

Asbury Revisited

On the surface, Wilmore, Kentucky (population 3,200), is still a sleepy little college town tucked in rolling farmland fifteen miles southwest of Lexington. Yet many of its people are said to have changed in the past year. As Dr. Clarence Hunter, professor of religion and philosophy at Asbury College, puts it: “We just feel the presence of God. We have since February third.”

February 3, 1970, was the day a spontaneous marathon of Christian witnessing broke out among the 1,000 or so students and faculty members of Asbury College during a regular morning chapel period. The revival ran non-stop in Hughes Auditorium for 185 hours, closing down classes for a week (see February 27 issue, page 36).

During the revival and on the weekends soon following, as many as 600 students and teachers fanned out in teams from the college and its neighbor, Asbury Seminary, to tell the Asbury story at other Christian campuses and churches across the nation.

Revival flared wherever the story was repeated, and new witnesses fanned out to tell of their experiences. By the time Asbury students returned from summer vacation, according to Arthur L. Lindsay, the college’s director of public relations, what had been fostered in Wilmore had leapfrogged around the world, touching every continent. There is no way to determine accurately how many lives have been transformed in the past year, the people at Wilmore agree.

“The greatest phenomenon of this revival is the way it spread,” the seminary’s president, Dr. Frank Stanger, says reflectively. “I do not understand from a human viewpoint how a group of students from

Asbury College and Asbury Seminary could go somewhere and tell about the revival and have it start there.... When they told about it, something started.... We have undoubtedly seen a spiritual phenomenon.”

Around Wilmore these days, a visitor is likely to hear the phenomenon referred to as “Revival ’70,” rather than the “Asbury Revival.” Dr. Robert E. Coleman, professor of evangelism at the seminary, thinks “the Asbury phase of revival was just one little part of an awakening, a movement of God, that is sweeping the world.” He is the editor of *One Divine Moment*, a book about the Asbury happening and what followed (published recently by Fleming H. Revell).

Although the people of Wilmore have descended from the mountaintop, so to speak, there are still evidences of the fervor that was.

Even now, a few witness teams go out every weekend, and return to report on their activities at Sunday-evening “sharing” services. And many of the students meet regularly in small Bible-study and devotional groups.

Although Hughes Auditorium no longer is open around the clock—it was for weeks following the revival—students and faculty are still found there at odd hours, praying, meditating, and reading their Bibles. Cards listing prayer requests are always at the altar rail.

On the fourth day of the revival a year ago, Gary Montgomery, then 20, confessed that he had experimented with “drugs, sex, booze, gambling, everything.... With Christ, I’m going to try to stay on an even keel and try to get my friends to do the same.” He is doing just that, according to several Asbury students. Montgomery, formerly of Miami, Florida, has dropped out of the college to witness full-time to

Wilmore-area drug-users.

A group of seminarians and town kids have opened the Bridge Coffeehouse as a ministry to youths. A corps of collegians whose eyes have been opened to both spiritual and social needs tutor school children. Many Asburians have committed their lives to various forms of Christian service.

The Reverend David Seamands, pastor of Wilmore United Methodist Church, says his church has experienced “the finest consistent attendance in my nine years here,” and the most generous giving, too. The church held a missions conference since the revival and hoped to raise \$10,000 for missionary work. Over \$17,500 was given on one Sunday morning.

The college and the seminary have also benefited financially. The college, in addition, gained three new Ph.D’s who were attracted by the revival, according to Academic Dean Custer Reynolds.

But the “fruit” of the revival most often mentioned is the “sense of community,” the atmosphere of mutual love and concern that now is said to pervade the schools and the town.

“The people come in my store and I can see more love radiated in them. They’re interested in talking about religion,” John Fitch, a lay preacher and local merchant, reports.

Indeed, the revival was credited with “saving” Asbury College by one resident (who preferred to remain anonymous). Prior to the revival, the college administration had been rife with tension and dissension, the observer said.

Perhaps that is why college president Dr. Dennis F. Kinlaw, speaking as an administrator, singled out as the most significant result of

the revival “the cleaning out of the little things that kill your academic, spiritual, and administrative efficiency.”

Wayne Anthony, 21, a college senior from Columbus, Georgia, observed that the “antagonism, tension, friction, and rebellion” of last year have been replaced by a general feeling on campus “that we can do a lot more together than as individual parts.”

The revival did have some apparent negative aspects. There was deep depression, for instance, among persons who expected to have personal problems erased and were disappointed, according to pastor Seamands.

There also is a tendency among some Asburians to look back in yearning for the exultation of the past, rather than to look forward striving to grow in faith.

Spontaneous revival is not new to either the college or the seminary, both of which are independent schools in the Wesleyan tradition. And though Revival '70 may have been spectacular in geographic influence, most students seem to agree with the assessment of Becky Ratcliff, a 20-year-old junior from Florida: “Asbury today is no utopia.”

JOHN F. NELSON