

Q ■ Is God ■ Gay?

A ■

If not, more and more of his followers are. With holdings worth \$50 million, the Metropolitan Community Church has more than 40,000 members and is seeking to double its flock over the next ten years. But what MCC wants most—acceptance by the Christian establishment—remains just out of reach.

By John Gallagher

At noon on a sultry, overcast day in June, several hundred men and women gather in protest around a gray edifice on Riverside Drive in Manhattan. Linked by strands of rainbow-colored ribbon, they surround the building, which takes up a full block, while out front a minister intones a prayer. "Let God out of the box," the protesters chant. "Let God out of the box."

Unlike the spontaneous rage characteristic of ACT UP

demonstrators, this group's anger has a slightly forced feel to it—a tone more conciliatory than confrontational. These protesters are members and supporters of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), and their target is the headquarters of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC), the influential ecumenical umbrella group that represents 32 denominations with 45 million members.

"Now is the time to demand that churches and religious institutions like the NCC use their money, power, scholarship, influence, and property to support the end of religious abuse of gay and lesbian people," says Rev. Nancy Wilson, MCC's chief ecumenical officer.

The protest was just one more salvo in an ongoing as-

STEVEN JOHNSON LEYBA FOR THE ADVOCATE



sault in which MCC, a denomination in its own right, has forced mainstream protestant denominations to deal with gay issues. "MCC put those issues on the agenda," says R. Stephen Warner, a professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "And now they won't go away, because MCC won't go away."

So far, however, despite plenty of debate the mainstream denominations are far from arriving at any pro-gay consensus. While these groups bicker and waffle over how to treat their gay members and cler-

"If you were to pick the ten fastest-growing denominations in the country, MCC would clearly be one of them."

—Rev. Lyle Schaller
Religious consultant

gy, MCC has been growing by leaps and bounds. "If you were to pick the ten fastest-growing denominations in the country, MCC would clearly be one of them," says Rev. Lyle Schaller, a nationally known consultant who advises parishes on growth and planning issues. "They are growing, while mainstream denominations are shrinking."

It has been 26 years since Rev. Troy Perry and 12 men and women celebrated the first MCC service in the minister's living room in Los Angeles, using a coffee table as an altar. In that time the denomination has grown to 42,000 voting members and nonvoting adherents in almost 300 churches in 16 countries. With contributions of \$10 million annually and property holdings worth \$50 million, MCC can claim to be the largest gay group in the United States, at least in financial terms.

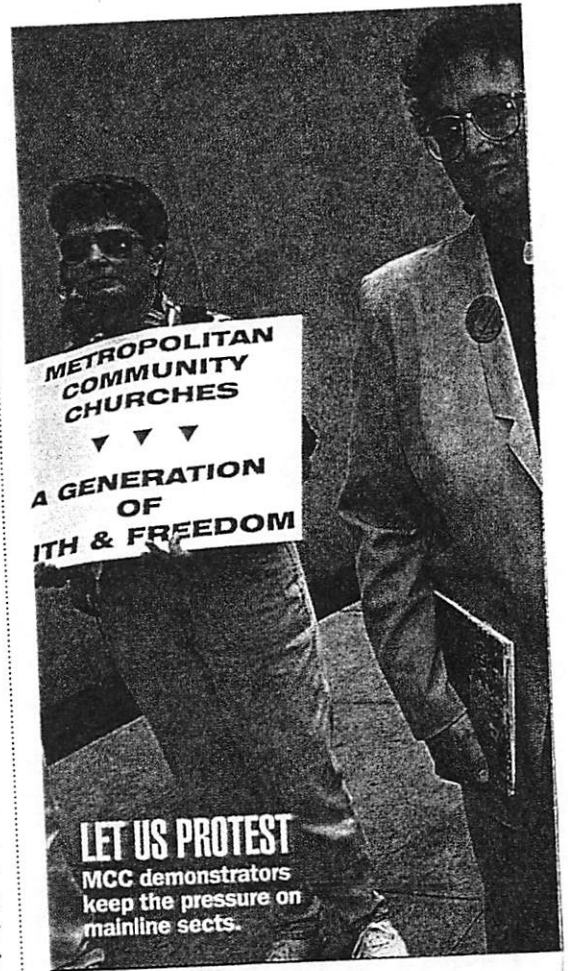
"MCC is meeting the needs of a group that other denominations aren't meeting," Warner says of MCC's growth, though he adds that the explosion in its membership raises uncomfortable questions. "Is MCC siphoning off energies that might go into the Presbyterians or the Methodists? Does it serve as a safety valve to keep pressure down on those churches? In a sense MCC is doing a favor for protestant denominations in churching people others won't deal with. Somebody in those denominations can say, 'You've got your own church.'"

