

Gay and mainline: The success of the MCC

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

Callers to the California headquarters of an odds-defying denomination—one that worldwide has 300 churches made up largely of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons—are greeted by the recorded voice of the founder and chief executive: “This is Reverend Troy Perry. Thank you for calling the offices of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.” An anonymous female voice then recites the conventional options: “If you know your party’s extension . . .”

The steadily growing UFMCC is still small enough to reflect its active, affable founder. Yet a closer look at the denomination that dared to declare it was Christian—with alternative interpretations of traditional biblical injunctions against homosexuality—reveals, for all practical purposes, a mainline-style church body.

To be sure, the National Council of Churches denied the MCC both membership and observer status in 1992. Rather than adopting a sectarian or separatist stance, however, the three-decade-old fellowship has kept as busy in ecumenical circles as any more established church body.

Perry recently told the *Century* that the MCC is seeking official ties with two mainline seminaries, asking them to teach a couple of courses required of all MCC seminarians (one on sex and the Bible, and one on MCC polity). The seminaries—Chicago Theological Seminary and the Pacific School of Religion—are both affiliated with the United Church of Christ, which permits local churches to call gay clergy.

Candidates for the MCC ministry have earned degrees for many years at noted seminaries, then have taken at least two courses required for ordination through the denomination’s small Samaritan College. But MCC voted recently to close Samaritan because of ongoing funding and accreditation problems, Perry said.

“We intend to sign a covenant with MCC—it’s an emotional commitment to being in partnership with them,” said Tom Minar, CTS’s vice president for development and external affairs. “We would really like to be thought of as a seminary that serves their needs.” At PSR in Berkeley, California, President William McKinney said of the relationship: “It’s close now, and we will see where it goes.” He added, however, that about 20 MCC seminarians already study at a campus that last year opened a new Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry.

Other steps into “mainline” circles include the following:

- Gwynne Guibord, the MCC ecumenical and interreligious officer, was elected president in January of the California Council of Churches. The council represents 19 denominations at the state capital, mostly on social issues. The MCC also belongs to statewide church councils in Colorado, Hawaii, North Carolina and Oregon. Guibord said that a half-dozen MCC representatives sit on National Council of Churches committees, including the Faith and Order Commission and a task force on justice for working women. The MCC also is an official observer at World Council of Churches meetings.
- The MCC, the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) took an unprecedented step last fall of jointly backing a new congregation in Berkeley to bring together Christians regardless of sexual orientation. New Spirit Community Church, which inducted its first class of 90 members in February, meets temporarily in the chapel at PSR.

The congregation is not formally affiliated with any of the three denominations at this point, said MCC pastor Karen Foster. But she said the idea is a solid one: “The people who are finding a spiritual home here love the mix of people, and wouldn’t have it any other way.”

- In what is now routine, some 60 MCC pastors and lay leaders this year attended the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership at the Crystal Cathedral in California. MCC treasurer Donald Eastman said he benefited from the conference in 1981 when he was pastor of MCC’s largest congregation, the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas. “Overall, we’ve been treated well,” said Perry. “We encourage our pastors to attend; it’s one of the finest church growth meetings you can go to.”

- The MCC has many contacts and friends in the straight world. Troy Perry was invited to the White House for conferences on AIDS and hate crimes, and in 1997 he was a guest along with 90 other clergy at a breakfast with President Clinton. Pastor-author Jimmy Allen, the last “moderate” president of the Southern Baptist Convention, spoke to the 1999 biennial UFMCC convention to relate his family’s difficult times with frequent church silence on questions of AIDS and homosexuality. National Council of Churches chief Robert Edgar, speaking as a United Methodist minister, in the fall addressed the anniversary service of MCC’s “mother church” in Los Angeles. In February, Anglican Bishop Christopher Mayfield of Manchester, England, preached at MCC Manchester as a part of his dialogue with gays.

Like any denomination primarily serving a minority group, the MCC has an activist side, urging broader civil and religious rights for nonheterosexuals. In a kind of good cop/bad cop strategy, MCC congregations urge social change by political and governmental officials, while the independent, interfaith Soulforce group headed by MCC clergyman Mel White takes a more activist, confrontational approach with other religious groups.

