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What's in a name?

*Learning the differences between true unity and conformity
within the Metropolitan Community Church*

by Steve Warren

Should a church founded for and by men who called each other "Mary" and "Miss Thing" feel threatened by people addressing the Deity as "Goddess?" The question arose last summer for the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) and is expected to be a hot issue in 1993 at the denomination's next biennial General Conference. The 20th Anniversary District Conference of the church's Northwest District, held May 15-17 in Salem, Oregon, offered a preview of how the debate is likely to go.

The district honored its past leaders while electing a new one, and took advantage of being in the Oregon capital the weekend before the primary election to hold a rally on the Capitol steps against the homophobic campaign of the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA).

The rally opened with Rev. Gary Wilson, pastor of MCC of Portland, explaining for the sake of out-of-staters, "The OCA is a radical right-wing group that passes itself off as being connected with conservative Christianity. They have as much to do with Christianity as my dog has to do with cats...They are truly frightening."

Besides testing the waters with city charter amendments in the Springfield and Corvallis primaries, the OCA is attempting to qualify an initiative for the statewide ballot in November. It would lump "homosexuality" with "pedophilia, sadism and masochism" as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse..." and forbid the use of government funds "to promote, encourage or facilitate...these behaviors." It would also exclude "sexual preference" from any kind of protected status under law.

Rev. Marguerite Scroggie, pastor of MCC Eugene, which also serves Springfield, said the local "religious community has rallied around us," giving incredible support to the fight against the OCA.

Rev. Elder Troy D. Perry, founder and moderator of UFMCC, addressed the crowd of about 150, many of them Oregon voters. He said the organization behind the OCA is trying to pass the same measure in Colorado in hopes of going nationwide if they succeed in these states. He stressed the need to nip them in the bud.

"It will not be pretty. It will not be fun," Perry told the rally, based on his experience fighting similar measures in California and other places. "You may win and you may not, but you cannot give up the fight."

The conference weekend may have marked the turning point in what had been shaping up as a fight for Perry within his denomination. At last summer's Phoenix conference, MCC members whose beliefs may be beyond the fringe even for this eclectic church began caucusing. The word "goddess" pushed Perry's buttons, and he preached, "This church has nothing to do with Goddess worship as I understand it...I do not believe Goddess worship is consistent with the Christian church."

As the controversy was carried back to local congregations, dialogue developed. New Life MCC in Berkeley brought a resolution, "The Salem Statement," to the Northwest District Conference. Citing historical bases, it would broaden the church's policy of inclusivity to permit imaging God "as feminine spirit or genderless spirit," and referring to the Deity as "He," "She," "God" or "Goddess."

Elder Larry Rodriguez of Los Angeles, who would later describe the weekend as "a landmark

conference," set the tone for it with a prophetic Friday night sermon that stressed the difference between unity, which permits people to band together despite their difference, and conformity, which forces them to be alike. The former is MCC policy, the latter how fundamentalists operate.

A forum on "Diversity" allowed the expression of diverse views. At first everyone seemed to be looking for points they could all agree on. Rev. Barry Wichman, pastor of New Life MCC in Berkeley, spoke of our "journey out of patriarchy." Golden Gate MCC pastor Rev. Buddy Truluck said, "If I'm free to have an altar call, (MCC of San Francisco Rev.) Jim Mitulski's got to be free to do whatever he thinks is right in his church."

Rev. Yolanda Allen of Mother River Spirit, a special ministry in Albion, Calif., called herself "a righteous, Afrocentric dyke and...child of the Goddess," leading Rev. John Torres of Guerneville, Calif., to make the first negative comment of the day: "I'm not comfortable with the word 'goddess.'" Rev. Michael England of Maranatha MCC in San Lorenzo, Calif., offered, "It's the people and practices that made me uncomfortable to start with that have caused me to grow."

By the time The Salem Statement reached the conference floor for a vote it had garnered considerable support, but some delegates expressed the fear that their congregations might need time and education before they could accept it. As a result the resolution was tabled.

When Rev. Perry preached on Saturday night, his theme was "Always listen to the voice of God." It was apparent he'd been hearing God speak through those assembled at the conference, because his tone had softened considerably with regard to accepting diversity within the Fellowship. The lesbian and gay Christian community is too small to be allowed to fragment as the Christian church has historically. Perry didn't mention the word "Goddess" specifically but said, "We cannot be the new Pharisees and hypocrites...What we've got to do is be honest and talk with each other...and find a safe space to do it. If this creates tension around theological issues," he continued, "architects will tell you that it's the tension that holds the building up."

He also spoke of the recent looting and arson that had come within a few blocks of both MCC Los Angeles and UFMCC headquarters. It made him determined, he said, to advance the work of White People Healing Racism, an organization unique to MCC. "Only whites can be racist," Perry said, "because we control the power in this country."

The conference adopted a Five Year Plan for growth and development within the district, and elected Rev. Thomas Bigelow as District Coordinator to fill the year remaining in the term of Rev. Ed Sherriff, who resigned after five years. Chuck Harvey of Portland, who has been acting as D.C., was reelected to the post of Assistant Director Coordinator.

Bigelow has been serving as D.C. of the Southeast District. He will move to Seattle from Florida and assume his new position at the beginning of July. A former Episcopal priest, he said he hopes to visit all 41 churches in the district during the year.

He'll find 41 diverse congregations, but if the spirit of diversity continues to grow, Bigelow may look back on this tour one day and realize he hadn't seen anything yet.