Perry emphasizes that MCC is not willing to accept that role. "We're not letting them off the hook," he says. Instead, he argues, MCC gives gay members of other denominations the support they need to "go back into their churches and push them to make a difference." But its role as a gadfly in no way compromises MCC's own bright future. "We're poised for growth," says Perry. "Our vision is to double in size in the next ten years."

One way to do that is to spend less time fretting over the issue of entry into

NCC, as MCC has been doing since it first applied for membership in 1979. Two years ago NCC's general board voted 90 to 81 not to act on MCC's application for observer status, a position enjoyed by several Jewish and Muslim groups. The vote effectively squelched the issue. Though present at the annual convention of NCC's general board—held in New Orleans in November—MCC was not actively seeking membership or observer status.

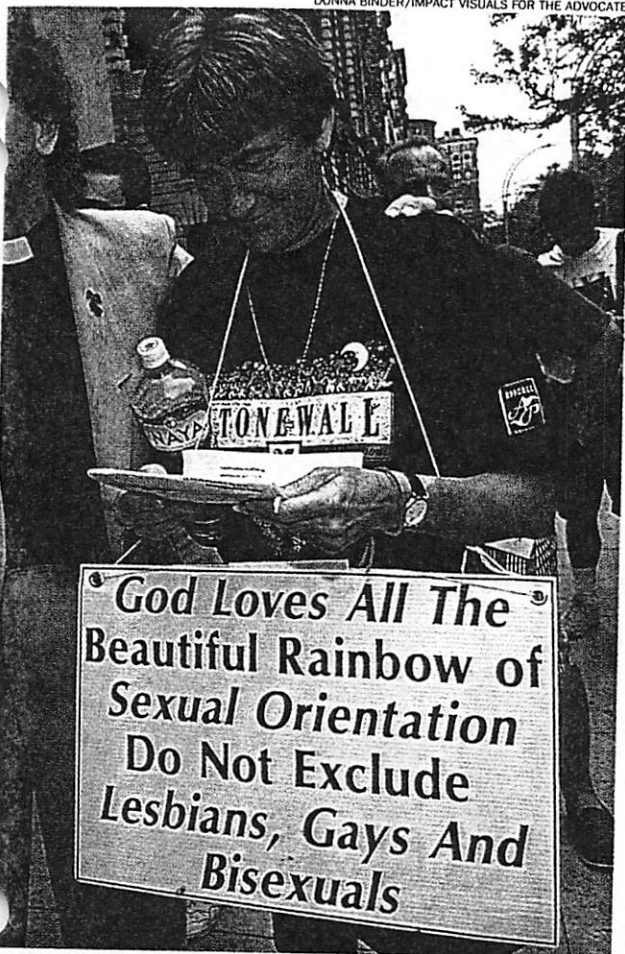
"We were expending a lot of energy there," says Perry. "We have other ways of dealing with churches. We don't have to go through NCC." Indeed, MCC belongs to National Interfaith Impact, a religious lobbying group in Washington, D.C., as well as the AIDS National Interfaith Network. Neither group, however, is as influential as NCC, membership in which symbolizes respect and ac-



ceptance from mainline sects.

And the group's inability to come to terms with MCC still rankles some MCC members. "It seems that their organization is unable to deal with their homophobia," says Rev. Kirtledge Cherry, MCC's field director for Ecumenical Witness and Ministry. "It's gridlocked in terms of MCC status."

NCC denies charges of homophobia, and indeed many of its staffers and officials are clearly sympathetic to MCC. Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, NCC's general secretary, went so far as to participate in the protest in June. Says Cherry: "Having a protest against them is kind of a bizarre experience—they're so schizophrenic, they join in the protest against themselves." NCC also provided electricity for the June protest as well as access to its cafeteria and bathrooms. And it has accommodated other MCC requests: For the November convention, for instance, NCC agreed to send its board members flyers announcing MCC's forum



on the religious right that was held in conjunction with the meeting.