The MCC’s Toronto church, employing an ancient British tradition of banns to announce a couple’s intent to marry as a substitute for a civil marriage license, performed two weddings of same-sex couples on January 14. Pastor Brent Hawkes said the church anticipates a court battle with Canadian officials. A month later, MCC congregations in a dozen U.S. cities held news conferences, demonstrations and celebrations for “National Freedom to Marry Day.”

When Troy Perry was interviewed by the *Century* in 1996 (September 25-October 2 issue), he characterized the then-new issue of legal marriage for gays and lesbians as too volatile and politically loaded to put atop the MCC agenda. “We will fight every step of the way, even though for many gay people, including myself, legal marriage is not a top priority,” Perry said then.

But in an interview this year at his West Hollywood church headquarters, Perry said same-gender matrimony has become the church’s foremost goal. “It’s just one of those things we will not back away from,” he said. The MCC began “holy union” rites early in its history, and mainline clergy began to conduct similar ceremonies, often surreptitiously, for lesbian or gay couples seeking a religious blessing of their partnerships. But MCC leaders changed their bylaws last year to blur the line between “holy unions” and “holy matrimony.”

The church issues news releases, sends letters and engages in other forms of political advocacy in governmental circles. In February, Perry and the pastor of a Salt Lake City MCC congregation publicly opposed a bill approved by the Utah Senate that would make it a felony to perform a prohibited marriage. The bill was aimed at protecting young girls coerced into polygamous marriages, but MCC leaders felt that such a law could be used against clergy performing same-sex unions.

When it comes to confronting religious organizations, a more aggressive but nonviolent role is played by White and Soulforce demonstrators who demand gay ordination and same-sex rites. Often joined by gay caucuses from within the targeted denomination, Soulforce staged disruptions at several church conventions last year, courting arrest in order to heighten public attention.

About two dozen protesters from Soulforce and Dignity, the Catholic gay caucus organization, spent several days in January at the Vatican protesting Rome's teaching that homosexual acts are "objectively disordered." They received no response to a request to meet with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the church's doctrinal overseer.

White, who lives in Laguna Beach, California, said Soulforce plans to return to Rome each year, and will appear at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America convention in August. Soulforce's newest tactic is at the congregational level. It is asking members and sympathizers to withhold contributions, dropping pre-printed or personal notes into collection plates to protest denominational policies against gays.

Once a ghost writer of books by Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, White eventually came to grips with his homosexuality and moved into a pastorate with the MCC. In 1999, while serving as the unpaid minister of justice for MCC headquarters, he left to form Soulforce with his partner, Gary Nixon. "We encouraged him," said Perry, who added that he supports both the ecumenical diplomacy of Gwynne Guibord and the confrontational tactics of Mel White.

If the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches shows two faces to the religious world, it also displays a patchwork of spirituality to people attracted to its congregations. The theological tenor of congregations in California, for instance, ranges from a charismatic-Pentecostal church in Long Beach to a San Jose church whose approach is oriented toward metaphysics and New Thought to a San Francisco congregation that "is darn near Unitarian," as one observer put it.

The biggest congregations, however, are not in laid-back California but in Bible Belt states like Texas and Florida where churchgoing is a habit, if not a social must. “It’s what people talk about at work—it doesn’t matter whether you are straight or gay,” said Perry. Resurrection MCC in Houston recently dedicated a new ten-acre property and is building to 1,500 in attendance, Perry said. Sunshine Cathedral MCC in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, agreed in February to purchase for \$2.15 million an existing church that includes a 875-seat sanctuary and a 250-seat chapel.

Perry was growing up in Florida when he decided to become a preacher—first a Baptist, then a Pentecostal with the Church of God. He said he was a pastor at a church in Santa Ana, California, when he confronted his homosexual nature in the mid-1960s, losing his wife and ministerial license in the process.

