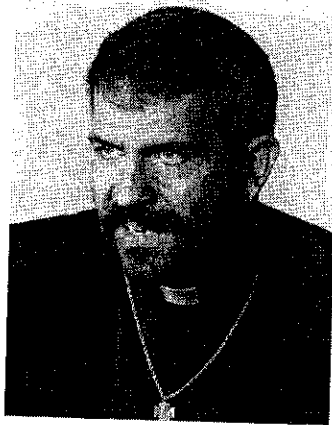


Troy Perry (1940-)

Lee Arnold



Troy Perry is a Christian in spite of Christianity. Thrown out of two Protestant denominations for being gay, he ended up founding a Christian church—the largest of its kind—that primarily serves the needs of gay men and lesbians. It was a long road from the fire-and-brimstone churches of the southern United States to heading up the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches in Los Angeles.

Troy Perry was born in Florida on July 27, 1940, and grew up there and in Georgia and Texas. Familiar with both Pentecostal and Baptist traditions, by the age of fifteen he was licensed to preach by a local Baptist church. And preach he did:

to churches, to fellow students at his high school, to anyone who would listen. Perry loved his church; he loved the preacher's daughter he would eventually marry; and he also loved other men.

Baptists and Pentecostals played a formative role in Perry's life. Yet these were two very different traditions. The Baptists (his mother's faith) were mainstream and fundamentalist who had a more traditional form of worship. The Pentecostals (his relatives' faith), on the other hand, were evangelical and believed in the actual manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues (also known as glossolalia). Their services were more animated as members, who were moved by the Spirit, would stand up and utter words unknown to man. Other members stood and provided divine interpretation of this utterance following this manifestation. The merging of these two religions made for a rich source of the best of both faiths but also caused dissension by those who believed one tradition dominated the other. This conflict spilled over not only to Perry's personal life but also into the Metropolitan Community Church, which he would found years later.

Perry had a horrific childhood. At age twelve, his father, a bootlegger, had been immolated in a car crash following a police chase. Perry's mother soon remarried to a no-account man with a severe drinking problem. The new husband not only went through the family's savings and assets but was physically abusive to young Troy, his mother, and his four brothers. After a particularly violent night, Troy called the sheriff and his stepfather went to jail for three days. A week after his release, a shiftless man—passed off as his stepfather's brother—came to stay with them. That man sexually abused young Troy and threatened him with violence if he told anyone. Troy ran away from home and lived with relatives throughout the South until his mother divorced. It was in this situation that he gravitated toward Pentecostalism, eventually becoming involved with the Cleveland, Tennessee-based Church of God.

He met the daughter of a Church of God pastor and eventually married her, even though he knew he had sexual feelings for other men. He tried to verbalize his reservations, but his future father-in-law simply told him that the love of a good woman would take care of anything. Even though he did fall in love with his wife, that love alone was not enough to stop those desires. Throughout his Pentecostal years Troy maintained liaisons with willing men from the churches he ministered. However, he chalked it all up to youthful exploration and did not consider himself gay. He was, after all, a Christian; and he had been taught one could not be both gay and Christian.

At age nineteen, shortly after his marriage, he took a calling at a Church of God church in Joliet, Illinois. All went well until a state overseer and district coordinator wanted to meet with him. They confronted him with the fact that someone in the denomination whom he had had sex with tipped off the officials that Troy was gay. The officials made Troy tell his wife and forced them to leave the church immediately. After a tense discussion, Troy and his wife Pearl decided to stay together and make the marriage work. He took a job in a local plastics factory and relocated to Torrance, California, when the company opened a branch there. It was there that Troy accepted the call of another Pentecostal church, the Church of God of Prophecy. This church had broken away from the Church of God in 1923 and had very little contact with its former brethren. No one would know that Perry had been excommunicated from the Church of God for being gay. By this time the Perrys had two small boys and were a model example of a young ministerial couple. Yet Troy still knew that he had homosexual desires; he could not continue to live a lie. While his wife and children were away visiting family, he went to the district overseer and told him that he was gay. When his wife and children returned, the bishop contacted Pearl; she knew what to expect.

