

Defending the Faith: A Local GLBT Church's Struggle for Understanding in a Hostile World

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ABSTRACT

Positive identity, understanding and acceptance are important to both people and institutions such as religious bodies. This study traces the progress of a local church's struggles for such reorganization from the community from its founding in 1976 to the present. This struggle is especially pronounced because it is a church within the membership of the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Churches (UFMCC). UFMCC was founded in 1968 by the Rev. Tory Perry in Los Angeles, California as a means to offer a Christian denomination primarily, but not exclusively, for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals (GLBTs). Based largely on primary documents and published news reports, this discussion considers this local church, Metropolitan Community Church Austin at Freedom Oaks (MCC Austin) and its many challenges over the years to justify its right to exist evidenced through Christian theology and social and political action. Faced with success and unfulfilled attempts, the church is now a congregation of some 400 members with growing acceptance by Austin's religious and secular communities.

Keywords: Church denominations, United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), Metropolitan Community Church, Austin, at Freedom Oaks (MCC Austin), Social action, Political action, Community acceptance, Queer theology, Christian theology, Austin, Texas, USA, GLBT Christians, Gay and lesbian Christians, Legislative actions.

SOCIETY AND THE RISE OF GAY RELIGION, THE 1960S

The decade of the 1960s continues to have tremendous and long lasting effects on the United States and the world. The cultural and political ramifications of that period influence our cultural norms today and are continually under review and analysis. Among others, these cultural and social movements include the African American freedom struggle and civil rights movements, increase in government support for the poor and the aged and gay liberation and gay rights [1]. The Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969 are generally considered the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement. [2] Nevertheless, gay, lesbian and bisexual persons have a long, if subdued, history of action style [3].

In 1968, before the Stonewall riots, the Rev. Troy D. Perry was the among first ministers, if not the first, to begin to organize a Christian

denomination that focused on the spiritual needs of gay and lesbian persons- - now largely referred to as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) community. At its first worship service, in Los Angeles in October of 1968, only 12 individuals attended. Within a few years, this small group would grow to become the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) and today reports a world-wide membership of 333 churches and 43,000 members in 22 countries [4]. At the first service, Perry announced that his group would preach a Trinitarian Gospel focused on Salvation, Community, and Christian Social Action. Over time, UFMCC activism has focused on social change especially for GLBT rights. [5]

The Fellowship has always presented itself as open to all persons regardless of race, sexual orientation or social position, but with a primary outreach to the GLBT community. Following UFMCC mandates, Perry and other church

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leaders and members were involved early on in social actions for human rights and justice. Perry quickly became a national spokesperson for GLBT rights.

Notable among these was his appearance in New Orleans in June of 1973 soon after an arsonist destroyed a building in which members of the local UFMCC church were meeting. Although there is no direct evidence that this group was the intended victims, the larger community acted toward these GLBT persons in negative ways. Many local churches refused to hold memorial service for the victims. In his role as a GLBT community leader and head of UFMCC, Perry offered his services to the GLBT community and held memorial services for GLBT persons in the few churches that opened their doors to the families and friends of the deceased. In public appearances and statements Perry strongly condemned the accounts made by the local press and law enforcement officials in the negative ways they characterized this horror that befell one of the Fellowship's churches. [6] Modeled on this type of public action, from its beginning, all UFMCC churches were encouraged to follow this social action model.

Churches within the Fellowship are not congregational or independent in church order. Each church is chartered based on bylaws and guidelines designed by UFMCC to help direct local development and sustainability. These bylaws and guidelines and publications offer guidance to local congregation in how to explain and defend themselves in local and often hostile environments [7], [8].

AN MCC CHURCH IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

Metropolitan Community Church of Austin at Freedom Oaks (commonly called MCC Austin) is now the local UFMCC congregation in Austin, Texas. It began in much the same way as did the original church in Los Angeles. In October of 1975, six individuals attended the first service in a private home in Austin. The original name was Austin Independent Community Church (AICC) and it quickly moved through the stages required by UFMCC to receive a charter within the Fellowship---study group, mission, and finally a chapter church. [9] Shortly before receiving its chapter, the local board of directors changed the name to Metropolitan Community Church of Austin (MCC Austin). The board felt it important to emphasize its place in the community, a theme

that has continued to unite this church to the community. [10]

From the start, MCC attempted to engage with the larger Austin community. In an undated letter addressed to the Austin Area Conference of Churches (AACC), MCC Austin expressed its desire to become a member of the Conference [11]. While supporting the civil and human rights of homosexuals, the Conference responded in part:

It is our judgment that a church body created primarily by and for the homosexual community is a contradiction to biblical truth in both the Old and New Testaments. We believe that the shape of creation in man and women implies clearly homosexuality is a contradiction. [12].