In October 1968, Perry placed an ad in a gay newspaper announcing a service to be held in his rented duplex in Huntington Park near Los Angeles. Twelve people showed up. Little more than a year later, the 385-seat Encore Theater in Hollywood was filled with worshipers for Sunday services. News stories about the unique congregation appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* in December 1969. Perry formed the “universal fellowship” in 1970 and dedicated its first church, in Los Angeles, in 1971.

Sociologist Steven Warner called Perry a “religious entrepreneur” in a long tradition of U.S. preachers. Perry recognized a “cultural market” of emerging gay communities and counterculture movements in the late 1960s. Melissa M. Wilcox, who studied MCC churches and earned her doctorate last year at the University of California at Santa Barbara, also credited Perry’s success to “his own charisma and organizational abilities, and the abilities of those who helped to found the church.”

In the early years, two out of three clergy came from the ranks of mainline and evangelical churches. MCC services, following Perry’s example, have attempted to serve Christians of varied backgrounds by mixing liturgical elements with enthusiastic preaching. “Perry’s sermons have all of the fire, vigor and crowd-handling savvy of the best evangelical preachers,” wrote Wilcox in the Winter 2001 issue of the journal *Religion and American Culture*.

The gay denomination’s survival and growth is an historical anomaly, Wilcox said. “Of the thousands of experimental communities founded during the 1960s and 1970s, many lasted only a few years, and few actually grew,” Wilcox wrote.

The Metropolitan Community Churches had 44,000 members at last count, but officials expect a higher total when reports are compiled for the denomination's biennial conference this July in Toronto. "We have never had a year when membership was not higher than the year before," said Eastman, a onetime Assembly of God pastor. The progress came despite the heavy toll taken by AIDS among male members a decade ago and fears prompted by some 17 arson attacks on MCC buildings through 1996, including one that killed 30 people.

The fellowship is nevertheless nearing a crossroads. Perry, who turns 61 in July, plans to retire from his post as moderator a few months after his 65th birthday. "Troy is a very impressive, very persuasive individual," said Eastman, the financial officer who is second vice moderator of MCC. "Will the charisma of the founder be transferred to leaders of the next generation?"

The MCC has already begun working to assure an orderly transition and is holding forums to solicit ideas on what kind of person should succeed Perry. Eastman, about the same age as Perry and not a candidate, will manage a transition process that draws on professional consultation from Speed Leas of the Maryland-based Alban Institute.

"Troy does not want the failures of other organizations whose founder leaves to happen in his," said Leas, who lives in northern California. "He absents himself from certain meetings as we talk about the future." Leas said that there are both men and women "who are seen as serious candidates" for nominations in a few years hence.

Lesbian members and lesbian clergy were once a small minority in the MCC. But under the prodding of women like Nancy Wilson, the MCC vice moderator who recently left a 15-year pastorate at MCC in Los Angeles to finish some book projects, the denomination gave increased voice to women and racial minorities. By the early 1990s, the ratio of men and women was roughly even, said Eastman. "We have constantly striven to be inclusive in practice, not just by using inclusive language in our services," he said.

Its mechanisms for change reminded Warner, who teaches at the University of Illinois in Chicago, of those in mainline churches. An invited speaker to the 1999 General Conference, Warner said that the decision-making assembly had elaborate rules as delegates debated their stance on gay marriage. "It felt very much like a meeting of the PCUSA [Presbyterian] General Assembly," Warner said.

Mel White, for one, said he hopes the MCC does not become so mainline that it scuttles what he called the denomination's role as a "field hospital" for the spiritually wounded. White and Perry alike have said that the membership figures are but a portion of the people that MCC churches serve.

"Very few people stay to become members," White claimed. "They stumble into an MCC church and weep for the first six months—like I did." Once they get their bearings, many return to a church tradition they are comfortable with, said White, who said he and his partner are "Episcopalians at heart" and, besides MCC membership, also belong to the large, liberal All Saints Episcopal parish in Pasadena, California.

"I used to think the MCC would have a very short life," said White. "Now I think they will always have a role as the Red Cross of the churches."