

The Chronicles of the
Metropolitan Community Church of Greater New Orleans
1971 – 2019

Metropolitan Community Church of New Orleans will celebrate its golden anniversary in 2021. A rich history of ministry to the LGBTQ community in southeast Louisiana is full of highs, and also devastating lows.

1971 to 1980 - In the Beginning

Pastors 1971-1980

Rev David E Solomon
Rev Deacon William “Bill” Larson
Deacon Courtney Craighead
Rev Warren Wagner
Administrator George Tresch
Rev Jerry Motto

Notable Dates

May 1971 – First worship service
March 1972 – Congregation Charter
June 1973 – Upstairs Lounge tragedy
October 1973 – Rebirth – Courtney Craighead 1st deacon installed
April 1974 – Easter Sunday – New Charter presented
August 1977 – Incorporation Certificate

The decade of the seventies was a time of change for the “Queer” community across the United States. Propelled by the Stonewall Inn uprising, communities were coming out, claiming their place in society and the basic rights that they were entitled to. The MCC community in New Orleans was stirred and found a new and inspiring spiritual rebirth inside the new Metropolitan Community Churches, founded by the Rev Troy Perry. However, there remained a reluctance to stand up and be counted. On June 24, 1973 the Upstairs Lounge tragic fire and the general population’s reaction to this event changed all of that. The fire tragically killed most of the church’s members including the Rev Bill Larson and associate pastor George Mitchel. While the general population ignored and even lauded the event, the survivors and their supporters stood tall with a very loud “*United We Stand*” and demanded respect and a place in the equal rights conversation. MCC New Orleans was re-chartered in 1974 under the leadership of fire survivor Deacon Courtney Craighead on resurrection/Easter Sunday.

MCC would continue to be a constant and determined voice for the rights and dignity of the GLBTQ community in New Orleans. In 1977, the church was instrumental in leading and organizing a major protest against Anita Bryant, and the hateful views associated with her “*Save Our Children*” campaign.

1980 to 1994 - Times of Change

Pastors 1980-1993

Rev Scottie Shelton

Pastor Ron Pannell

Rev Rickie Richards

Rev Susan Klevenstein

Rev MS Scottie Shelton

Notable Dates

1980 – Name Change to Vieux Carre MCC

1981 – HIV/AIDS epidemic begins

1985 – Move to 1934 Burgundy St

1991 – Vieux Carre MCC purchases its first Building at 1228 St Roch

This period marks the beginning and the devastating impacts of the AIDS epidemic in New Orleans. It was very a difficult time for the leaders of the church to maintain a smooth and structured organization, as literally, it remained in survival mode. During this time period the church worshipped at various locations including St Mark's United Methodist on N Rampart, Magazine St, Port at Charters Street and Burgundy Street. Care for the dying and comforting the living was both stressful and all consuming. The move to the 1934 Burgundy location put MCC at ground zero of the community and the church and its facilities became a 7 day a week operation. Numerous activities such as AA, mid-week services, funerals, choir and day care, serving over 100 souls each week.

In 1992 the church with funds from the estate of Casa de Fernandez was able to purchase 1228 St Roch at Marais. This began a period of stability, growth and continuing community service.

1994 – 2006 – Growth, Stability and Care

Rev Dexter Brecht – Senior Pastor

The “Dexter years” were quality years of service for the Vieux Carre MCC/MCC of Greater New Orleans. Civil rights moved forward and the church gained a new level of respect inside the general community of New Orleans. The outreach of the church expanded, to include feeding of the homeless, day care for HIV patients, a food pantry and the community “Spirit Awards”. The Spirit Awards acknowledged the tireless generosity of those who gave of themselves, by demonstrating leadership in bettering the quality of life in our community. Awarded over a period of six years to deserving recipients in the areas of care, education, community and entertainment.

Church membership during this period ranged between 40 and 60 people with Sunday services often with over 70 in attendance. In 2001 the church owned building on St Roch was sold with the expectation of purchasing a new church property located on Canal St. When this deal fell through, a major disappointment to its members, the need to find rental space once again arose. The church settled into a familiar space, St Marks United Methodist on N Rampart Street where the church again focused on the Care Ministry. Associate Pastor

Laurie Reed was facilitator to this ministry and in the development of the MCC Care Team. The primary goal of this group seven members strong, was to “bring care to the community”.

In the spring of 2005, a three-year agreement with the Archdiocese of New Orleans for space at their Project Lazarus facility was signed and sealed. This arrangement proved short lived, when after just three months of worship service, the agreement was terminated by the Archdiocese with a statement “The Catholic Church teaches that gay sex is intrinsically disordered and continuing the lease might give the wrong impression about Catholic teaching”. Just weeks later the Hurricane Katrina disaster occurred on the gulf coast.

