

## Twenty candles for MCC

*"We listen to each other and speak the truth, but we realize we don't have all the truth."*

— The Rev. Elder Troy D. Perry

BY STEVE WARREN

Cheers, challenges and congratulations filled the air as the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches celebrated its 20th anniversary on October 6 at a lavish, \$100-a-plate dinner at the Registry Hotel in Universal City, California, with more than 700 in attendance.

Still presiding over what is the oldest and largest institution serving the lesbian and gay community is its founder, the Rev. Elder Troy D. Perry, who has seen the denomination grow from 12 persons meeting in his living room to a worldwide outreach with more than 40,000 members.

Following a parade of testimonies from such diverse MCC members as an English missionary, a Mormon businessman turned gay activist, an Australian transvestite, a black lesbian, French-Canadian and Chicano gay men and a heterosexual grandmother, the Rev. Malcolm Boyd, an openly gay Episcopal priest and successful author, declared, "What I just heard here is the book of Acts in 1988!"

Boyd, who has always been close to MCC without being part of it, said he was asked to be critical of the church. Without putting down what MCC has done or is doing, he veiled his criticism in charges to do more in five areas. "Speak the truth with love" to the gay and religious communities, he exhorted, even though many people in both are hostile to MCC's work.

"We cannot live without safe sex," Boyd said. "MCC, address this. Offer us leadership." Also, "Be more open to other cultures. . . universal fellowship is where the future lies." The AIDS challenge, he pointed out, is bringing lesbians and gay men closer together and expanding the role of women in MCC's ministry.

Boyd pushed his own agenda of gay and lesbian theology, which, he predicted, will "change the face of theology as we know it." To this end he announced upcoming joint ventures between MCC's Samaritan College and his own Institute of Gay Spirituality and Theology. "MCC," he encouraged in closing, "keep the church a place where Jesus is welcome [and] can be himself."

Far less critical was the Rev. Susan Turley Moore of the General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches, which was supportive of MCC's unsuccessful bid to join the National Council of Churches. In drafting her church's opinion she became widely quoted for her contention that if the frequency with which a law is

mentioned in Scripture is any criterion, "pork eaters have a lot more to worry about than gay men and lesbians."

San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos flew south to offer his congratulations: "It took Moses 40 years to reach the promised land. Troy did it in 20. . . . A year before Stonewall you were prophets of liberation."

Agnos spoke about old laws that were used to discriminate against lesbians and gays: "In Oklahoma you couldn't get a license to be a hairdresser. . . . That might explain a lot about a former Miss Oklahoma, Anita Bryant."

He addressed his own refusal to let San Francisco head the Olympics until the United States Olympics Committee withdraws its opposition to the Gay Games's use of the "O" word. The Gay games were organized, he said, "with the same spirit of community pride and pursuit of excellence as the Black Olympics, Armenian-American Olympics, Japanese-American Olympics, Chinese-American Olympics, even the Eskimo Olympics. No one sued them, but they sued the Gay Olympics and called it a trademark issue."

When Agnos mentioned the Names Project Quilt, which was returning to Washington, D.C., that weekend, he said it would be five times as big as a year ago. A few persons started to applaud the statistic before realizing what it meant and lapsing into an embarrassed silence. Agnos told some Quilt stories of his own and left the church members with this thought: "There's no question that history will record this epidemic. The only question is, how will it record your role in it?"

The speeches were delivered against a painted blow-up of the *Time* magazine cover from early this year that looked back at 1986. The Rev. Elder Freda Smith, who was master of ceremonies for the evening, said she had written to protest the magazine's exclusion of MCC's founding from its list of the year's major events. Many of those things will have been forgotten in a hundred years, she predicted, while the impact of MCC's ministry will stand.

In addition to music by MCC members Leroy Dysart, Marsha Stevens and the Rev. Danny Ray, Holly Near sang four songs. "If we didn't want to be activists we might as well have stayed on a spiritual plane. You don't have to pay rent up there," she said.

Perry rose to speak around midnight, four hours after the start of the event. By his side was Phillip De Bleck, his lover of "three years, four months and six days." Rather than giving a speech Perry referred the audience to his

remarks in the printed program they had received, but he couldn't help adding a few anecdotes. One concerned his attendance at a reception for religious leaders during the pope's visit to Columbia, South Carolina, last year. When a conservative clergyman challenged his right to be there, Perry responded, "The Catholic church has invited all the bastard children back home, and they don't care if you're a straight bastard or a gay bastard!"

Death has been much on Perry's mind lately. His mother and one of his earliest MCC colleagues, the Rev. Elder "Papa" John Hose, both of whom attended the dinner, have been gravely ill for some time, and among the friends

he has lost to AIDS recently have been fellow gay activists Dan Bradley and Leonard Matlovich. They gave him heart to go on, he said. "With our dying breath, we will never give up the struggle. . . . We will win!"

What makes MCC different from other churches, Perry said, is that MCC doesn't claim to have all the answers. "We listen to each other and speak the truth, but we realize we don't have all the truth."

Perhaps Holly Near expressed it best when she said, "Just as music can work for or against people, so religion can work for or against people."

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