Troy Perry was thrown out of his second Pentecostal denomination for being gay, and his wife and children left him. He then went to work for Sears

until the Army drafted him at age twenty-five, despite his claims of homosexuality. Stationed in Germany, he met other gay servicemen and eventually toured Europe with one while on leave. In 1967 he returned to California and his job at Sears. He fell in love and had a torturous affair which ended with his lover walking out the door. Troy, despondent, locked himself in the bathroom and slit his wrists. Fortunately a roommate came home, heard the water running, and broke down the door. In his autobiography, Troy tells how in the hospital a nurse told him, "I don't know why you did this, but what you did tonight was crazy—why don't you look up?" Perry knew he had to get back on track with the Lord. How, he wondered, could he do this and still accept his gayness? Perry believes God answered his prayers by speaking to him and letting him know that He loved him just the way he was. He believes that God told him we are all children of God, and God does not have stepchildren.

In the summer of 1968, while on a date at a gay bar, the police raided and arrested people; Troy's date was one of them. It took him several hours to get his friend out of jail, but by then the damage had been done. The police had harassed and humiliated the man so much that his spirit was broken. He confided to Troy that nobody cared about gay people. No amount of protesting by Perry could convince his friend that God did care. It was then that Troy believes God told him to establish a church that would care about gay men and lesbians. God wanted it done now.

The history of Troy Perry then becomes the history of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). On October 6, 1968, Troy Perry held a worship service for a dozen people in his home in Huntington Park, California; this was nine months prior to New York City's Stonewall riots. Within two years, MCC owned a piece of property in Los Angeles, the first piece of property ever owned by a gay organization in the United States. From an interview in *The Christian Century* in 1996:

If you had told me twenty-eight years ago that the largest organization in the world touching the lives of gays and lesbians would be a church, I would not have believed you. So many members of the lesbian and gay community feel that they have had violence done to them by religious groups that it is very difficult to evangelize any members of our community. But we do evangelize. That evangelism is not limited to gay folk. (p. 896)

In 1992, the National Council of Churches (NCC) denied not only membership to the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) but also observer status. Perry did not take this as a bad sign. At least in the whole process dialogue was established between the NCC member churches and the Metro-

politan Community Church. (Ironically, MCC was granted observer status in the World Council of Churches and attended its assembly when it met in Australia.)

Yet changing the establishment has never been easy. One unholy alliance appears to be between fundamental Christianity and violence. Twenty-one MCC churches were arsoned and burned to the ground; several of its leaders have been threatened or assaulted; four MCC clergy have been murdered. From an interview with the *Orange County and Long Beach Blade* in 2000: "We will never, ever, be chased out of a city; we've never, ever, left a city where we've faced persecution." Troy also stated in his interview with *The Christian Century* (1996):

I believe that we are the last minority left in America that you can hate in public and still get away with it. The radical right in America continues to raise millions of dollars to oppose us, claiming that our community is demanding special rights. My agenda is only one thing: to be treated like every citizen is supposed to be treated under our Constitution. I don't expect more, but I refuse to accept any less.

A staunch opponent of Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign in 1977, Perry even refused to drink the complimentary orange juice provided on a cross-county flight to protest the former beauty queen's feckless use of the specter of children's welfare in order to attack gay civil rights. (Anita Bryant was a former Miss Oklahoma—and runner-up for Miss America—as well as a spokesperson for Florida orange juice. She eventually lost her job as a citrus saleswoman after her foray into the antigay rights movement. Perry once referred to her as an overripe beauty queen. Bryant later admitted that her then-husband, Bob Green, manipulated much of her activism during this time.)

The battle with Bryant's Save Our Children was lost in Miami. There followed a domino of defeats for gay rights in Wichita, Kansas, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Eugene, Oregon. Perry watched these with dismay and vowed that it had to stop. The next target of the antigay agenda was California. In 1977 the amendment debate, proposed by State Senator John V. Briggs to ban gays and lesbians from being public school teachers in the state, was in full swing. Perry worked tirelessly to get politicians (including such diverse ones as Jimmy Carter, Jerry Brown, and Ronald Reagan) to endorse "No on Proposition 6." Briggs, however, had the support of the man behind the Dade County, Florida, campaign: Jerry Falwell and his fund-raising ability. Yet ultimately Briggs was shown for what he was—just another bigot with a hateful agenda and a bankroll. The antigay forces lost in every California county.