In many instances, events and history notes about New Orleans are described as Pre-Katrina and Post Katrina as the event was life changing for everyone in the region. MCC New Orleans only having been evicted from the Lazarus House facility weeks prior the storm had not yet settled into a new home at St. Matthew’s United Church of Christ on South Carrollton. This location was conveniently located on the streetcar line in the Riverbend area of uptown New Orleans. Much of the church’s property and records were destroyed with the flooding of the storage unit where these items were kept during the transition.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, MCC Baton Rouge hosted Pastor Dexter and several members while New Orleans was still evacuated. After returning to New Orleans the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in the Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans hosted MCC New Orleans before officially moving into St Mathew’s in the Carrollton neighborhood.

By the end of the Pastor Dexter era the church was in a weakened state. Personal losses, lack of a permanent worship space, disagreement over finances and finally Hurricane Katrina had taken their toll. Pastor Dexter resigned in June 2006 followed by the resignation of 18 of the remaining 31 members in July one month later.

MCC New Orleans would indeed need another, “Resurrection Sunday”.

Notable Dates
1994 – Rev Dexter Brecht arrives
1998 – Memorial Service to mark the 25 th anniversary of the Upstairs Lounge fire
1998 – Spirit Awards created to knowledge positive works inside the community
2001 – St Roch property sold. Worship and Offices moved to St Mark’s United Methodist on North Rampart St. Renamed - MCC of Greater New Orleans
2005 - June 19 th . The unexpected death of the beloved Deacon Courtney Craighead, Upstairs Lounge fire survivor at age 65.
August 29 Hurricane Katrina devastates New Orleans
2006 - June, Pastor Dexter Brecht resigns

2006 to 2019 – Good to the Core

Pastors

Interim Pastor Keith Mozingo

Rev Clinton Crawshaw

Rev Rick Sosbe

Interim Pastor Rev Gail Minnick

Rev Alisan Rowland

Associate Pastor Lonnie Cheramie

The beginning of this period in the history of our church is weighted heavily with the connection to the MCC of Baton Rouge. After the departure of Rev Brecht, Pastor Keith Mozingo under the leadership of Rev Elder Jim Mitulski from the fellowship stepped up to lead the remaining core members out of the depths, to a future with a UFMCC presence in New Orleans. The core group at this time included Rev Dr Bill Memmott, Robin Brown, George Tresch, Mike McDonald, Brenda Patterson, Russell Burkett, Charlene Petrie and others. During this rebirth and rebuild, MCC New Orleans operated outside of its charter, as a parish extension of MCC Baton Rouge allowing its Board of Directors to lend oversight and its resources to re-establishing the church in New Orleans.

Rev Clinton Crawshaw – The Big Easy

In September 2007 the church called Rev Clinton Crawshaw, a British born priest right out of the Church of England and the revived MCC New Orleans was re-invented as The Big Easy MCC referencing the long held nickname for New Orleans as well as scripture (Matthew 11:30) *“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”*. Under the leadership of Rev Clinton the church grew into a culturally diverse congregation and developed a focused outreach to the transgender and marginalized communities. The church held regular mid-week bible study classes, established a circle of “small group dinner-clubs” to foster relationships and actively participated in community events and festivals. The pastor wrote a regular column, the “Pink Pastor” in the bi-weekly Ambush magazine distributed regionally.

Worship service during this period was a blended, high spirited and structured with focus on teaching and the music ministry. A second early afternoon “liturgical service” was added and between each, attendance grew to a typical range of 80-110. Under the direction of Nicholas Harrison, the music ministry developed into a very strong ministry, giving rise to an aspiring singing group “Affinity Praise” and producing a CD with original praise and worship songs. This period in the life of MCC New Orleans clearly solidified its place in New Orleans and demonstrated what is possible under strong leadership and commitment.

The “Clinton era” of growth and development ended in December 2010, when citing health issues Rev Crawshaw resigned, again leaving a void in leadership. Membership declined but worship services continued under the loving guidance of its Board of Directors and the newly named Music Director, Ryan LeJeune. The 2nd “liturgical service” continued for nearly six months under the leadership of Lay Delegate, James Barreca until

shrinking attendance at both services prompted reconciling the two services into one more blended worship style service at 5 Pm which had become the main service time for a long period.

The very short tenure of Rev Rick Sosbe at the end of 2011, and the tragic death of James Barreca, was a difficult time for the once again newly re-named MCC of New Orleans. The Board of Directors stepped up again to fill in, while working with UFMCC to bring an interim pastor to stabilize the church in New Orleans.