In many ways, this struggle by MCC Austin to join this local association of Christian churches parallels the ultimately unsuccessful struggle of the denomination to join the National Council of Churches in the mid 1970s. The opinion, widely-held at that time within the religious community, that homosexuality and Christian faith are incompatible made it difficult for MCC Austin or other MCC churches to be accepted by the Christian establishment. It began years of attempts by MCC Austin and the denomination to explain its existence in both theological and social terms to the larger community.

In Austin, the initial rejection did not end the debate. In 1982, AACC, influenced by the electoral defeat of a fair-housing initiative, sought to better understand homosexuality. This fair-housing proposal did not come from the Austin City Council, but was initiated by a write-in petition lead by some religious leaders. Rejection by voters was based on its broad wording; allowing rent discrimination based on personal opinions based on sexuality. Public debate and comments on the proposed ordinance clearly revealed that it was aimed at the gay and lesbian community. This public discourse suggested to AACC's leaders that their members needed "to better understand MCC Austin and its doctrines" [13]. At the time, AACC leaders were noncommittal about the conflict being resolved; but noted that social changes were occurring and that this was an attempt at understanding MCC Austin's position according to biblical principles. [14] A member of the Church stated that membership was not necessary for him and others to lead a Christian life, but he hoped that an acceptance would indicate that the Council was now ready to

accept the view “that Christianity is not for the selected few” [15].

This membership question lingered well into the 1990s. By that time the AACC had been reorganized into Austin Area Interreligious Ministries (AAIM), an interfaith rather than strictly Christian group. This new group emphasized greater inclusivity reaching beyond Christianity [15]. Soon after this reorganization, MCC Austin was invited to join this new ministry. This membership allowed MCC Austin “to engage with other communities of faith in the Austin area ... generating mutual respect, trust and social justice through education, advocacy, social services and community building” [16]. The following year, MCC Austin's Associate Pastor was elected to the AAIM Board of Directors and served two three-year terms.

THE NEW CHURCH ON THE BLOCK

Soon after its founding, the general public took notice of MCC Austin, and news reports began to appear in the local press about a Christian church for homosexuals. One of the first issues that this church faced was to explain how homosexuals could be faithful Christians based on traditional biblical interpretations. In the early days, pastors and leaders were often invited to address and discuss these issues with generally curious and polite audiences. This defense has continued into recent times, with the Church having to continually defend itself against traditional interpretations of scripture. Again, this mirrors issues faced at the denominational level.

This defense was generally based on progressive interpretations emerging at that time including a more informed understanding of ancient cultural and social influences [17], [18]. There is little evidence in public records or in the church's archives that the Austin church faced the open, organized hostility often encountered by other churches within the Fellowship. When protests did arise they generally were by individuals rather than groups. Some protests occurred when the Church, following its policy of openness to the community, allowed outside groups to use its buildings.

For example, a production of *Corpus Christ: A Play* by Terrence McNally, produced by the Austin Theater Project, an organization not affiliated with in the Church, used the Church's sanctuary to stage this 2012 production [19],

[20]. The play was controversial, not only in Austin but around the country. The play depicts Jesus and the apostles living as gay men in 1950 Texas. The first night of the production at MCC Austin initiated a small street demonstration held on a public street in front of the Church's entrance. No violence occurred [21], [22].

Nevertheless, MCC Austin still faces discrimination from several factors in the community. These include companies that refuse to conduct business with the Church, non-profit groups who decline donations from the Church, and invitations to religious and/or public affairs withdrawn once MCC Austin's identity is discovered [23].

