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A voice at the end of the line

In 2001, Jason Hamlin says, Jesus told him to feed the poor. He complied, and still does today

By ANN PEPPER

The Orange County Register

Jason Hamlin of Irvine says he's heard Jesus Christ speak to him audibly four times.

It's probably to be expected, but when he speaks he's always very to the point, very in the moment.

Jesus, that is.

The last time Jesus spoke to him, Hamlin was driving his two-seater 300ZX down East Chapman Avenue in Orange shortly after the Albertsons opened there.

"Go see the bread lady," Jesus told him.

As this was the fourth time he'd heard this voice, Hamlin knew exactly who was talking and was accustomed to following instructions and getting really excellent results. When he visited the bread lady at Albertsons, he was not surprised to find that she was all but waiting for him.

But more about that later.

When Jesus first spoke to him, Hamlin said he kind of panicked. Hyperventilated.

Still, it's turned out well for him and the hundreds of thousands he's helped since first hearing the voice.

In fact, if Hamlin's crazy, it ought to be catching.

The story begins

As a young man, Hamlin, 37, had a spiritual bent easily matched by his popularity as a basketball player and all-around good guy.

At La Purisima Catholic Church school in 1983 he was so well-liked that he was able to get the rules changed so he could be the first "C" student to be eighth-grade president.

"Because I played basketball, I got along with everyone," the slight, 5-foot, 7-inch Hamlin said. "The stoners, every ethnic group, they all liked me because I could put a ball in a basket."

After high school, Hamlin studied business at the University of Arizona. But he dreamed of the big screen. He was sure he was meant to change his generation, and he thought he could do it from Hollywood.

Then, when he was 21, his mother died of cancer.

"The rug was pulled out from under me," he said.

"My problem was, I had personality, charm and charisma, but I didn't have character and I didn't have integrity. I made wrong choices."

Hamlin says he spent the three years from age 21 to 23 in trouble with alcohol, drugs and the law.

On Nov. 8, 1992, it all stopped.

"I came home one day and I was drunk and I looked around and said, 'You know what? I'm done with this.'"

So, rather matter-of-factly, began the dramatic spiritual awakening of Jason Hamlin that today is bringing him increasing recognition, from Irvine to Kuwait City.

A difficult road

It's pretty much a given that spiritual awakenings don't come easily. For Hamlin, an aspiring actor waiting tables at the Cheesecake Factory in Fashion Island, there was no exception.

When he got off work at night, Hamlin and his blue-eyed Siberian husky, Stoli, combed beaches looking for answers.

Walk. Walk. Walk. Up and down the sands of Huntington, Newport and Balboa.

"For two years I was walking from the time I got off work, often until 5 o'clock in the morning. I cried out: 'What am I supposed to do? Please tell me there's more to life than working 9 to 5 and renting a video on Friday night! Tell me there is more to life than having a few kids, a nice house and driving a Mercedes.'

"I wanted something to believe in. I wanted to know what was truth. I wanted that more than anything. I don't know why."

One morning around 3, Hamlin was walking along a golf course when the water sprinklers shut off. He stepped onto the grass. Immediately the sprinklers shot back to life, startling him and soaking his clothes.

"I ran behind a tree and I just screamed, 'Jesus!'

"The sprinklers shut off.

"I was encapsulated in a bubble. I was floating, thinking, 'Oh God, what is this?' I felt the pure essence of peace."

The feeling lasted for about 90 minutes and then, to Hamlin's dismay, disappeared.

The next night, he walked three-quarters of the way out to the 56th Street jetty in Newport Beach and lifted his fist at God.

"I'm not leaving until you show me a sign that was you on the golf course. I will stay out here!"

He began to cry.

"God, who are you? What are you? I want the truth! I want the truth!"

Looking up, Hamlin noticed a man sitting on the beach about 100 yards away, watching him. He didn't think much about it, but continued to pray. To ask questions. There was something he was supposed to do. What was it?

When Hamlin looked up about half an hour later, the man on the beach was 50 yards away and walking toward him.

As the stranger closed in on him Hamlin screamed, "What do you want?"

Hamlin remembers he answered: "'You wanted a sign. You got it. Jesus sent me out here for you tonight.' And all of sudden that presence that was on the golf course came over me again."

Hamlin was overwhelmed. The two men walked together on the beach, the stranger offering words of comfort.

"He started naming things in my life. Things years back in my past that nobody knew. He put his arm around me. I was thinking, I can't believe this. He was like the essence of peace, and he said, 'You are called.'

"I said, 'Called to what?'

"He said: 'There is a great thing you are going to do on the earth. He's been waiting for you.'"

Hamlin turned to thank him and the man was gone. The presence stayed through the night.

The awakening

The next day Hamlin's friends at work asked him what was up. He was glowing, they said.

"I told Wendy the bartender that I was going to Hollywood to be an actor. She said, 'You are going to be a minister.' And I said: 'What? You're smoking crack. What are you talking about?'"