NCC is also undergoing, in ecclesiastical jargon, "a process of discernment," which is another in a series of dialogues about the status of MCC. In New Orleans, council members met with MCC representatives and with members of gay and lesbian caucuses from various denominations.

Nonetheless, there is unlikely to be any official movement soon. "There is no pending application for anything on behalf of MCC," notes Rev. Eileen Lindner, associate for ecumenical relations at NCC.

Two years ago, at the time of the NCC debate on MCC status—which Lindner calls "protracted and rancorous"—NCC officials said that while some member churches sided with MCC, including the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Swedenborgian Church, several others indicated that they would pull out of the group if MCC's request were grant-

ed, particularly orthodox and predominantly black denominations. Elias Farajaje-Jones, a professor of divinity at Howard University, says many black denominations "have a history of being traditionally homophobic. From their point of view, to allow MCC in is apostasy, the end of the world." He adds, however, that "there are plenty of people in those churches who would object" to that stand.

Gay issues have, in fact, created divisions within the member denominations as well as between them. An interim report on MCC noted that "these issues run through the churches, not between them, like a seismic fault," says Sarah Vilankulu, NCC's director of interpretative resources. "It wasn't the Greek Orthodox Church against the United Church of Christ. It was something all the member churches were dealing with in one way or another."

Indeed, with many of the denominations in NCC in virtual meltdown over issues of sexual ethics, particularly homosexuality, "it is impossible for NCC to come to a decision unless its members can do so individually," says Lindner.

Although sexual ethics is the overriding factor, other considerations will also determine whether MCC ever succeeds in joining NCC. For one, by the lengthy standards of Christianity, MCC is still in swaddling clothes. As Lindner notes: "MCC began only in 1968. That makes it younger by 100 years than most of our members and by 250 years for many others."

More crucial are doctrinal matters. "I am interested in how the MCC brings together people from very disparate doctrinal backgrounds and makes them into a cadre of clergy in a single denomination," says Lindner. "Is this truly a national church, or is it a cluster of congregations that has no doctrinal similarity but is just huddled together on the issue of homosexuality?"

The gospel according to MCC



Rev. Troy Perry

In his second book, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*, Rev. Troy Perry describes the three-pronged doctrine that unites all congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church, founded by Perry in 1968:

Salvation: God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to tell us that whoever believes shall not perish but have everlasting life; and "whoever" includes gay men and lesbians, unconditionally, because salvation is free—no church can take it away.

Community: For those who have no families who care about them, or who find themselves alone or friendless, the church will be a family.

Christian Social Action: We will stand up for all our rights, secular and religious, and we will fight the many forms of tyranny that oppress us.

The answer lies in MCC's short history, which has shaped its doctrinal character. Perry began his career as an ordained Pentecostal minister, married and the father of two sons. Unable to deny his orientation, however, he resigned from the Church of God of Prophecy and

*This Christmas give a
gift that's been laying
around for twelve years.*



ended his marriage by the time he was 24. After a stint in the Army, he returned to Los Angeles and gay life, where an unhappy love affair led him to attempt suicide. Finally, Perry became convinced that his mission was to start a new church for the gay community.

With the lilt of his Florida roots still in his voice, Perry describes his critics' early reactions: "Goodness gracious, a church for gays and lesbians! Isn't that funny?" But they became very hostile when we started growing."

Individual MCC churches are still subject to a range of threats and harassment. Vandals shot at King of Peace MCC in St. Petersburg, Fla., in September. Huntsville, Ala., residents protested the opening of an MCC in their town this fall, while the Boise, Ida., MCC floated around for weeks earlier in the year because no one was willing to house it. And in August the government of Argentina denied MCC legal recognition for its Buenos Aires chapter because of "an affinity for public demonstration, including marches

and methods of defense promoting not only homosexuals but also homosexuality as a whole."

Thus, while MCC congregations vary in character, they are united by a three-pronged doctrine emphasizing salvation, community, and social action, says Perry. The social action component grows out of the church's experience of persecution, especially in the early days when it faced police raids during services. Inextricably linked with the struggle for gay liberation, Perry and his followers often found themselves in the forefront at demonstrations, butting heads with police. Perry himself conducted numerous fasts and prayer vigils.

