

## Spiritual Celebration

by Jeri Lee-Hostetler

"I wanted to make it very clear," says Rev. Delores Berry, "that I never felt rejected by God for being a lesbian!"

Nor does she believe that the Bible, correctly understood, promotes or approves of homophobia. "I don't believe that the Scriptures tell us that our sexuality is negative in God's sight."

When Delores Berry first came to Portland in September, 1983, she came to "candidate" at Metropolitan Community Church. By the time she left, just less than a week later, she had agreed to move three thousand miles from Newport News, Virginia, to become the new senior pastor of MCC in Portland.

Someone hung a banner outside the church before she left. It read, in a blaze of color, "Thank you, Rev. Delores, for letting God love us through you!"

It had been that kind of a week. Delores Berry is that kind of a person.

When I asked her for an interview in response to Dennis Peterson's article in the second issue of *JUST OUT*, this is what happened.

JERI: You read Dennis Peterson's article?

REV. DELORES: Yes.

JERI: What did you think of it?

REV. DELORES: It's not unusual to read about someone who feels that they have been cured of homosexuality or cured of some other thing that they cannot deal with being or having.

I didn't feel negative. I didn't feel angry. I'm not going to say I don't believe the person, because I don't even know if the person was really homosexual in the first place.

I look at all of those things, and I felt... that this was someone else's story. It was someone else's life, and I'm not going to deny their right to have those feelings.

JERI: How about *your* story? What church were you raised in?

REV. DELORES: It would be better to say "churches." My mother was more Methodist. And my father was more inclined to be involved in Baptist churches. Some of the churches weren't really affiliated with any specific denomination. Because they both took me to different types of churches, I was able as a very young child to choose what I wanted to believe, and to choose where I wanted to go with them. It was very open and very free.

In growing up, I've been in Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Jehovah's Witness... I settled in the CME Church — Christian Methodist Episcopal.

JERI: About what age were you then?

REV. DELORES: About 16 when I settled there. I stayed in that church until I was 25, when I came to MCC.

JERI: What about your personal faith journey? Not just church, but your personal relationship with God?

REV. DELORES: My parents put a lot of energy into helping me develop outside the church as well. One of the things that my father would tell me — he'd say it every now



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and then, I guess to make sure that I'd never forget — in his very gentle way, he would say, "Remember, the church will do things that God would never *think* about doing."

So I grew up knowing that I could trust God. And I grew up with a lot of emphasis on Jesus.

My experience in my faith journey was that God loved me, and that God was taking care of me... and my family and friends. I knew that God made me, and that God was not ashamed of me. As I acknowledged all that, my growing-up years were a very restful time in God.

Something different happened after my father died. I got angry with God.

JERI: How old were you then?

REV. DELORES: I was a month into my fourteenth year.

For about a year there was a time when I totally rejected the church and rejected God. I was angry that God would do such a horrible, horrible thing. That was a crucial time in my faith journey.

But it was a time when God kept sending people with messages for me. They would say things like, "You know, God loves you," or "God didn't take your father away to hurt you." This kept happening through that whole time, and I learned that I could be angry with God, and God would still care about me.

So I know now that I was never completely disconnected from God — although I thought I was, at the time.

JERI: Will you talk some about your faith journey in relation to your sexuality?

REV. DELORES: Well... I was aware of my sexuality at about the same time that I was aware that I had arms and legs. I was very young when I realized that I was very comfortable about being around women. By the time

I was in the second grade, I *knew* that I had this real strong attraction to girls. And I had this *mad* crush on my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Flood.

So I was growing up, and I was feeling God taking care of me. I was also acknowledging that I had this strong attraction to women. But the attraction to women never broke the chain of God's taking care of me.

I didn't grow up feeling that God was rejecting me because of my sexuality. I grew up knowing that the *church* would reject me. But my father had already told me that the church would do things that God would never think about doing.

I never felt disconnected from God because of my sexuality. But my faith journey in my sexuality came to a crushing halt when I realized that I would be kicked out of the church — and I felt very called to the clergy.

So, at the age of 20, when I started in my ministry in the CME Church, what I did was disconnect as a sexual being. I spent five years of celibacy, not because I felt that God wanted me to do that, but because I knew that the church would denounce me and throw me out of its ministry if I were to be openly sexual in any way.

Yet in the meantime, a slow but powerful knowledge was growing. I was discovering that there was a big part of my life that I was denying. God had given me a gift, and I was not accepting that gift.

That's when I came out.

But I want to be very clear that in all of that I never felt that I was damned by God for being a sexual being — or for being a lesbian.

JERI: So what you are saying is that you basically disagree with the concept that accepting your sexuality... accepting yourself as you are... is somehow against the will of God?

REV. DELORES: I do not agree with that at all. I don't believe that our sexuality fell out of the sky. I believe that whatever we are, that is a gift from God. I celebrate the fact that I am a lesbian. I celebrate it as a gift from God.

And I ache for people who cannot celebrate that, and celebrate openly.

I don't feel that God frowns on our sexuality. If I believed that, then I'd have to believe that God made a mistake in creating us, and I don't believe God makes mistakes.

Nor do I believe that God gave us up to some kind of "vile affection." I don't believe that I'm a "vile" person. I know very few "vile" people, and the people that I know who are vile, some of them are homosexual, some of them are heterosexual.

I don't believe the Scriptures tell us that our sexuality is negative in God's sight — although it doesn't really matter what I believe. What matters is the truth, and the *truth* is that the Scriptures don't tell us that.

I know, too, that MCC is not the only denomination that has come to that realization. There are Lutherans and Catholics and Episcopal people and others who are understanding that God does not condemn the homosexual.

The problem is — and this is what we have to deal with — that there are people who just cannot believe that God would smile on something that *they* feel is so unright.

It's just like someone thinking that God could not possibly care for Black people... or God could not possibly care for Jews.

That's people's stuff. That's not God's stuff. JERI: Believing that, you no doubt get into situations where you have to deal with people who disagree with you. How do you deal with those people?

REV. DELORES: I give them the facts, if they're willing to hear them.

Then I tell them what they tell me. "I'm praying for you. I believe that God will reveal God's right and God's power in your life. I pray that you will be able to put down your anger and stop denying the existence and the rights of God's children.

"I will keep you in my prayers, but in the meantime, I will continue to vote in the way that will encourage you to do right by all humanity. I will continue to march and to sing and to shout and to write and to preach and to teach — so that you may be free of the oppression that you need to lay on others."

That's what I tell them. And then I take their hand.

JERI: If they will take it.

REV. DELORES: Most of the time, they do. I've had very few times when I've felt completely rejected.

JERI: What about recommended reading? Would you recommend any particular books for someone who wanted to look at this question objectively?

REV. DELORES: The first thing I would recommend is reading the Bible... and getting a Bible dictionary... and getting a concordance or a dictionary that also offers you Greek and Hebrew.

I could recommend books like *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*, by Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott.

There is a book called *The Gay American History Book*.

There is really a nice little book that's called *Straight Answers About Homosexuality for Straight Readers*, although I don't particularly like the word "straight" in referring to heterosexuals.

JERI: Why don't you like that word?

REV. DELORES: It means to me that if they are straight, then someone else is crooked.