

The Front Page

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12th General Conference of UFMCC

by Steve Warren

The 12th General Conference of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, held July 1-7 in Sacramento, California, focused on human rights and a Christian response to the AIDS crisis.

The biennial international conference, held in Sacramento, CA the first week in July, featured a daylong "Focus on AIDS" in the midst of an intense week of business that included the adoption of a revised internal structure to accommodate the continued growth of the denomination.

The theme of the conference was "Free to Be," from Galatians 5:1, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

A recurring theme at the AIDS presentation was that the gay community is laying the groundwork in AIDS research, treatment and support, and will become an increasingly important resource as the disease spreads further among heterosexuals. MCC has different roles to play in different communities, according to its founder and moderator, Rev. Troy D. Perry: "We have churches where there aren't even gay bars.... We're the only game in town." In such areas the church must be active in education and support.

In larger cities MCC can work in concert with other local organizations, helping to fill service gaps and providing pastoral care and hope. "You can live about 40 days without food," Perry said. "You can live about three days without water and three minutes without air, but you can't live for one second without hope."

Perry's response to the "wrath of God" theory of AIDS from the "religious right" is simple and unequivocal: "We don't believe in a theology of the common cold in our denomination. God does not give us disease.... AIDS is no more God's gift to homosexuals than sickle cell anemia is to black people or toxic shock syndrome is to women or legionnaire's disease is to American legion members for being too patriotic."

Obviously concerned about the political impact of AIDS and talk of quarantine, he vowed, "If they can shut down any gay businesses they can shut down our churches.... We're going to fight that to the death."



Ordained at UFMCC's General Conference XII was Rev. Lynn Guerra, Pastor of MCC Charlotte, here being congratulated by Rev. Troy Perry. (Photo by Steve Wilson.)

"I know I'm healthy. I can feel it in my body," said Rev. A. Steven Pieters in announcing the remission of his AIDS-related cancers during the conference. He is one of 12 who have been on an experimental protocol involving the drug Suramin which has been used for 40 years to treat African sleeping sickness.

Pieters, who is attached to MCC in the Valley in North Hollywood, was diagnosed with AIDS in April 1984. He had both Kaposi's Sarcoma and Lymphoma. After six weeks on the Suramin chemotherapy protocol, he said, all traces of both cancers are gone as is the HTLV-III virus from his blood. His T-cells have doubled, his lymph nodes are gone and his bone marrow is clean. In the face of a "life-threatening illness ... I can experience hope and joy and peace," he beamed, "because God is greater than AIDS."

Attributing his apparent cure at least in part to the power of prayer — "God did not give me this disease. God is with me against this disease" — Pieters admitted that the cancers could return when he is taken off Suramin in

November, that the virus could merely be "hiding in my central nervous system." If that is the case, "I have had a summer of health and life. God gave it to me and nobody can take it away."

The results have been less dramatic, he said, for the other 11 patients on the Suramin protocol, all of whom had different symptoms from his, and some have had severe side effects as he was warned he might. His doctor is scheduled to announce the details of the experiment late in July to the National Cancer Institute, he said. "She's going to tell them it proves one of three things: either a) Suramin is effective in treating AIDS in some people; b) the old medical joke that the first experiment in a series is always successful; or c) there is a God."

Perry noted that MCC of the Resurrection in Houston distributes free condoms to members — "and they're one of our most conservative churches! We're the only church in America that does it. What is the Roman Catholic church going to do when (AIDS) reaches their members?"

Other panel members and some of their remarks included:

Dr. Martin D. Finn, Medical Director for Public Health, Los Angeles County Dept. of Health Services: Much has been accomplished in the four years public health officials have been dealing with AIDS. While a vaccine is a long way off, "What is open to us now is a course of prevention." Studies have shown a high incidence of the HTLV-III virus in gay and bisexual men in L. A. (54%) and Berkeley (47%). With about half of us carrying this virus already, "We have to protect the other 50 percent." An "up-and-coming problem" is "school children with AIDS."

Kate Duzman, Executive Director, Sacramento AIDS Foundation: Three conclusions: "1) Things will get worse before they get better. 2) This disease is preventable. 3) The government is not doing enough." In educating people about AIDS, "Validate their fear of AIDS. Validate their fear of dying. In our culture that's not an okay thing to do.... When I speak to heterosexuals they're confused because a woman is doing AIDS education. Once they're confused you can teach them a lot.... When they tell you that AIDS is God's wrath on gay people, you ask why there are so many more heterosexuals than lesbians who have AIDS. Is it true lesbians are God's chosen people?... This is a disease. This is not our disease. There are men, women and children of every age and sexual persuasion on every continent in the world who have AIDS. This is news to most people."

Dr. Dennis J. McShane, Asst. Professor of Medicine, Stanford University Medical Center: "We all have AIDS because it's in our community.... AIDS is going to be around for a long time, so get comfortable with it.... I can't do much for my patients in terms of a cure, but what I can do is talk with them and touch them. There's a lot of healing in the hands." While the HTLV-III antibody test is necessary for safeguarding the blood supply, it can do more harm than good to individuals who are advised of positive results. As for "Safe Sex" preventing AIDS, "We really don't know. A lot of (the information) out there is just what will prevent the spread of any venereal disease."

Stan Hadden, Legislative Aide to California Sen. David Roberti: "identify the (politicians) whose minds can be changed. Stop beating up on our friends for not doing enough." Gov. Deukmejian cut about half of

continued on page 11

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