

northwest

For All the Saints

MCC beatifies holy gays

by Patricia L. MacAodha

A saint has historically been defined as "a holy or godly person." What does that mean in terms of a revolutionary church that conservative Christians would consider neither holy nor godly?

As Metropolitan Community Church of Portland prepares itself to call a new senior pastor, the transition team has plunged into a process of recalling its past, as a means of informing the future. During the Lenten season, MCC of Portland has been honoring the memories of "people who made significant contributions through work and engaged ministry," says the Rev. Ron LaRocque. The list includes both laity and clergy. All are deceased.

The Rev. A. Austin Amerine, Jimmy Bryan, José Montoya, Harriet Barshovsky, Fran Hamilton and Amani Jabari were the selected former members. Three of these were clergy members, and three were laity. All were leaders in creating a solid church—not just a building, but an enduring congregation.

Each week during Lent, the memory of one of these deceased members is being honored during the worship service—an effort to understand what they gave of themselves. LaRocque says it's more than looking at how each "expounded their beliefs, but how they lived their lives in faith. Sometimes," he adds, "people who have given so much are forgotten. Their stories fade." Not so in this church.

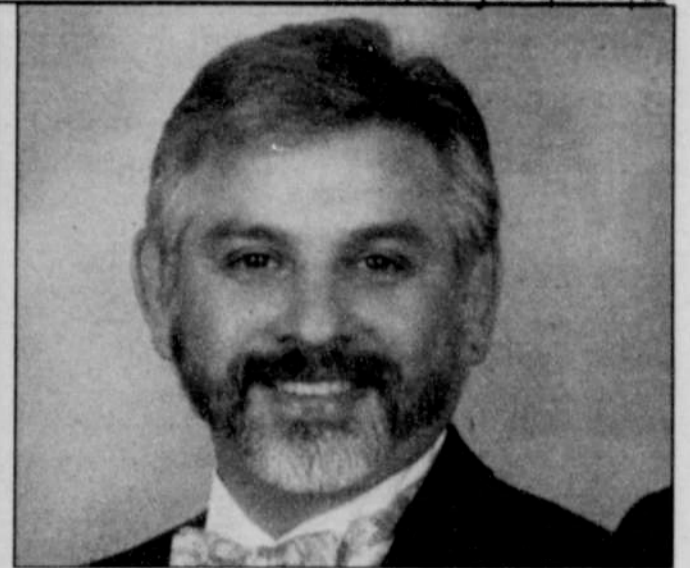
Chuck Harvey, former district coordinator and MCC of Portland member, describes the memorial sequence. "It comes after the invocation and right before the Scripture readings." Each speaker introduces the saint, speaks of memorable points about her or his commitment to MCC and lights a candle. The embarrassing habits of each person are also mentioned, to remind the congregation that these were humans and that they made the contributions in spite of their weaknesses, and often because of them.

"I believe the saints candle is a practical way to remind each of us that we are the arms and legs of Christ to continue God's work on earth," Harvey says. Different presenters have brought mementos of each honoree: photos, T-shirts indicative of one's ministry and, in the case of Montoya, his vestments.

Montoya had planned to become a Catholic priest. His parents became ill while he was in training for the priesthood. At the same time, he realized that he was a gay man and that his priestly dream would never be fulfilled. In fact, Montoya wasn't sure of his next step. A devotee of Our Lady of Guadalupe, he visited the basilica in Mexico and prayed for an answer: Could he be gay and serve the creator he believed in? He knelt in front of the Guadalupe statue and prayed for an answer. Looking down on the floor, he saw a button. He



The contributions made by the Rev. A. Austin Amerine (left) and José Montoya were not forgotten by the MCC of Portland congregation.




turned it over and read the message, "It's all right."

In MCC of Portland, Montoya served as a deacon, helping people in hardship, serving communion and performing related tasks. He was also a member of the congregation's board of directors. The Rev. Frodo Okulam remembers, "He had a way of making things happen." Montoya died after a long battle with AIDS. Member Dave Dishman recalls Montoya as "a wonderful, caring and kind person with a great sense of humor."

Amerine was known for "planting" churches. The founding pastor of the Portland church, he also started MCCs in Salem, Corvallis and San Francisco as well as Spokane, Bellevue and Tri-Cities, Wash. Known for his musical talents and inspired preaching, Amerine had a humorous side. He nicknamed everything. Dishman recalls, "His treasured white Mercedes was 'Snowflake.' His cane was 'Mabel.' His apartment was 'D-4.'"

MCC of Portland member Betty Nelson says, "I'll always remember his glasses pushed up on his forehead, and his watch in hand as he preached."

Amerine loved music, says Dishman, and "played a mean piano." He served the Portland church from 1976 to 1979, leaving to become the first coordinator of the enormous Northwest district, which includes churches from Alaska to Hawaii and from northern California to Reno, Nev.

As Amerine was MCC of Portland's first official pastor, the local church was also his last assignment. In fact, he had already retired when the Portland congregation called him back to fill an empty pulpit as its interim pastor for a four-month period. The Rev. Roy Cole later filled the pulpit, and Amerine went into a well-deserved, but never complete, retirement. He frequently re-emerged to attend events and even preach, until his death in 1998. Harvey recalls a favorite Amerine quote: "We are called to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." Few would deny that Amerine accomplished that goal many times over. 

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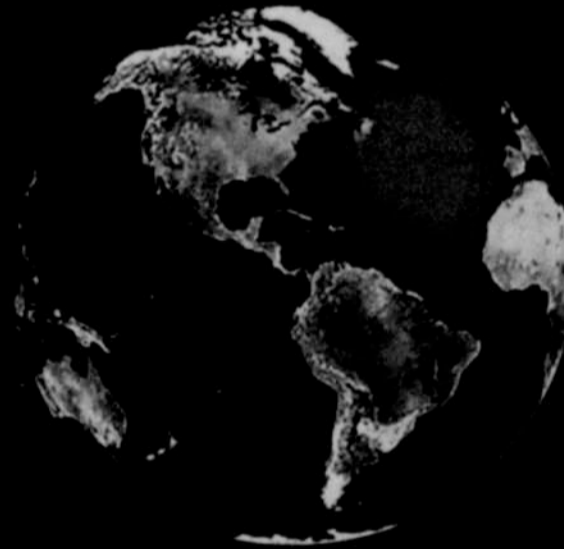
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