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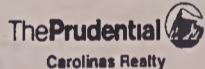
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For more information on the festival and other OutCharlotte activities, to be put on the mailing list, or to offer your help as a volunteer, call:
(704) 563-2699,

or visit our web site at www.outcharlotte.org

UFMCC

Continued from page 4

marched toward dawn, our expensive array of flowers wilted. Yet we waited. When most of us had tired, we began singing "We Shall Overcome" — over and over, louder with every refrain. The irritated police were not pleased, but Bill and Tony were released.

There was no celebration for Tony. He managed to make his way into my automobile before I saw the full extent of his mental agony. To say he was upset would be a colossal understatement. He was really upset! His clenched fists showed white knuckles. Moans of agony came from deep inside him. He refused to be touched by so much as a fingertip, and he resisted any word of consolation.

"Have you got anything to drink at your place?" Tony said while I was driving. I nodded, and 20 minutes later, as he sat at my breakfast table with early rays of the sun on his face, I let Tony pour his own glass of bourbon. When he had drunk a little of it, he was no less upset, but appeared calmer.

"Man, you know I never been arrested in my life for anything before," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "What am I going to do?" Before I could think of a reply, Tony began reflecting on something that had particularly galled him in jail. "You know," he said, "there was a Chicano cop in there, talking to me through the bars, in Spanish. He called me a puto, a male whore, and he said he was going to call where I work and tell my boss there's a puto working for him!"

"Tony, you just have to ignore..."

"I tried to ignore! But do you know how it feels?"

"Yes."

"No, Troy, you only think you know. You never been arrested! You don't know how it is when the cell door bangs shut and you're in their cage. I felt like a freak in a sideshow. Puto Latino!"

"Take it easy."

"Do you know what everybody says about queers?"

"Come on, listen, it'll work out all right."

"No, it won't," growled Tony, standing. "I'm going to get a bus and go home. Nothing's going to be all right. I don't want to hear that crap. You live in an ivory tower. We're just a bunch of dirty queers and nobody cares about dirty queers!"

"Somebody cares."

"Who?"

"God cares."

Tony had walked to the front door. He paused and uttered a terrible, painful laugh. "No, Troy," he said, "God doesn't care. What do you mean, 'God cares.' Be serious! I went to my priest for guidance when I was 15 and he

wouldn't even let me come back to Sunday school. I guess he thought I might contaminate somebody! He said I couldn't be a homosexual and a Christian, so that was the end of church. And for me, in my religion, that meant the end of God!"

"You don't need the church to speak to God."

"I do."

"Just get down on your knees and pray."

"I can't."

"God will hear you."

A look of increased sadness seemed to envelop Tony's face. In his culture, religious exaltation was all-consuming, as it was in mine, but in a different way. He could not go to God without the intercession of a priest — but I could — because I knew it was possible to meet God anywhere.

"I'll catch the bus," my friend said.

Tony shut the door. As he walked out of my line of vision, I was still Pentecostal enough that I knelt down and urgently lifted my clenched hands in prayer. Somehow I knew I was approaching the culmination of my life, and I felt a building excitement. I went out of the house. The rest of the world still seemed to be sleeping as the bright sun arose.

A short time later, I lay on the bed in my room upstairs, tired from a night without rest, but nevertheless unable to sleep. I said, "Lord! You know I've prayed and I know you love me. You've told me that. I feel your Holy Spirit. What should I be doing? I can't help thinking of Tony, alone, bitter, cut off from talking to you. I wish I could find a church somewhere that would help him. I wish there was a church somewhere for all of us who are outcast."

Suddenly, as if there was an electric spark in my head, I began asking myself, "What's wrong with Troy Perry? Why are you waiting for somebody else?"

Then I prayed a little later that same morning, harder than ever before, and in the sort of talking I do, I said, "Lord, you called me to preach. Now I think I've seen my niche in the ministry. We need a church, not a homosexual church, but a special church that will reach out to the lesbian and gay community. A church for people in trouble, and for people who just want to be near you. So, if you want such a church started, and you seem to keep telling me that you do, well then, just let me know when."

Whereupon, I received my answer to an impossible dream. A still, small voice in my mind's ear spoke, and the voice said, "Now." ▼



[The full story of the founding and expansion of UFMCC is told in the book, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*, written by Rev. Perry and published by St. Martin's Press. Ordering information is available online by sending an e-mail to ResourceCenter@ufmcc.org.]

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