

# DEMPSEY'S DETERMINATION

The Rev. Marsha Dempsey is an earnest addition to MCC Portland by T.K. Mantese

**P**erched in her comfortable office above the funkier section of Northeast Broadway, the Rev. Marsha Dempsey describes the circuitous path that led her to Portland.

Most recently affiliated with the Christ Covenant Metropolitan Community Church of Decatur, Ga., this soft-spoken and articulate woman has taken on the dual role of director of congregational life and executive assistant to the pastor at MCC Portland, whose congregation is primarily comprised of sexual minorities.

A third-generation Presbyterian, Dempsey obtained her master's in divinity from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kentucky. She was not out during the 14 years that she served in the Presbyterian ministry in Hous-

ton and female staff and hire someone who could relate to the women in the community.

Since Dempsey's arrival in the Rose City, MCC Portland's female membership has increased to 40 percent of the congregation.

Dempsey, who has a calm, warm presence and exemplary listening skills, was not hired to minister at the altar. As the pastor's executive assistant, she is responsible for office, staff and volunteer management. Her single biggest responsibility as director of congregational life is coordination of the Sunday worship schedule—deciding, for example, who will do the call to worship, the invitation to the offering, and serve communion.

Even the most determined atheist should witness the poignant communion ceremony at

biblical interpretation of the past and future precludes one from Christlike living in the present.

Take Genesis, for instance, and the tired refrain, "It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

Says Dempsey: "It's a story, and I don't believe it. It's a cultural myth. Hebrews handed down stories to explain how it all began. In Hebrew, *Adam* means 'humankind' and *Eve* means 'mother of all living.' They're archetypal figures, not literal people. I don't buy the Bible hook, line and sinker."

Dempsey says the story of Adam and Eve illustrates our interdependence.

"God did not think Adam should be alone," she says. "We all live in community and need each other to be human, to discover who we are.

There is much more to the story than 'God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.' It's a good thing Eve's name wasn't Matilda."

She also believes that after death the soul or the spirit returns to its source: God. And she takes an unconventional stance, saying of eternal damnation: "To think that we could ever do anything so horrendous that God would need to punish us eternally, not just for a day or two, is far-fetched."

Because we are familiar with conditional love, Dempsey says, we tend to project that onto God.

"God's love is unconditional," she insists. "It's not a human love."

Dempsey adds that she wishes all churches would address real societal problems, like domestic abuse and drugs.

Her perspective on family values, while not unusual for those who have endured supercilious condemnation from self-righteous heterosexuals, is informed by biblical authority.

"People want to look to the Bible for family values. Which family value are we talking about? Abraham had a concubine, fathered a child by her, then kicked her and the child out when his wife got jealous," she notes. "Jacob had two wives and favored the children of one over the other. David had Bathsheba brought to his chamber then arranged to have her husband killed so he could marry her."

The so-called traditional family in which the wife stays at home while the husband goes to work is a recent invention, says Dempsey.

