



Troy Perry.
Courtesy Metropolitan
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Perry, Troy (b. 1940)

by Linda Rapp

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The Reverend Elder Troy Derooy Perry is the founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, a Protestant denomination devoted to ministering to the spiritual needs of glbtq people. A charismatic preacher and leader, Perry has built the religious organization into one of the fastest growing denominations in the world, with over 300 churches in some 18 countries.

Early Life

A child of the deep South, Perry spent his early years in Tallahassee, Florida, where he was born on July 27, 1940.

As a child Perry was an avid church-goer. Since his parents were not, the boy went with neighbor families to worship services and Sunday school at a variety of Protestant churches.

Perry recalls a happy childhood, until the death of his father when Perry was twelve. His mother soon remarried, and her new husband proved to be a violent man who physically abused his wife and five stepsons. After a number of frightening episodes, including being raped by a friend of his stepfather, Perry, who feared that his stepfather might kill him, ran away to live with relatives in Georgia and later in Texas.

In addition to being safe, Perry was once again free to go to church, which his stepfather had forbidden. He enthusiastically participated in Pentecostal services. He felt the call to preach and gave his first sermon at the age of thirteen.

Once his mother had divorced his stepfather, Perry returned to Florida. There, one of his uncles, a Baptist minister, invited him to preach in his church. Perry, then fifteen, did well and as a result was licensed to preach in the Baptist church.

Perry's mother, seeking better job opportunities, moved the family to Alabama, where Perry rejoined the Pentecostal church. He dropped out of high school after the eleventh grade in order to pursue a career as an evangelist.

By this time he had begun to date girls but was also feeling attraction to men, which "confused and bothered" him. He sought counsel from his pastor, who told him that he should marry a good woman. At the age of 18 Perry wed the pastor's daughter.

Perry obtained a GED and enrolled at a Bible college in Illinois, at the same time serving as pastor of a congregation of the Church of God.

Perry was excommunicated from the Church of God after church officials learned that he had had a consensual sexual relationship with a man.

Perry subsequently preached in another Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God of Prophecy. At the same time he worked for a plastics company, which offered him a transfer to the Los Angeles area. Since he was also able to find a position as a pastor in nearby Santa Ana, he moved there with his wife and two young sons.

After reading Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America* (1951), Perry decided that he could no longer live as a "pseudoheterosexual." He revealed his sexual orientation to a church official. Shortly thereafter he was dismissed by his bishop.

Perry's wife left him, taking their sons with her. She eventually divorced Perry and remarried. She kept the boys from having any contact with Perry until 1985, when the younger son, James Michael Perry, sought out his father and was happily reunited with that side of his family.

Perry soon began to discover the gay community in Los Angeles and to become acquainted with other gay men, whom he viewed "as part of [his] extended family."

When Perry was drafted into the United States Army in 1965, he acknowledged that he was gay, but the Army inducted him anyway. He was stationed in Germany, where he worked as a cryptographer, a job requiring a high-level security clearance.

After two years of military service, Perry returned to Los Angeles. He soon fell in love with another young man. When the man suddenly broke off the affair, Perry attempted suicide by slashing his wrists. He was discovered by friends, who rushed him to the emergency room.

A New Church

As Perry recovered, he turned again to God and came to the realization that God still loved him even if churches were generally sending a very different message.

Perry felt called to start a new church. He spoke to members of the gay community and took out an advertisement in a newspaper announcing a worship service.

Twelve people attended the first meeting of the Metropolitan Community Church, which was held in Perry's living room. Perry preached a sermon entitled "Be True to You," enunciating three important tenets of his faith: 1) salvation--which comes through Jesus Christ and is unconditional; 2) community--which the church should provide, especially to those without caring family and friends; and 3) Christian social action--a commitment to fight oppression at all levels.

These principles have guided the Church as it has matured from an evangelical, Pentecostal organization into a more liturgical and ecumenical denomination that welcomes heterosexuals as well as homosexuals and that empowers women and minority groups.

Growth and Tragedy

The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) grew rapidly but not without difficulties. Perry's first congregation managed to buy a building, which volunteers renovated. The first service at MCC's Mother Church in Los Angeles was held in March 1971.

In the next few years, other congregations sought affiliations with the Los Angeles congregation. In 1972, twenty-three affiliated churches were organized as the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, with Perry as moderator.

The new denomination not only attracted adherents, however; it also attracted the hatred of homophobes.

In January 1973 the Mother Church was burned. The persons responsible were never apprehended. In subsequent years, seventeen other MCC sites would fall victim to arsonists.

A particularly devastating fire occurred in June 1973, when the Upstairs Lounge, a New Orleans gay bar that had once been the site of MCC services, was torched. The fire was the deadliest in the city's history. Among the thirty-two people killed were the New Orleans MCC's pastor, assistant pastor, and ten members of the congregation, which numbered only twenty-two at the time.

Most of the churches of New Orleans refused Perry's request to use their buildings for memorial services, but St. George's Episcopal and St. Mark's Methodist Churches made their premises available.

When Perry learned that news photographers had gathered outside St. Mark's, he offered mourners the option of leaving by a back way if they did not wish to be seen. He was gratified when all chose to go out through the front door.

Community Activism

From the very beginning, Perry has been a community activist. Perry's work for glbtq rights has taken many forms. In his early days, he campaigned for an end to police harassment in Los Angeles. He subsequently helped organize two marches on Washington, one in 1979 and another in 1987.

Among the aims of the 1987 march was to call on the Reagan administration to improve its woefully inadequate response to the AIDS crisis.

AIDS has been an important issue to the MCC, which has lost numerous members to the disease. The church has a longstanding AIDS ministry and has been a leader in establishing groups to support people with AIDS.

Holy Unions

Perry favors the legal recognition of same-sex partners. At an event held in conjunction with the 1987 march on Washington he blessed the unions of over two thousand couples. The Rite of Holy Union has been celebrated in the MCC from the earliest days of the church.

Perry himself has been in a committed relationship with Phillip DeBlieck since 1985. After Canada announced that it was no longer restricting marriage to heterosexual couples, Perry and DeBlieck traveled to Toronto, where they were married on July 16, 2003 in a joyful ceremony at the local Metropolitan Community Church. (Perry's previous partner, Greg Cutts, died in 1983 from an adverse reaction between a prescription medication and an over-the-counter remedy.)

Social Justice and Recognition

Perry has been an active and visible worker for social justice, vigorously campaigning against homophobic laws throughout the United States. He has also testified before Congress on the subject of gays in the military.

President Jimmy Carter invited him to the White House to take part in a discussion of the civil rights of glbtq people in 1973. During the Clinton administration he participated in the White House Conference on AIDS (1993) and the White House Conference on Hate Crimes (1997). Perry was also among one hundred national spiritual leaders honored by Clinton at a 1997 White House event.

His Testimony

Perry has written and contributed to a number of books, including the autobiographical works *The Lord Is*

My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay (1972) and *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* (1990). With Thomas L. P. Swicegood he co-authored *Profiles in Gay & Lesbian Courage* (1991), which presents the lives and work of such leaders as Harry Hay, Harvey Milk, Leonard Matlovich, and Barbara Gittings.

Speaking of the renewal of his faith after his suicide attempt, Perry described the great joy in his heart when he realized that his sexual orientation did not affect God's love for him. He has devoted his life and his considerable energy to sharing this message of hope.

His ideals and vision are reflected in his church's 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 the integration of their spirituality and sexuality."

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