

MCC: A Welcoming Home for GLBT People of Faith

By Joe Kyle

In 1968, nearly a year before the riots at the Stonewall Inn that gave a jump-start to the modern gay pride movement, the Reverend Troy Perry and a small group of friends gathered in a Huntington Park, California, living room for a simple worship service. That singular event was the first step in the birth of an international movement that would become the Metropolitan Community Churches.

Now, during its 37th year, Rev Perry has retired, leaving behind a church that has grown to 45,000 members in nearly 300 congregations in 25 countries. While these numbers may seem small when compared to the size of the worldwide GLBT community, the fact that a gay church not only exists, but has continued to thrive and prosper, is a testament to the perseverance and charisma of its founder, as well as the dedication of its members.

At its General Conference in July, the church leaders elected a new moderator, Rev Nancy Wilson, to replace the retiring Perry. At the same time, it refreshed and renewed its mission and vision statements, stressing the importance of community interaction during these troubled political times.

In Hawai'i, attempts to establish an MCC congregation have met with mixed success. A church established by Rev Perry and his partner in 1973 flourished for a time before splitting into a new entity, which was officially disaffiliated in 1997. Subsequent congregations have been doomed by internecine squabbles.

The latest and most promising attempt to establish a worship family since Perry was here in 1973 is being undertaken by Rev Jonipher Kwong, an MCC pastor from California. Kwong is developing a completely new worship style that he hopes will be more useful to the local GLBT community. "It's a blend of Christianity, Buddhism and indigenous Hawaiian traditions," says Kwong. "I'm hoping to get new people who are willing to try out a new church that is edgy and respectful of indigenous traditions and that seeks to reach out to the community."

In a world where much of organized religion seems to have washed its hands of the gay community—indeed, most often targeting them in hateful diatribes and sermons—many wonder why any member of this community would want to join a church. Still, Rev Kwong believes it's vital for the gay community to have a place where it can worship.

"I think a lot of gay people

have been wounded by religion," explains Kwong. "I know that it's an uphill fight to get folks to come back to church sometimes. But I do think we need some sort of spiritual grounding, at least for those of us who do seek a spiritual path. I believe that a faith tradition can provide an anchor, and a sense of revitalization to prevent burnout."

Kwong also believes it's important for the GLBT community to build bridges between the faith community and its political activists. "I believe this church [the MCC] will be able to provide a holistic approach to our struggle for equality," he says.

Rev Kwong is a native of the Philippines who moved to the mainland when he was twelve. A spiritual upbringing in the evangelical tradition helped him to understand from an early age the importance, to many people, of a vital spiritual faith. It was not until he had completed college, however, that he began to see how he might contribute to this family of faith.

It was while working in the film industry and attending MCC-LA that Kwong first realized the need for young people to connect to some type of spirituality. "I realized that there was a hunger in our community for that," he says. "The need for an alternative to the bars and the drug scene, and to other unhealthy ways of dealing with one's sexuality and the low self esteem that exists in our community."

Kwong's attempt to build a new MCC communion in Hawai'i has so far met with only moderate success. He admits that there are several challenges. "There are still a lot of people who remember what happened in the past and are not willing to let that go," he explains. He says he has regularly met people who attended the previous MCC who are less than complimentary about the experience. He is eager for them to know that his is a completely new start; that he is not trying to revive anything.

The second challenge he faces is something that is more of a common cultural experience in our local community. "A lot of [GLBT] people are still in the closet. There is still a large shame factor here in the islands."

But Kwong says he is willing to be patient, to "continue to listen to people's stories; to continue to reach out to wherever people are and to try to be a supportive presence."

Rev Jonipher Kwong and 'Ohana MCC of Hawai'i meet for a Sunday Worship Celebration every Sunday at 4 pm at the St Clement's Episcopal Church Parish House at 1515 Wilder Avenue in Makiki. More information is available at www.ohanaMCC.org, or by calling 728.8811. ▼