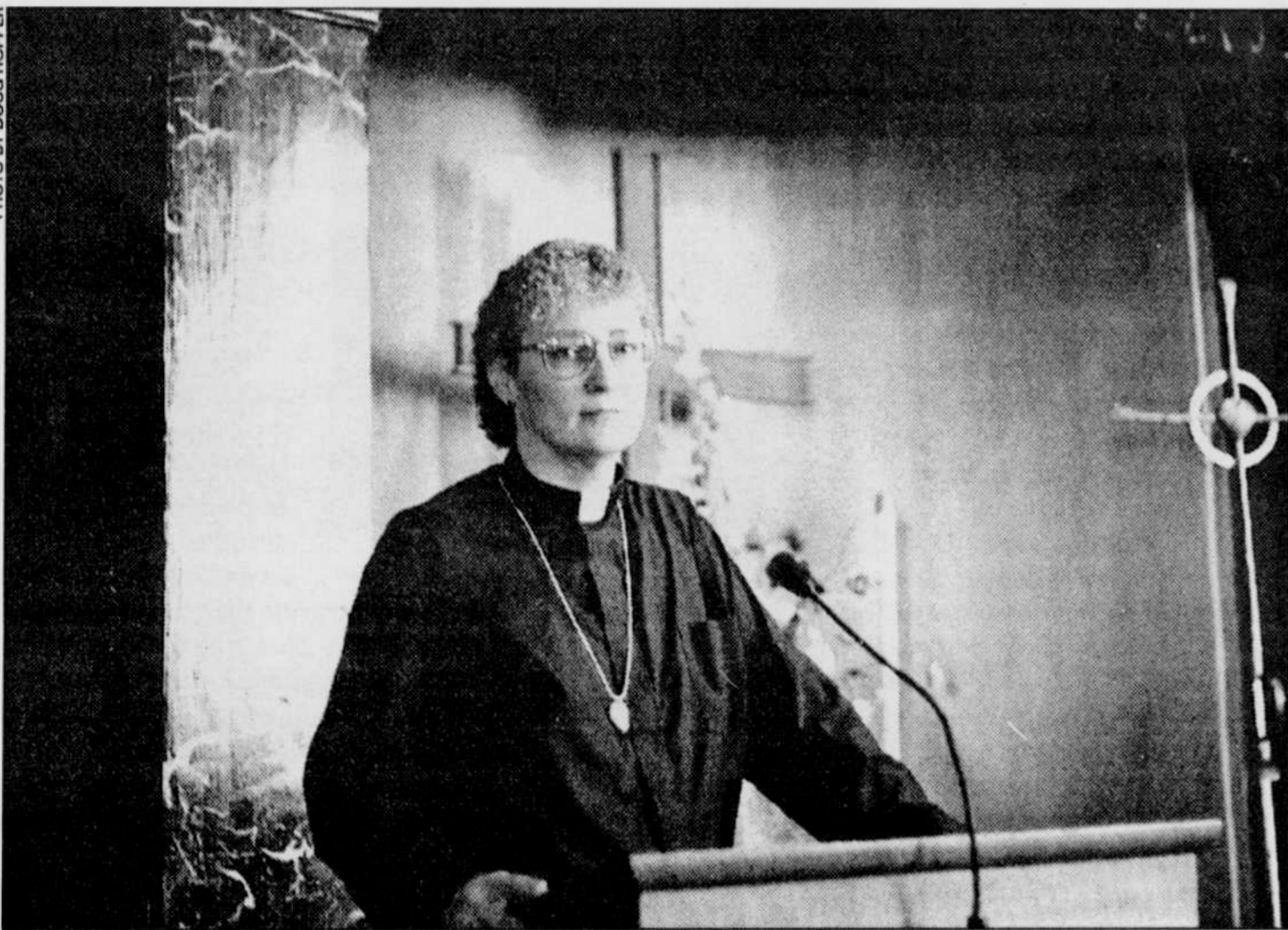
She explains: "About three or four hundred years ago, everybody worked unless they were landed gentry. Nannies raised the kids in England for centuries. American Indian elders raised the children because the tribe members of childbearing age had the strength to do the work. The generation in the middle was the one that worked."

Down the road, Dempsey would like to see MCC encourage people to vote.

"Our community is larger than people think it is," she says. "We need to exercise our right to vote and be involved in the process enough so that the next time a candidate for office is gay or lesbian it is not an issue."

She would also like to see the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches receive member status in the World Council of Churches.

"It would put us on the road to acceptance," she states. "We're one of the fastest growing denominations in the Christian world. We have a lot to offer people."



The Rev. Marsha Dempsey

ton. The sadness she feels about the loss of her spiritual home is evident when she talks about that church's policy against ordaining openly gay and lesbian clergy.

"They are fighting tooth and nail over this issue, and it became clear to me that there was no place for me in the Presbyterian Church," she tells *Just Out*. "You have to choose: Am I going to be true to myself or be false to the world? It was a very difficult decision. I had to leave the Presbyterian Church."

Dempsey returned to Tulsa, Okla., her hometown, in the spring of 1994. Shortly thereafter she met her spouse, Amy, whom she eventually joined in Kansas City, Mo., and married in an outreach ministry of the United Methodist Church. (The pastor who presided over the ceremony has had charges filed against her for performing gay and lesbian marriages and has since left the Methodist Church.)

Two years ago, Dempsey became a minister with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. She completed requirements for her credentials and received ordination and reaffirmation of her vows in Atlanta.

Although the Pacific Northwest was as familiar to her as "the backside of the moon," Dempsey says, she remembers that she could not get the Portland job opening out of her mind. The advertisement encouraged women to apply because MCC Portland's pastor, the Rev. Roy Cole, hoped to strike a balance between male

an MCC, if only to observe what is affected or nonexistent in many churches: a real expression of Christ's love.

The communicant is embraced warmly by the ministers and offered a personal prayer. The genuineness of the comfort, love and acceptance that is expressed during this quiet and intimate ceremony is undeniable. It is a truly communal happening in which disciple and guide contemplate, get close and speak from their hearts.

Dempsey does not know of any other church that serves communion quite this way.

"Some of the people who come to [Metropolitan Community Churches] are so wounded in one way or another that for them to be able to come forward and partake of communion—and not be made to feel that they are somehow unacceptable, and not believe any of the garbage that they have had heaped upon them—to have access to the sacrament is very important," she explains.

Dempsey also contrasts the MCC approach to that of mainstream churches, noting that many churches emphasize doctrine above God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

"I would never put the words of St. Paul above the words of Jesus," she says. "It is important for Christians to emphasize the love of Jesus."

Her unorthodox beliefs about biblical history and post-mortem travels suggest that literal



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