"Christian social action means I can't sit around," Perry says. "I don't accept oppression; I live out freedom. I have to get off my butt." MCC member churches generally have active AIDS ministries, and some have lesbian health and prison ministries as well. The New York City church passes out 1,500 bags of groceries to families every week and has six beds for the homeless.

But in other ways social action may be the hardest part of the doctrine to sell to the congregation, at least in political terms. Last year MCC passed out hundreds of thousands of cards to its members to send to Congress and the president, demanding a repeal of the Pentagon ban on gays in the military. How many were mailed is another matter; members of Congress reported that letters opposing the policy were swamped by those supporting it.

Soon to embark on a stint as MCC's minister of justice, a newly created position, Mel White sees MCC as increasing such efforts. "MCC represents the new activism," says White, a former ghostwriter for right-wing televangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. "Those dear guys and women from ACT UP and Queer Nation have risked their lives and are now exhausted. The traditional activist has paid the price to open the door and raise the questions that need to be considered." Now, says White, it is up to MCC members to carry the baton.

Perry's background as a Pente-

costal minister is another influence on MCC's overall theological bent, which is clearly evangelical—providing an ironic link with some of its worst enemies, the evangelical churches. "Many MCC congregations can't be clearly distinguished from evangelicals," says Schaller. Warner agrees: "A lot of Evangelicals would be aghast at that comparison, but I would make it myself. Evangelicals think evangelicalism means you are heterosexual and have two kids, but it's broader than that. You can go into an MCC congregation and think you're in a typical evangelical church until you see that the couples going to communion are of the same sex."

Newcomers may be put off by the evangelical character of many MCC services. White remembers entering his first MCC church, in North Hollywood, Calif., with his partner after driving around it for several months before finally going in. Given their high-liturgical backgrounds, what they found surprised them. "It was a dumpy little American Legion hall

with a cheap cross, plastic flowers, and a whole bunch of blue-collar folks clapping hands and singing," he recalls. "We look back on it now as just plain culture shock."

But for White, as for many other individuals coming out, MCC was a lifeline to the gay community. "It was literally the beginning of life for me because it was the first time I heard God speaking through a queer," he says. "It won me over." For gay men and lesbians, he argues, it was "the only game in town. If it was different from what I was used to, so be it. These are my brothers and sisters, and they're on the front line. Where else am I going to go? I have to be there."

Today, MCC churches cover the spectrum, notes White. "Each congregation reflects the pastor," he says. "Some are warm and enthusiastic and evangelical, and others are far more theological and liturgical and liberal. MCC is not one thing—it is the sum of many things."

Nonetheless, the church's beginnings are rooted in a conservative

theology—which may be one of its strengths. "Whereas most of the mainline denominations are organized around religious law, MCC is clearly organized around God's grace," says Schaller. "In today's world, that's a winner. The legalisms of the mainline denominations aren't selling well anymore."

Such an explanation might also explain why MCC's two largest churches are in the Bible Belt. The Cathedral of Hope in Dallas has 1,300 members, while the Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale has about 750 people show up for its four services each Sunday. The \$3.5-million Dallas cathedral, which opened in 1992, is especially grand, with stained glass windows capturing such gay symbols as the lambda and the pink triangle.

"Until you see 1,300 gay and lesbian people worshiping, you have no idea what that does," says Rev. Michael Piazza, the senior pastor at the Cathedral of Hope. "Part of the reason we built such a large building was to create synergy for bring-

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THOSE WHO APPRECIATE QUALITY ENJOY IT RESPONSIBLY.

ing people together in a positive way." The church has also opened a columbarium as well as separate buildings for conducting meetings and counseling.

MCC may have to scramble to keep up with its growth, though. "One third of our churches are pastored by our laity," says Perry, and that's a particular problem because the churches that thrive are those with full-time pastors. Of MCC's ordained clergy, half are transfers from other denominations; the other half are members who felt called to ministry. The church is also trying to establish ties to the Chicago Theological Institute to train its clergy.

