



Metropolitan Community Church

by Linda Rapp

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Metropolitan Community Church founder Troy Perry. Image provided by the Metropolitan Community Church.

On an autumn Sunday morning in 1968 a twice-defrocked gay Pentecostal minister welcomed twelve people into his living room for a worship service. From that distinctly modest beginning the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) has grown into a worldwide ministry with over forty thousand members in eighteen countries.

Origins

The Reverend Troy Perry felt the call to preach at an early age, delivering his first sermon when he was only thirteen. Although his parents were not particularly religious, his family had strong church ties; one of his aunts was a Pentecostal preacher who handled snakes as a sign of faith and an uncle was a Baptist minister.

After giving a sermon at his uncle's church at the age of fifteen, Perry was licensed as a Baptist minister. Feeling closer in spirit to the Pentecostals, however, Perry held pastorates in the Church of God and then in the Church of God of Prophecy but was dismissed from both because of his homosexuality.

Several years later, while recovering from a suicide attempt after a failed love affair, Perry, who came from a religious tradition that held homosexuality to be a sin, realized that God did love him--and other gay men and lesbians.

Perry felt called by God to found a church that would spread this message. He took out an advertisement in *The Advocate*, then a local Los Angeles newspaper, announcing the first meeting of the new church.

A dozen people from a variety of Christian backgrounds congregated in Perry's living room on October 6, 1968 for a communion service. Perry preached a sermon entitled "Be True to You" and enunciated the basic tenets of the church--that salvation is promised to all who believe in Jesus, that the church community would serve as a family for those "alone and friendless" or lacking support from their families, and that the church would be committed to "Christian social action" to combat both religious and secular forms of oppression.

Growth

The congregation soon outgrew Perry's living room. Sunday morning services moved to the Encore Theater in Hollywood, one of a number of unconventional venues that the church would use, especially in its early years. As word of Perry's ministry spread, congregations were founded in other places as well. In late 1970 leaders of churches in five cities--Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Chicago, and Honolulu--met in the first General Conference of their new denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

Around the same time Perry and his Los Angeles flock managed to buy a dilapidated building that volunteers

then refurbished. The "Mother Church" was dedicated in March 1971.

Homophobic Arsons

In January 1973 it was burned to the ground.

The homophobic destruction of the Mother Church--for which no one was ever prosecuted--was only the first in a series of church-burnings. In succeeding years seventeen other MCC sites fell victim to arson.

The most devastating was a fire at the Upstairs Lounge, a gay bar that had been used for services by the New Orleans MCC congregation. This deadliest fire in the city's history took the lives of 32 people, including the MCC's pastor and assistant pastor along with about half of the congregation. The tragedy was compounded when most of the churches in the city denied Perry's request to use their buildings for memorial services for the victims, some of whose families refused to claim the bodies.

Social Action

From its beginning the MCC has been a visible participant in the movement for glbtq civil rights, using marches and fasts to call attention to the cause, taking a page from the book of African-American civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King.

The MCC made a strong showing at the National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights in 1987. Twenty congregations took part, forming a contingent that stretched for several blocks. In a separate event held the same weekend Perry presided at a commitment ceremony for over two thousand gay and lesbian couples.

The MCC was the first American denomination to establish an AIDS ministry. It also has a prison ministry and a "deacons' closet" program that provides food and clothing to the homeless and needy.

Diversity

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches now has a membership of over forty thousand in some three hundred congregations in eighteen countries. Only one congregation, established by ethnic-minority Biafrans in Nigeria, does not have a mainly glbtq membership. Overall, approximately fifteen percent of MCC members are heterosexual.

Women have been part of the MCC clergy since 1972, when Freda Smith was licensed as a minister. Women were in the minority in both the membership and the ministry at the beginning, but their numbers have grown considerably over the years, and the ratio of men and women is now approximately equal.

Ecumenicism

Although Perry's religious roots are in the Pentecostal church, his vision for the MCC has always been ecumenical. Two of the first clerics to join him in the MCC ministry were Richard Ploen, a Presbyterian who served with him at the Mother Church in Los Angeles, and Arthur Green, the founder of the Chicago congregation, who came from the Old Catholic denomination.