The very next day, although he hadn't been to church in years, Hamlin went to a small local congregation. When the minister asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus into his heart, Hamlin jumped up from his third-row seat and clambered across the other worshippers.

"I had an earring in and my Doc Martens on, but the minister said, 'Today, son, your life is gonna change.'"

It was May 31, 1994. Hamlin was 25. Within two weeks, he'd enrolled at the International Bible School of Irvine. Never a particularly good student, there he made straight A's, graduating on a Saturday two years later.

By Monday, he was preaching in the jungles of Thailand.

"I went to the Karin tribe - exiles from Burma on the Thai border - and I told them all about Jesus. I lived in bamboo huts and refugee camps. I began to go to the churches there and minister. Seventh-day Adventist. I prayed for them. There was blackwater malaria, and people said I was going to get it. But I was there for four months and I didn't get it."

He financed other missionary trips on the kindness of strangers and a little stock he owned.

"I trusted God and stepped out by faith," he said.

Hamlin started circling the globe - India; Moscow; Brisbane, Australia; Guatemala; Ukraine; Lithuania; the South Pacific. He opened offices in Australia and Iceland to book speaking tours.

Then four years ago, his energy began to flag and his father fell ill. He "came off the field" for a while.

Kind of.

He wasn't back in Irvine long. It was April 2001. He was sitting at a Starbucks when, for the first time, he heard what he's come to believe is the voice of Jesus.

"I could hear him the same way you are hearing me now. He said: 'Start feeding the poor with this company, and I'll give you favor ...to the top of the company and with corporate America.'

"Now, I'd gotten a part-time job at Starbucks at Culver and Irvine Boulevard because I was always in there with my laptop whenever I was home. I saw all this food go in the trash every day. I asked Starbucks: 'Can I feed the poor with your company?'"

The manager said, "Sure." They'd been looking for somebody to give the food to.

So, Hamlin headed out with bags of leftover pastries into downtown Santa Ana - wandering around the courthouse and the civic center at night - to find someone to feed.

"For the first two days, it was very strange, I couldn't find anybody. On the third day I found this guy walking around the civic center, and I gave him hundreds of dollars in Starbucks pastries.

"I was so excited. My first person! But then I sat down in front of the courthouse and said to myself: 'What the heck am I doing? Everybody thinks I'm crazy.'

"So I feed this one guy and I'm driving down the 55 freeway, and I hear the Lord's voice again: 'Jason, if that Starbucks is with you, what about all the other Starbucks?' So I said, 'All right, God.' And I got on the phone and ... lo and behold, one Starbucks turned into five and five into 10, then 20, then 60."

The Orange County Register – Article about Jason & Tara Hamlin

Hamlin began working up to 18 hours a day, driving from one Starbucks to another picking up food. He'd take it back to Culver and Irvine, wrap it, inventory it and bag it. Each filled bag held about \$200 worth of muffins, bagels, baguettes, scones, coffee, bread, salads and sandwiches. So many bags he could barely stuff them all into his little car.

Then he'd go out until the wee hours distributing it.

"Mind you, I'm by myself. And by myself out of my car in the first 30 days I fed 7,000 people. The first 60 days I fed 18,000. I know because I tallied everything. Everything was written down. I didn't want Starbucks to say, 'Hey, you are stealing and selling the food?'"

"So in the first 90 days I fed just under 34,000 people. That's when it began to turn the heads of Starbucks' corporate offices.

"I began to panic, so much food was coming in. And I quickly found out one thing about feeding poor people: It is a boatload of work and costs a lot of money. Transportation. The biggest challenge is to get the food from point A to point B."

Hamlin began taking food to the Catholic Worker home in Santa Ana and the Fred Jordan Mission on L.A.'s Skid Row.

And then he heard from Jesus again: Would he go to the Middle East? To Kuwait?

Hamlin arrived just before the region blew up, on the last civilian flight before the government stopped issuing visas. His friends sent him off with warm assurances he'd return in a body bag.

In no time he found himself preaching at a 4,000-member Christian church with members from 53 ethnic backgrounds.

He told them about the Genesis Project – his food program – and they sent him home with enough money to buy 4,000 toys to distribute at Christmas through the Fred Jordan ministry.

Back home from Kuwait, and within six months of starting his food program, Starbucks allowed one of its coffee shops to be used to tape Hamlin talking about the hungry and homeless with the Fred Jordan Mission.

Starbucks Vice President Dennis Stefanacci took part in the mission's Christmas program, which was supplied by Hamlin with Starbucks food and Kuwaiti-financed toys.

And the company presented Hamlin with its "Spirit of Starbucks" award, the first time it had gone to a clerk.

But there's more.

"So I come back and the Genesis Project is growing, but a year later it's still just Starbucks. I'm driving down East Chapman Avenue when all of sudden the Lord speaks to me for the fourth time."



SWEETS CHARITY: Pastries donated by Starbucks are readied for the next day's outreach at the Genesis Project's headquarters.

This is when Jesus sends him to see the Albertsons bread lady.

