

Humble first service leads to worldwide spiritual revolution

by James N. Birkitt, Jr.
Special to Q-Notes

October marks the 30th anniversary of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) — the world's oldest and largest predominantly gay spirituality organization.

During 1968, three life-changing events deeply impacted the future of a defrocked Pentecostal minister by the name of Troy D. Perry — and motivated him to look for a way to address the spiritual and social justice needs of the gay community.

First, in the midst of relationship break-up, Perry unsuccessfully attempted suicide. Second, a friend by the name of Carlos was falsely arrested by the Los Angeles Police Department for "lewd conduct" — a catch-all term used to oppress and harass the gay community. Third, in the face of police harassment, a group of gay men marched to the local Los Angeles police station and for the first time took a public stand for their dignity and civil rights.

These events took place one year before the historic Stonewall Riots and led to a dream of a church where gays and lesbians could worship in openness and authenticity.

Out of that dream, Rev. Perry held the first worship service of UFMCC on Sunday, October 6, 1968.

The ancient Hebrew prophet Zechariah wrote, "Who has despised the day of small things?" Those words certainly characterized that first MCC service as 12 worshipers gathered along with Perry in the living room of his home in Huntington Park, CA. But that small gathering held the promise of an international movement which would bring spiritual hope to hundreds of thousands of gays and lesbians — and forever change the face of Christianity.

From that first worship service, UFMCC has grown into an international movement with more than 42,000 members and adherents in 15 countries, an annual income exceeding \$15 million, and a powerful message of spiritual acceptance and affirmation for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

The celebration of UFMCC's 30th Anniversary begins this month and culminates with the dedication of the UFMCC World Center in West Hollywood, CA and the fellowship's International General Conference and World Jubilee in Los Angeles. Both events are scheduled for July 1999.

The following text was written by Rev. Perry in the early 1970s and recounts, in his own words, the conditions and events surrounding the first-ever UFMCC worship service.

Rev. Troy D. Perry

That first Sunday church service finally arrived. I stood nervously watching the door, worried to death. I had cleaned out the living room, set up some chairs, used the coffee table for an altar. I had borrowed a robe from the Congregationalist minister that I had helped out previously. He insisted that I had to preach in a robe for that first service. I had borrowed some trays from some very close friends. These were for communion.

I set up everything and stood in the kitchen. Our house was one of those "shotgun" looking houses. From the front door, you could see all the way back. I could stand in the kitchen and look all the way down the hallway to the front door. I paced nervously around in my borrowed robe and clutched the Bible and thumbed through it and riffled the pages.

Then, people began to gather. Willie Smith let them in. He greeted them and saw that they sat down. One friend of ours brought his straight brother and the brother's girlfriend. Other people showed. Most had heard about it, but finally, three people showed up who had read the ad in *The Advocate*.

There were 12 in the living room, and I walked out, and asked everyone to stand up, and I said, "We'll go before the Lord in prayer." We joined hands and prayed. Then I said, "We'll sing some hymns." We'd borrowed hymnals from the Congregationalist church where I had been a guest preacher the previous Easter.

No one knew what to expect. Everyone was as scared as I was. They all waited around for me to lead the singing and sing out. Well, I did. My mother always used to say, "My boys don't sing too well, but they sure sing loud." And that was never more true.

As we sang, I recalled Marianne Johnston's reaction to the church. She thought it was a

lovely idea, but she said, "You'll be raided during your first service."

I laughed and said, "Well, I wish the police would come in. It wouldn't bother me at all."

We sang several hymns. They sounded a little thin and sour, but the spirit was what counted. We didn't have a piano or any kind of accompaniment. It seems strange now. Willie Smith was there, but he wasn't sure he wanted to be a part of it. He still didn't know just what to think.

I recall I had reassured Willie, just before we started, that God was in this. I said, "I know now that I'm going to be in God's perfect will. Not his permissive will as I was in my past life." When we sang the second hymn, I recalled this talk. I reached that part of the service where I had to get down to cases. We again prayed.

Then I relaxed. I introduced myself. I told about where I was born, my age, my name, my marriage, my sons, my religious background, where I went to high school and college. I talked about the churches I had pastored in Florida, Illinois and California. I said that one in Santa Ana had been the last I pastored in 1963, and here we were now, after my army hitch. I told them that I was a division manager with one of the largest retailers in Los Angeles, and that I would continue as such until the church was large enough to support a full-time minister. Even then, I was sure that time would come.

Then I introduced the church. I said the church was organized to serve the religious, spiritual and social needs of the homosexual community of greater Los Angeles, but I expected it to grow to reach homosexuals wherever they might be. I made it clear that we were not a gay church — we were a Christian church, and I said that in my first sermon. I also told them that we would be a general Protestant church to be all-inclusive. Then I prayed again. And then I went into my Biblical message.

My sermon was entitled, "Be True to You." It was actually inspired by Polonius' advice to his son, Laertes, when the young man was about to leave. It's early in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, and it's from those lines that go: "This above all: To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night/the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

I then moved from Shakespeare to the story of Job, to the Book of Job, chapter 19, and I read the passages aloud.

During his trials, Job learned to be true to himself. He never wavered once he made up his mind and knew that he was called of God. His friends came and told him that he must have sinned for some reason or he wouldn't be visited by all these bad nasty things that plagued him. He lost his family. Everything terrible happened to him. But Job's remark to them was,

"Though God slay me, yet I'll trust Him. I'll come forth as pure as gold." Even going through the refiner's fire, he knew that he would make it. And I knew that we at Metropolitan Community Church could do that too.

I also preached about David and Goliath. David said that the same God that protected him when he had to do battle once with a bear and once with a lion would protect him again. Even when things look awfully bad to us in the gay community, God can help. And we can win, even though it looks like everything is stacked against us. So, I said, "Be true to you. Believe in yourself and believe in God. You have to believe in yourself as a human being first and then God is able to help you. You are not just an individual in circumstances, but you always are the created being of God."

And then I told the story of J. C. Penney, the man who developed one of the biggest retail chains in the world. I talked of his trust, his belief in the Golden Rule and what that did for him. He was true to himself, no matter how he was ridiculed. Some laughed at his mixing his belief in his version of the Christian principles with retailing. But he stuck to it and developed the second biggest retail chain in the country.

I pointed out that we must be humble hu-
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It's Masquerade's First Anniversary Halloween Party Sat. October 31st

\$5.00 cover,
Costumed individuals get in free with membership
The fun starts at midnight!!!



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Saturday, October 24 — Cherry goes to the Factory