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY ACTION

Almost from its beginning, MCC Austin committed itself to community outreach, in an effort to be seen as a good corporate citizen. In 1976, with only a small membership and few momentary resources, the church's group of deacons organized a monthly collection of food for needy individuals in the community, the church sponsored a children's party at the Austin State School, and supported a local gay-and-lesbian AA Lambda group for those with substance dependency issues. The deacons also maintained a “Deacon's Closet” where clothing was collected for the needy [24].

In 1977, the Church facilitated a public forum in a central Austin public park where several issues relating to the gay and lesbian community of the time were discussed: lesbian separatism, children in our community, subtleties of racism, and responsibilities to the handicapped [25]. The church, for a short time in 1983, maintained a Gay and Lesbian hotline in its quarters.

In recent years service to the community has continued, including donations to local food banks, sheltering and feeding the homeless in church quarters during inclement weather, renting portable showers for the homeless, adoption of a local school for special services, and offering monthly “care grants” to local non-profits that share MCC Austin's values. Since the beginning of this MCC Cares program the church has distributed over \$100,000 throughout the Austin community. The arise of the HIV-AIDS crisis in the early 1980s encouraged the church to take an active role in association with community-based AIDS local services and health providers. Many of its members volunteered as helpers to individuals as well as assistance within organizations. The church

also faced internal challenges when members of its members faced the disease. Today the church each month lights an AIDS altar candle in memory of those who fell victims to AIDS and to remind its members that the fight against AIDS is not over [26].

REFLECTIONS ON THE TURBULENT YEARS

The decade of the 1990s offered other challenges to the Church—many of these were social, cultural, and political issues. Nationally, GLBT individuals and organizations encountered violence, encouraged by very conservative Christian rhetoric against homosexuals. MCC Austin clergy and Church leaders were involved in planning a “Stop the Violence March” in Austin in 1991. This consisted of a massive march to the Texas capitol building and a church service with communion open to the general public, conducted by the church's clergy in the city's major auditorium [27].

Anti-gay rhetoric from conservative religious circles continued and, in 1995 MCC Austin Senior Pastor Rev. Kenneth Martin, along with some church members, visited the late Rev. Jerry Farwell in Lynchburg, Virginia and explained to him and his vast following how this speech was harming GLBT persons [28]. Following the brutal murders of Matthew Sheppard and James Byrd Jr., the Texas Legislature debated a hate crime bill to protect minorities. There were indications that the bill, if passed, would not include GLBT persons. Again, lead by the Rev. Martin, in 1995 the church marched along with the wider community in support of a hate crimes bill that was inclusive of all, including the GLBT community. Initially such a bill did not pass, but finally in 2000 a hate crimes bill was signed by the governor that included protection for gay and lesbian persons [29]. At the national level, in 2009 the U.S Congress expanded a 1969 law to include GLBT persons [30].

Previously, in 1993, national GLBT community leaders, including UFMCC founder Rev. Troy Perry, had organized a massive “March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation.” MCC Austin sent volunteers at their own expense to attend and show their support for needed civil rights protection [31], [32].

Throughout the 1990s the local, state, and national situations continued to present challenges. In 1994, the Rev. Martin, wearing his clergy collar, and accompanied by his

partner, appeared before the Austin City Council in support of a proposal to offer benefits to officially recognized same-sex partners of city employees [33]. Despite this action, the proposal was defeated by city voters [34].

Near this same time, Jeff Lutes, mental health professional, church member and local leader of the church's Soulforce chapter appeared before a state legislative committee hearing considering banning the rights of same-sex couples to adopt and/or serve as foster care providers for children under state supervision. He and his partner had legally adopted two children and, according to the local press, his emotional testimony appeared to upset the chair of the committee so much that Lutes apologized to the committee for his emotions. The bill was never presented for consideration by the legislature after the committee considered the expense to the state in banning such adoptions and care rights to same-sex couples [35]. This issue arose again in 2017 with a bill signed by the governor that allowed Christian religious-based adoption agencies in Texas to deny applications from GLBT and non-Christian couples [36].

Nationally the church focused its attention in opposing and defeating the 1993 *Defense of Marriage Act* passed under the Clinton administration. This act restricted legal marriages to only between one man and one woman. The church also opposed the “Don't Ask Don't Tell” 1994-2011 government policy that allowed gays and lesbians to remain in military service as long as they did not reveal their sexual orientation. To underscore the Church's opposition to this policy, the Church presented a special worship service honoring all of its members and friends who had served in the military over the years. This included some members and friends, both men and women, who were dishonorably discharged based on their discovered sexual orientation [37]. In support of dismantling this Clinton-era policy, a ministry within the Church presented a reading by an outside drama group of the play “Another America: Asking and Telling” by Marc Wolf. This play, by detailing various sides of the argument, reveals the failures of this policy [38].