Troy Perry had the sad task of going to San Francisco and meeting with civic and community leaders after the murders of Mayor George Moscone and gay City Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978. His presence helped keep the response to the murders peaceful.

With comedienne Robin Tyler, Perry helped organize the first gay march on Washington in 1979. MCC members didn't want only to show up in Washington; they wanted to do it with style (and with the press present). They rode from San Francisco to Washington on Amtrak, dubbed the Freedom Train, picking up people and publicity along the way. The first march was a success. It made its goal of focusing on gay rights and immigration reform. By 1987, there were two new reasons to return to Washington. The first was the United States Supreme Court sodomy decision against Michael Hartwick. The second was AIDS. The Reagan administration was seen as apathetic to the crisis. President Reagan had a hard time even saying the word AIDS. Perry helped organize the second march and made sure that MCC was well represented in the crowd. The MCC is the oldest ongoing AIDS ministry of any Christian denomination in the United States.

Perry and the MCC were part of the 1993 March on Washington, and Perry was one of the three people who called for, and a subsequent member of the board that resulted in, the Millennium March on Washington on April 20, 2000.

Troy Perry has long been a champion of human rights and a recognized leader in both the gay and religious communities. In 1973 he was appointed to the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, the first openly gay person to be appointed to such a position anywhere in the nation. In 1977 he was invited to the White House by President Jimmy Carter to discuss gay rights. In 1978 he received a humanitarian award from the American Civil Liberties Union Lesbian and Gay Rights Chapter. He was invited to the White House three times by President Clinton: in 1993 to participate in the White House Conference on AIDS, in 1997 to participate in the White House Conference on Hate Crimes, and in 1997 as an honoree at a breakfast honoring 100 national spiritual leaders. Perry received an honorary doctorate of ministry from Samaritan College in Los Angeles for founding the Metropolitan Community Churches, and an honorary doctorate in human services from Sierra University of Santa Monica, California, for his work in civil rights. He also received a humanitarian award from the Gay Press Association. Besides Perry, other MCC clergy in the news are the Reverend Mel White (former ghost writer for Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Billy Graham), and the Reverend Elder Nancy Wilson, pastor of the mother church, MCC Los Angeles.

Troy Perry's relationship with his family has had it highs and lows. His mother, deceased for over ten years, was the first heterosexual member of

the Metropolitan Community Church and one of her son's biggest supporters. Separated for over nineteen years, he has reunited with his youngest son, Michael, and even married him and his daughter-in-law. He is still estranged from his oldest son, Troy Perry Jr.

Troy Perry has had his share of love and loss. In 1983 his partner and MCC employee, Greg Cutts, died from a reaction to medication while working on a church video project in Vancouver, Canada. On a happier note, Perry later began a relationship with Phillip Ray DeBlieck. He and DeBlieck have been lovers for over fifteen years and live in the Silverlake section of Los Angeles.

One can find an MCC float or contingent in almost every gay pride parade. They are out there, unashamed to be both gay and Christian. Their mission statement is threefold: We embody and proclaim Christian salvation and liberation, Christian inclusivity and community, and Christian social action and justice. The MCC vision statement is even more ambitious: to embody the presence of the Divine in the world, as revealed through Jesus Christ; to challenge the conscience of the universal Christian Church; and to celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Again from the *Christian Century* (1996) interview:

I am very hopeful about our future. I used to say years ago that we were working to put ourselves out of business. . . . I see now that we will not be shutting our doors, and that there is a need for our church. Today there are gays and lesbians in church groups outside of my own denomination, but there are tens of thousands [over 48,000 members in eighteen countries; over 500 clergy serving 310 churches] who want to be part of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. We continue to expand and grow and carry the good news that Jesus died for our sins, not our sexuality. (p. 896)

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