently learned of Joseph in a Sunday school class and was inspired by his devotion. She was near tears when she said goodbye.

"When you pray, call my name unto the Lord," she said.

"And Donna Cunningham's, too," her friend added.

Joseph must also rely on the generosity of others for shelter — again, a provision he believes made possible by God.

He sleeps in parsonages or homes if invited. Sometimes, though, he sleeps in the woods.

Other times, he may not sleep at all, evangelizing through the night instead.

Joseph didn't always have the faith necessary to devote himself to such a humble and seemingly fickle lifestyle.

"I started out without religion," he said. "I remember God being mentioned only one time (at home) before I was 12."

He was later baptized, but lost faith as a teenager. He later returned to it, he said, after "my own confrontation with evil and my need for healing."

"A voice within me said, 'Jesus is the answer'. When I accepted that, it was the turning point in my life."

He began reading the Bible cover to cover and even worked a few years in Christian journalism, before embarking on his evangelical mission.

Since he first began roaming the earth in 1991, he has been met with a broad range of reactions, from respect to skepticism.

"Some people think I'm crazy," Joseph said. "That's the first thought people have. Other people really think that it's something divine."

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Overall, though, most people are receptive.

"It's a special calling," he said of his decision.

It is also one that obviously involves a great deal of sacrifice.

Simple things like music, television and even family take a back seat to faith, Joseph said.

"My life is going to be a sacrifice in that area," he said. "Jesus spoke about that sacrifice."

Although these things have lost their importance, they aren't necessarily ignored.

He tries to call his father when possible, and he even made a special trip to see Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ."

But the majority of his efforts are concentrated on his mission of spreading the messages of Jesus and of love — a mission he plans to continue until told otherwise.

God called him to this, he said, and may someday call him away.

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