

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ September 2013

The Miracle Worker

The Rev. Fred Fenton

The telephone rang. A woman's voice asked, "Are you the priest? Come quickly; my husband is dying, and he hasn't been baptized." I was working in my office at St. Mary's-by-the-Sea Episcopal Mission in Imperial Beach, California — the most southwesterly city in the continental United States, and unique in other ways, but that's another story.

Finding the mobile home park was easy. I had passed it many times. A white-haired, elderly woman answered my knock. "Thank God you've come," she said. Stepping inside, I introduced myself and asked, "Did your husband say he wanted to be baptized?" Looking surprised, she replied, "Oh no! He would never do that." Unsure how to respond without more information, I switched subjects, explaining that baptizing her husband at home would not preclude his being welcomed into the Church in a more formal way at the next service of Baptism.

She smiled and turned to lead me down a narrow hall. "I will need some water," I said. She stopped to fill a red Pyrex bowl, then together we entered a small bedroom. Her husband, a tall, thin man, was lying very still, his eyes shut. A recording of "Bali Ha'i" could be heard from the adjoining mobile home.

"What is your husband's name?" I asked. "Henry," she answered. "He goes by Hank." Holding the bowl in one hand and dipping the other into the water, I leaned over the prostrate figure and asked, "You do want to be baptized, don't you?" He murmured something in response. Taking that as assent, I then said, "Henry, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," as I splashed a quantity of water on his head. Eyes opening wide, the newly baptized asked, "What did you do *that* for?" I could not tell whether it was the splash of water that had startled him — or the Baptism. His wife's reaction was clearer; she was delighted: "You've been saved, Dad!"

Driving back to the church, I concluded that the Baptism was all his wife's idea, and that I might never see either of them again. I was wrong. For a man said to be dying, Hank made a very quick recovery. He was in church the following Sunday. To my surprise, he and his wife came every Sunday after that. Later, when both were Confirmed, Hank was elected to our mission's Bishop's Committee, then chosen as our Junior Warden.

Hank was an old salt. He had served on the USS Langley early in the twentieth century before it became the Navy's first aircraft carrier. My congregation, composed mostly of young Navy families, loved the man. He easily recruited naval personnel to paint the exterior of the church, which Hank said was nothing compared to painting a whole ship.

One day, when I was clearing out Sunday school materials to make way for a new curriculum, Hank asked if he could have the hodgepodge of old Bible storybooks. Soon, I began to hear rumors of a

Editor's note: The name of the "miracle worker" has been changed to protect his and his family's privacy.

Sunday school being held in the recreation room at the mobile home park. Sure enough, Hank was using our discarded books to teach more kids than we had at the church. Kids of all ages. Kids in jeans and torn shirts. Kids still in their pajamas. Parents who looked in on the operation reported back that Hank told Bible stories like an old sailor who had very little knowledge of the Bible but a lifetime of storytelling. The children were mesmerized.

Too old to fight in World War II, Hank kept going to Naval Base San Diego pleading to be given a chance to re-enlist. Meanwhile, there was a call for volunteers to risk their lives defusing unexploded Japanese bombs dropped on Pacific island airfields. That became Hank's ticket to the war.

While engaged in this hazardous assignment, Hank — who had met his beloved wife years before at a USO dance on a Friday night and married her the following Monday morning — received word from the Red Cross that she was dying and to return home at once. Hank told me he had sent her a telegram that instructed her to “hold on, Mother; the war isn't over yet.” Miraculously, both survived. She met him at the dock when he returned.

In 1965, my wife, Billie, and I were invited by our bishop to participate in the Selma March. Hank was worried. “If you have any problems, don't call your parents or a lawyer. Call me. I will do whatever it takes to get my pastor back.” We didn't have to make that call, but we kept his card with us, sure that, if needed, he would work a miracle for us.

He performed another miracle when our women's group was raising funds to buy shoes for poor children living in the hills above Tijuana. Without shoes they could not walk down the rocky path to school. No shoes, no school.

Hank drove the first truckload of shoes and other supplies and saw the poverty firsthand. Women had to carry water up the hill. Soon every five-gallon bottle Hank could find and fill was being used to carry fresh water to that beleaguered community. He also made bulk purchases of beans and rice for them. They had no refrigerator, but Hank found one and wired it to the only electrical socket on the hillside. His inventiveness and his compassion knew no bounds.

I attended a celebration of the 60th wedding anniversary of Hank and his wife. Children and grandchildren were there, plus homeless kids they had legally adopted through the years, and some who had simply stayed with them while going through a rough patch in life. Hank put his arm around one young man and said, “Meet Imani, my African son!”

Looking back after 50 years, I am grateful for the mobile home Baptism that resulted in my knowing Hank, a man to whom miracles came naturally, born of his devotion to God and country and his love for everyone he met.



After 40 years in parish ministry, spent mostly in the Diocese of Los Angeles, Fred retired in 2001 as rector of St. James, Baton Rouge. He and his wife, Billie, now live in Concord, California, where he continues a lifelong commitment to social justice by working for immigration reform. Email address: fentons925@sbcglobal.net