

To know us is to love us

by Jeri Lee-Hosteller

When Troy Perry first began to suspect that he was a homosexual, he made an appointment to discuss the issue with his pastor. After about an hour of talk, the pastor's eyes lit up, "Just marry a good woman, Troy. That'll take care of those problems." Troy followed the pastor's advice so well that he ended up marrying the man's daughter. The marriage did not last. More than anything else, perhaps it was a detour on the road that was going to lead Troy Perry to the discovery of who he was and the worldwide ministry to which God had called him.

When he was in Portland early in February, Troy talked to me about that road, about their founding of Metropolitan Community Church, and about his own faith journey.

Jeri: Troy, can we start with your faith journey? How did you come to see yourself as a homosexual? And how did that relate to your faith?

Troy: First let me say that I started preaching when I was thirteen years old. I have always felt that this call to ministry was with me, and it was something I had to do.

So it was out of that concept of myself as a Christian and as a person called by God to minister that I began to try to deal with my sexuality, while I was still in high school. That was when I had that conference with my pastor and began to try so hard to follow his advice.

My wife and I attended school for a while; we had two sons; and we moved to California. That was when I finally came to terms with who I am. After reading some materials on homosexuals, I recognized that the feelings in the material I read were my feelings. My wife and I discussed this, and we decided that the only answer was for us to separate.

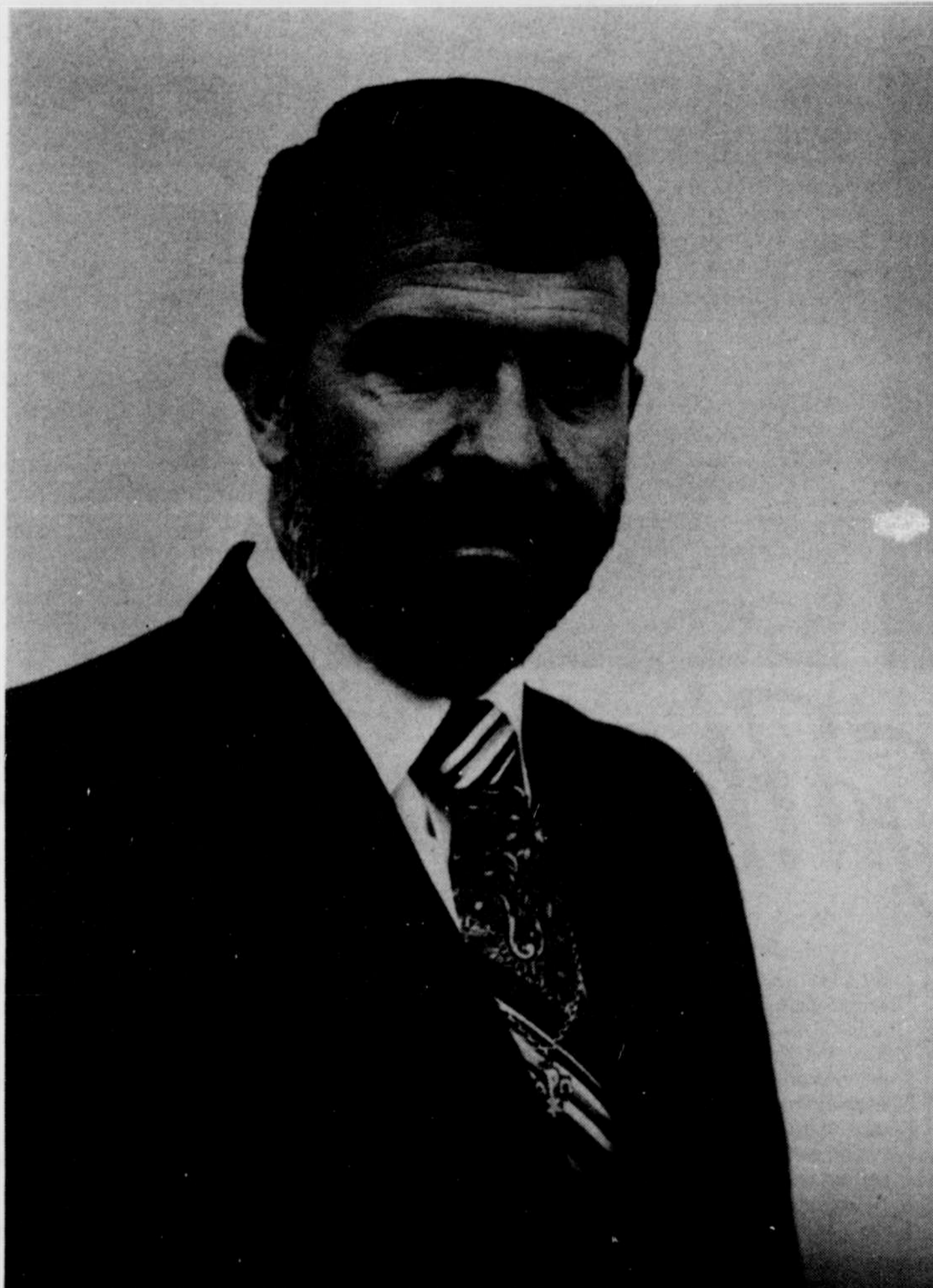
In this process, I was excommunicated from the church that I was pastoring in Santa Ana. I moved to Los Angeles. My wife and family moved east.