"She says to me, 'We've been looking for somebody to give our bread to.'"

Today, five Albertsons are contributing and five more are waiting to help.

A local family turned their home into a food-distribution point for the project, but it's gotten too small. Food is now coming from Starbucks, Albertsons, Trader Joe's and Corner Bakery.

The Orange County Register – Article about Jason & Tara Hamlin



STOCKING UP: Jason Hamlin moves a pallet of goods while picking up a truckload of food from Operation Blessing in Riverside. Donations come from sources such as Starbucks and Albertsons.



FOOD AID: Seven-week-old Jasmine Ehrman sleeps as her mother Mary and father David (not pictured) receive goods from the Genesis Project at La Purisima Catholic Church in Orange. The food-distribution project, started by Jason Hamlin in 2001, says it has fed more than 3 million people.

Pallets of food have started arriving through Obras de Amor, a food ministry of Templo Calvario in Santa Ana, one of the largest Hispanic churches in the United States. Operation Blessing in Virginia Beach, Va., opened a distribution center in Riverside. Feed the Children of Oklahoma City, one of the country's largest private humanitarian groups, and the Fountain of Hope in Los Angeles joined up.

The Genesis Project has grown from one brave, trusting Orange County guy lugging around two bags of Starbucks pastries to an operation that supplies around 60 tons of food each week.



ON A MISSION: Jason Hamlin, who started feeding the hungry five years ago, wears a baseball cap that says it all.



HEEDING THE CALL: Jason Hamlin says a prayer before giving out food at La Purisima Catholic Church in Orange. Hamlin's Genesis Project supplies 20 to 30 tons of food each week to thousands of needy people throughout Southern California and Mexico.

In 2004, \$2.3 million in food and donations came in, Hamlin said. In 2005, he calculated it between \$6 million and \$7 million - up 276 percent in a single year.

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"It's doubling every six months," he said. "Why? Because I believe that I'm obeying God. I am doing what I am supposed to be doing with a pure heart."

Jason Hamlin Ministries International Inc. is now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the Genesis Project as its offshoot.

"This project is about 4 1/2 years old now, but still in its embryonic stages," Hamlin said. "Because I want to go global. I want planes."

"God has revealed himself to me like never before. This is what he was calling me to do long before I was a kid on the basketball court."

Hamlin hasn't taken a salary in a decade, but he's planning to start soon. He just married Tara Hamlin, 31, whose fortes are business and her love of God. She appeared just as he'd about given up hope of finding a woman willing to live the way he lives.

They've got a lot to do. The needs seem to be everywhere, and the two trucks the project was given - one each by businessmen in Orange County and Kuwait - are seriously inadequate.

He'd like to pay his six full-time volunteers. He needs a warehouse in Irvine. He needs it now. But he says he learned a valuable principle since he was the guy with the two Starbucks bags.

"It's not until you step out in faith that God begins to meet your needs. He will wait until you move because he's not moved by our needs. If he was moved by our needs, he'd feed Africa. He's not moved by our needs, he's moved by our faith."

"When we release our faith it releases him to move in our lives."

"So I'm like, 'Wow, so this is how it works.'"



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Genesis Project aims to feed more than just the body

By ANN PEPPER

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ORANGE – Linda Dean, 62, who has multiple sclerosis and is in a wheelchair, and Maria Ortiz, 42, are the first in line, waiting in the Hewes Street parking lot at La Purisima Catholic Church near crates of Parmalat milk - which doesn't require refrigeration.

They're waiting for free food.

- "This food is very important for both of us," said Ortiz, who earns \$10 an hour as Dean's helper and is the mother of five children, three of them adopted.

Behind Ortiz and Dean snakes an orderly line of men and women, as well as children, who scoot off to investigate what might be for dinner.

At least 350 people are in line. They started arriving at around 7:30 a.m., 3-1/2 hours before the distribution is set to begin.

At 11 a.m., the Rev. Christopher Heath, La Purisima's pastor, dressed in a long black cassock and black shades, tells people he'd like to see more of them in the pews.

"We want to do more than feed your body," Father Chris shouts in welcome. "We want to feed your soul."

Today, pretty much everyone's concentrating on getting their bodies fed, and the pastor is glad he has an opportunity to help make that happen. **This line is here because he met Jason Hamlin, founder of the Genesis Project food-distribution program, in his local Starbucks.**

David Ehrman, 31, bounces 7-week-old Jasmine in his arms. Ehrman, who works in customer service for an insurance company, is in line because his wife is on maternity leave from her job.

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She's getting partial pay, but it's not enough to make ends meet, her husband says.

"Without the dual income and now the bonus gift of a child it is hard sometimes. This is just awesome.

"We get diapers and big things of lettuce, and the freshness of the food is wonderful. All kinds of really good stuff that the expiration date is far off, so you are not struggling for the next 29 days wondering what you are gonna eat."

Ehrman says one day his family will give back.

"Because now we are taking," he said. "I've never had the need until now."