Although following the well established policies of UFMCC, some of this social activism did meet opposition from some members of the congregation. A major complaint voiced was that the Church had “wrapped itself in the gay flag too much, lessening its spiritual mission” [39].

The “Freedom to Marry” debate before the U.S. Supreme Court and support for religious minority groups in the community has assumed recent concern and action. Once the decision allowing same-sex couples to marry was announced by the Court in 2015, the Church under the leadership of its current Senior Pastor, the Rev. Karen Thompson and her clergy support staff, published directive on what the decision meant and how to plan marriages. The Church offers its facilities and its clergy to perform same-gender marriage services [40], [41].

The Rev. Thompson, following the church's social agendas and traditions has been active since her installment as senior pastor in 2008. She often speaks before various community groups and appears with local clergy in support of human and religious rights.

In terms of community development and outreach, one of the major disappointments to the Church and its leaders during the early 1990s was the failure to establish a community center for the GLBT community. Under the leadership of the Rev. Martin, the church began the process of gathering support from the community, and offered leaderships along with substantial financial support. However, once the church handed its major leadership role over to members of the local GLBT community, misunderstandings developed among board members and support groups. These disputes could not be resolved and the community center project dissolved. After this demise, the church assumed financial responsibility for significant remaining expenses [42], [43].

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The publication of Perry and Swicegood's landmark book *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* continues to encourage MCC Austin [44]. Much like the first years of the Fellowship outlined by Perry and Swicegood, from its humble beginning MCC Austin has grown over the course of four decades from an upstart group of six people to a thriving congregation of more than 400 members. This places it in the 90th percentile of churches in America ranked by size [45].

Over that time, the leaders of the church have striven to present the Church to the larger Austin community as an authentically Christian institution and a good corporate citizen. This has been an uphill battle, since MCC Austin came into existence at a time when “gay Christian”

was an oxymoron and when gays generally were viewed as sinful and/or sick.

Former senior pastor, the late Joan Wakeford, who served the Church from 1983 to 1984, writes in her autobiography about the challenges that she and the Church faced in the community during her pastorate. Many of her accounts reflect issues presented in our discussion. She clearly notes the divisions and conflicts that MCC Austin presented to the religious communities. Nevertheless, she also speaks about the support she received from many in Austin's religious and secular communities and of her expectations that MCC Austin was on a firm foundation conducive for continued growth and development [46].

Reflective of this and others' visions, today, MCC Austin is a respected member of the family of faith communities within Central Texas. It regularly participates in community events and contributes in numerous ways to the life of the greater Austin community. Nevertheless, despite having a significant proportion of heterosexual members, it proudly maintains its “primary outreach to the GLBT community,” serving as a haven for those who feel unwelcome or unappreciated in their home churches.

The path to acceptance of MCC Austin within the larger Austin community has paralleled the path of its denomination within the larger religious community, and the path of GLBT acceptance in American society. A number of interrelated factors have been at play:

- Growing acknowledgment by large segments of mainline Protestantism that the Bible does not contain any blanket condemnation of homosexuality.
- A shifting perception within American society of gays and lesbians from dangerous deviants and outcasts to neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family members.
- A developing awareness that even groups with whose theology or life-style we may not agree are nevertheless worthy of respect and accommodation.
- An evolving social and political climate that admits the notion that different does not necessarily mean worse.

Despite these changes, there are still countervailing factors. Some conservative religious groups still support the notion that the Bible unequivocally condemns homosexuality. Segments of the

political establishment continue to use gay inclusion, AIDS, and, lately, transgender rights as issues to deny social inclusion and civil rights to GLBT person. Many GLBT persons continue to view religion with suspicion, as oppressor and enemy. In spite of opposition, the leadership, members and friends of MCC Austin continue to embrace the words of UFMCC founder Troy Perry given at the 1979 March on Washington: "There have been setbacks, and there will be more setbacks, but in the end, we will win because we are right!" [47].

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