Perry credits Ploen for his help in "gleaning what we needed from other denominations' ceremonies" in order to make members feel comfortable in the new church. The modern MCC, in the words of John Dart, "displays a patchwork of spirituality to people attracted to its congregations." While some churches retain the charismatic Pentecostal tradition, others favor a more metaphysical philosophy, and a San Francisco congregation has been described as "dam [sic] near Unitarian."

Official Doctrines

The official doctrines of the MCC are, in fact, mostly quite close to those of conservative Christian churches. They set forth beliefs in the trinity, the divine inspiration of the Bible, and salvation by grace.

A doctrinal difference between the MCC and more traditional churches is, of course, their views on homosexuality. The MCC reading of the Bible verses cited as condemnations of homosexuality (Romans 1:26-28, I Corinthians 6:9-10, and I Timothy 1:9-10) is that the texts as written in the original Greek actually condemn temple prostitutes of both sexes and pederasts rather than same-sex partnerships or non-heterosexual people themselves.

The MCC also has sacraments and rites similar to those of mainline churches, including baptism, Holy Communion, ordination, and Holy Union. The rite of Holy Union, "the spiritual joining of two people," has been a part of MCC practice almost from the beginning. The MCC has been at the forefront of the fight for legalizing same-sex marriage.

Rejection by the National Council of Churches

The MCC sought membership in the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 1992 but was not admitted. The MCC does belong to several state councils of churches. It has so far been denied even observer status at the NCC, although MCC members meet with gay and lesbian caucuses of NCC member churches, and MCC clergy attend NCC General Assemblies, albeit without official standing. The denomination applied for and was granted observer status by the World Council of Churches in 1991.

The MCC was authorized to provide chaplains for United States Veterans Administration hospitals and other facilities in 2002. Church officials announced plans to apply to provide chaplains to the military services as well.

The MCC Mission

The MCC describes its identity and mission in the statement "The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches is a Christian Church founded in and reaching beyond the Gay and Lesbian communities. We embody and proclaim Christian salvation and liberation, Christian inclusivity and community, and Christian social action and justice. We serve among those seeking and celebrating the integration of their spirituality and sexuality."

Perry says that when he founded the MCC he anticipated a day when the major churches would change their views and teachings about homosexuality, at which point MCC members would "go home to [their] own denominations," an idea that he now calls naïve. The MCC has grown every year, even when AIDS was taking its greatest toll.

Melissa Wilcox calls "the failure of Perry's original dream of assimilation" the most important element in MCC's survival. She describes the MCC as a "hybrid organization," conservative in much of its essential theology and its evangelism, yet radical in its affirmation of glbtq people. The church offers a welcoming community for glbtq Christians who find themselves condemned by mainline churches because of their sexual orientation and at the same time marginalized by many in the glbtq community who regard religion with skepticism or scorn.

In 2003, the denomination was rocked by the decision of its largest congregation, Dallas's Cathedral of Hope, to leave the fellowship. Although the Cathedral's dean was under investigation by the MCC for fiscal irregularities, Cathedral officials credited the decision to sever ties with the denomination to a desire to reach a larger Protestant audience. In 2006, the Cathedral of Hope voted to affiliate with the United Church of Christ, perhaps the most gay-supportive mainline Christian denomination in the United States.

The Future

The most insistent question facing the MCC is that of the transition of leadership upon the retirement of Perry in October 2005. At the denomination's General Conference in Calgary, Alberta, in July 2005, Reverend Elder Nancy Wilson was overwhelmingly elected to succeed Perry as Moderator. Wilson, a longtime leader in the denomination, has served as pastor of several MCC congregations, including a stint as Senior Pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles, the denomination's Founding Church.

As Wilcox points out, the MCC has been long concerned with having a good organizational structure and has also taken on arising concerns of the glbtq community such as the AIDS crisis, transgender issues, and the question of same-sex marriage. This combination of stability and the willingness to move with the times, together with the church's provision of a welcoming haven for glbtq (and other) Christians who feel marginalized, suggests that the MCC will prosper even after the departure of its charismatic founder and continue to build on his determination to seek social justice and his message of hope and love.

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