Later, I was drafted into the U.S. military. I spent two years in the army, and I struggled the whole time with the problem of me. I knew I was called to preach — but had been told that God would never love a homosexual. It just didn't fit together, but I kept wrestling with it.

After the army, I moved back to L.A. and, for the first time in my life, I fell deeply, madly in love. It only lasted six months, but I had never experienced that kind of intensity for another person.

When it broke up, that also was intense, and I reacted the way many gay people do. I decided nobody loved me. God certainly couldn't. I didn't see any signs that anyone else did. That left *nobody*.

I climbed into the bathtub, took a razor



Rev. Troy Perry

Photo by Roland Bynum

The church in America is a sacred cow. People don't like to say that, but it's true. The church controls even the civil laws in this country.

blade, cut both of my wrists, and sat back, hoping I would bleed to death. My roommate came home and put an end to the hope.

He heard the water running, and when I didn't answer, he broke down the door. After that, there were neighbors there, and a trip to the hospital. Strangely, it was while I was in the hospital, waiting for them to sew up those cuts, that things began to come together for

me. Someone walked up to me, shoved a magazine in my face, and said, "I don't know why you've done this. It was real dumb! But I did it, too. Then I went on and made something of myself." It was hardly sympathetic, but when she added one more thought, it did what I needed: "Why don't you just look up?"

Coming from my church background, I heard that as a real code word. It meant

something different to me than she intended. It meant look up to God, and I did exactly that.

For the first time in a good while, I decided to pray, and I said, "God, I ask forgiveness."

I felt a joy I hadn't known in years. The next day after I got home — the tourniquets had been taken off my arms; the wrists had been sewn up — I was lying in bed thinking about what had happened, and all at once that peace and that feeling of joy hit me again. And at the same time, I was thinking, "God, You can't do this to me. I'm a practicing homosexual. The church has told me that You can't love me!"

"Troy," came the answer, both gentle and firm. "Troy, don't tell me what I can and cannot do. I love you. You're my son." I knew right then and there that I could be gay and Christian, and never again would I apologize for it.

Jeri: So how did you come to start Metropolitan Community Church?

Troy: A friend of mine was arrested. After he got out of jail, he told me, "There's one thing I've learned from this: nobody likes a gay person." I tried to tell him that God cares, and he laughed in my face.

That was when I knelt and said, "All right, Lord. If you want to see a church started, a church with ministry to the gay and lesbian community, you just let me know when.

God's voice answered, "Now."

With that I took out an ad in the paper, and gave my home address. Twelve people showed up for that first worship service. Today we have over 200 churches in ten countries, and we have over 37,000 members now.

Jeri: What was your dream in the beginning?

Troy: My vision was to have a church where people could come and worship God as totally whole persons, not having to worry about who they were. I wanted to see a worship experience where no one would ever say, "Aha! That one over there is a gay person . . . or that one is a lesbian."

I felt early on that the Gospel God had given me to preach was a three-pronged Gospel. The first prong was salvation. The second prong, which was just as important, was what I call the Gospel of community. We who were not a people, God has made a people; part of the purpose of MCC is to be family to those who don't have any family. The third prong, just as important as the other two, was the Gospel of Christian social action: where we find oppression, we want to bring change.

Jeri: If that was your dream in the beginning, did any of what actually happened surprise you?

Troy: When MCC started, I had no idea we would grow as rapidly as we did. I never suspected there would be such a need for us. In my wildest dreams, I didn't know that. Actually, the thing I worried about most was, "God, what if we hold a service or two and nobody comes back?" I was scared to death we would fail. Once I got past that, I knew we were going to be all right.

Jeri: People call this a gay church. Was that