Reverend Gail Minnick

On December 16th, 2012, Rev Gail Minnick was called by the congregation and accepted the position of Interim Pastor and would honor this commitment for two years. This was a period for the core of the membership to take ownership, define and refine the MCC church that would be independently sustained in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The congregation announced on May 21, 2013 their five CORE VALUE STATEMENTS:

- **Welcoming** – We cherish and invite all to share in our spiritual community
- **Acceptance** – We celebrate and encourage You, no matter where you are on life's journey
- **Love** – We are motivated by Christian love in how we speak, act and live
- **Open and Affirming** – We confirm the diversity of creation and are called to minister to the LGBTQ and marginalized communities
- **Open Communion Table** – We recognize and defend that God's table is open to all

On July 14th, 2013 the congregation announced their new MISSION STATEMENT:

The mission of MCC New Orleans is to offer a safe and holy place where everyone—with particular outreach to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and marginalized communities – can worship, receive affirmation and celebrate God's love.

On September 15th, 2013 the congregation announced their new VISION STATEMENT:

With God at the center of everything we do, MCC New Orleans is a dynamic force for spiritual growth, social justice, and support for youth and the marginalized. This is accomplished through loving kindness for one another, educating ourselves and the wider community, and providing a powerful worship experience in our own space. We are a diverse program size church, building on our strong foundation and partnering with constituents throughout the New Orleans metropolitan area.

and ANTHEM/MOTTO:

We are MCC New Orleans: Celebrating God's love for everyone

Soon after these proclamations, the church decided that a morning service was more desirable and would better serve the community. The lease agreement with St Matthew UCC would not be renewed and a new location would be necessary. On December 1, 2013 the church officially relocated to 6200 St Charles Ave at the St Charles Avenue Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ congregation. The worship service was set for 10 Am each Sunday.

Rev Gail fulfilled her duties as interim pastor and in January 2014 returned home to Virginia where she served Shenandoah Valley MCC as their interim pastor, for a time. Administrative Assistant Andre Monte maintained the day-to- day operation of the church, along with the Board of Directors. The search for the next pastor of MCC New Orleans would commence with the election of a Pastoral Search Committee.

Reverend Alisan Rowland

After months of processing applications, The Pastoral Search Committee selected newly MCC ordained Rev Alisan Rowland from San Diego, California. With a visit in the summer of 2014 and the vote of the congregation Pastor Alisan's first worship service as full time pastor was August 24th. Pastor Allie's background included the position of chaplain with a ministry to the sick and dying to she served with tenderness and compassion and soon became a beloved member of the MCC Community in New Orleans and the wider general population.

During Pastor Allie's tenure in New Orleans, MCC hosted its first South Gulf Coast Network gathering in March 2015. Members from MCC churches in Corpus Christi, Houston, Baton Rouge, Mobile and Pensacola enjoyed a weekend of workshops, fellowship and worship strengthening the bond of the congregations in the gulf south region. Alisan found it integral to connect herself and the church to other community organizations like Temple Sinai, Unitarian Universalist Church, Louisiana Equality Foundation, NOAGE, PFLAG, the LGBTQ Community Center and NO/AIDS Task Force. Pastor Allie once again ministered to the community through a bi-weekly article published in the newly re-established Ambush Magazine.

The lease arrangement with Saint Charles Avenue Christian Church was not renewed after two years due to facility infrastructure issues, and a new home, was once again required. In the fall of 2017, the church signed an agreement with First Presbyterian Church at 5401 S Claiborne Ave for the worship and office space it currently occupies.

As MCC New Orleans approaches its 50th anniversary change has again come to the leadership and operation of the church. First, near the end of 2018, Andre Monte – Administrative Assistant stepped down to pursue secular employment. In early 2019, after nearly 4 ½ years of service Pastor Alisan and her partner Pamela Raptis departed New Orleans, returning to San Diego, due to health concerns. Board Chairman Shawn Blank admirably stepped up and filled much of the duties caused by these vacancies, prior to his resignation and departure from the church in June 2019.

Notable Dates

2007 – September – Rev Clinton Crawshaw called as Pastor	Church re-named Big Easy MCC
2008 – Nicholas Harrison Music Director “Affinity Praise” choir is born	2010 – December – Rev Crawshaw resigns
2011 – January – Ryan LeJeune accepts the position of Music Director	October – Rev Rick Sosbe named pastor
2012 – Church re-named MCC New Orleans May – Rev Sosbe resigns	January 27 th – James Barreca killed December – Rev Gail Minnick called as Interim Pastor
2014 – January – Rev Minnick completes her assignment	August – Rev Alisan Rowland called as Pastor
2019 – January – Rev Rowland resigns and returns to San Diego, CA	May – Rev Lonnie Cheramie named Associate Pastor
2020 – January – Rev Lonnie Cheramie called as the 18 th Pastor of MCC of New Orleans	