

Minnesota church learns price of supporting gays

by [Annalisa Musarra](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue

A small Minnesota church is finding out the high cost of standing up for same-sex equality—while also receiving an unexpected lifeline from the very people it decided to support.

When Pastor Oliver White voted in favor of the United Church of Christ's endorsement of same-sex marriage in 2005, 72 percent of his predominantly African-American flock at Grace Community United Church in St. Paul couldn't stand with him.

The UCC's 2005 vote, he said, was "the beginning of the end of many UCC churches." Predominantly black churches like his suffered the most, he said, since the black community "was, and still is, very homophobic."

Because of White's vote, his church developed a reputation of being a "gay church," and people stopped coming. And stopped giving.

"About 25 percent of the congregation did not come back the following Sunday, and it gradually went down from there," said White, who is African American. "Almost immediately we realized that we were hurting financially."

The church, which has shrunk to about 45 or 50 members, had to take out a mortgage to help keep its doors open. When they couldn't keep up with payments, the mortgage was sold to an investor who has the option of closing if the payments arrive even one minute late. "It's been a great burden on us," said the pastor.

On February 6, White sent 40 letters to UCC congregations across the country, asking for financial help. Out of the 40 letters, the pastor received only three responses: one for \$500, another for \$600—and then a miracle donation from Dallas.

The Cathedral of Hope United Church of Christ in Dallas, the UCC's fourth-largest congregation and one made up mostly of gays and lesbians, came to the rescue of the small Minnesota church it never knew existed by raising \$15,000 in a single Sunday—enough to keep Grace Community alive for the next several months.

The Dallas congregation for years was known as the largest church in the California-based Metropolitan Community Churches, the first denomination to be led by gay and lesbian clergy and laity. The Cathedral of Hope became part of the United Church of Christ in 2006.

The cathedral's senior pastor, Jo Hudson, revisited the letter from Minnesota sitting on her desk as she was preparing a sermon for Lent. "I didn't know how to respond to the letter at first," she said. "I began reflecting on my sermon and Black History Month . . . which led me to the letter."

Hudson said she knew that her church would have a chance to live out its stewardship theme for the year, "Every Gift Matters," and White's letter offered the chance to stand by a church that stood up for gay rights years before.

After just the first service, members contributed more than \$7,000. The second service's contribution raised the total to almost \$14,000. The church kicked in another \$1,000 to make it an even \$15,000.

"Jo called right after church and said they had raised \$13,000. Then she called again and said it was now \$15,000 and she was sending two delegates to present the money," White recalled. "It literally took my breath away."

On the last Sunday in February, two Cathedral of Hope parishioners delivered the check to White's congregation.

White

said the donations have helped with the mortgage payment but small bills still remain, such as utilities and attorney fees. "The donation from Cathedral of Hope is more than enough to carry us until June," he said, "but it is extremely important that we also address the other expenses."

Mel White, a gay rights activist and the former dean of the Dallas cathedral, said the Cathedral of Hope knows who its friends are. "It's really admirable that a large, predominantly gay church, already with a tight budget, is reaching out to a small church that stood up for gay rights," said White, founder of the gay rights group Soulforce.

Back in St. Paul, as Grace Community tries to find the words to thank the church that gave such a sizable gift, Oliver White is looking forward to developing a relationship across the country. "My friends in Dallas," he said, "won't let us fail." —RNS