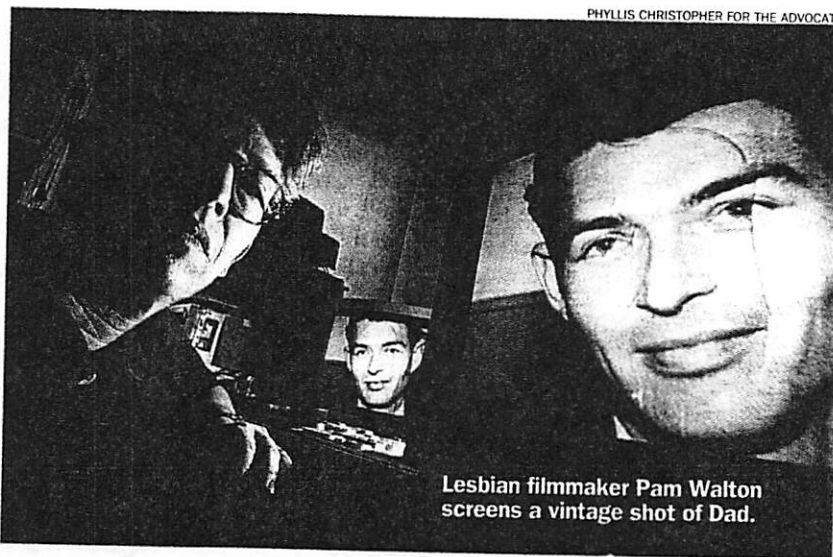
Given the rate of expansion, the usually affable Perry is frustrated that MCC is, in his words, "the best-kept secret in the gay and lesbian community." Many of the national gay political organizations "produce, I'm sorry to say, often just a lot of press releases. We live it every day."

MCC's growth is likely to continue as long as other churches fail to address issues of concern to gays and lesbians. The best that most denominations have been able to achieve, says Warner, is a patchwork of compromises, which individual churches can choose not to follow.

And even if the mainline denominations do reach some accommodation with gays and lesbians, says Warner, it may be too little to satisfy them: "What the church really means in about 90% of our society is a social institution based on a heterosexual nuclear family.

"Liberal churches are not going to reconstruct themselves at that most basic level," he continues. "That's why even a church that claims it wants to be open and affirming to gay people may not feel any different from those that are not. It's sort of like a white liberal church that says it welcomes black people, but you don't find a black person there because the service is so white and middle-class."

"I used to say in the early days that we were working to put ourselves out of business," says Perry. "But that's not going to happen. There are thousands of people in MCC who are very comfortable. They like the way we do business."



PHYLLIS CHRISTOPHER FOR THE ADVOCATE

Lesbian filmmaker Pam Walton screens a vintage shot of Dad.

A family that prays together...

Pam Walton seeks a truce with a leading figure on the religious right—her father

By Chris Bull

As part of his vision for a society based on biblical principles, the influential conservative author and activist Rus Walton has publicly flirted with the idea of imposing the death penalty for those who engage in same-sex intercourse. "Sodomy gnaws at the vitals and rots the soul of the nation that permits it to go unchallenged," Walton says in his popular book *Biblical Principles Concerning Issues of Importance to Christians*.

But for Walton the question is more complicated than a strict interpretation of scripture. Walton's daughter Pam is a lesbian filmmaker who has produced and directed two gay-themed documentaries. The two have been estranged since 1981, when Rus Walton cut all ties, refusing to answer her correspondence.

"I've felt a mixture of rage and sadness," says Pam Walton, 49, who now lives in Mountain View, Calif. "I just couldn't understand how he could perceive my letters as anything but loving."

Rus Walton, 72, who is the executive director of the fundamentalist advocacy group Plymouth Rock Foundation (PRF), declined to be

interviewed for this article. "I love my daughter dearly, I just don't agree with her lifestyle," he said when reached by telephone at his Marlborough, N.H., home, which also serves as PRF's headquarters.

As one of the founding fathers of an ultraconservative Christian political movement known as reconstruction, which seeks to replace the American legal system with laws derived from the Old Testament, Walton occupies an important behind-the-scenes position among religious fundamentalists. "Walton's more of a philosopher than a leader, but his organization plays an extremely important role on the right," says journalist Russ Bellant, who has written extensively about religious conservatives. "He was among the earliest to advocate the doctrine of a Christian nation—the idea that the colonial history of America should serve as the standard for contemporary American life."

Walton, however, is just the latest in a series of antigay fundamentalists with children who have acknowledged their homosexuality publicly or privately. Others include Phyllis Schlafly, whose son John came out in 1992, and Bill Byrne, a sponsor of an antigay resolution in Cobb County, Ga., whose daughter

Shannon came out this year.

"What's happening in the Walton family is typical of the hypocrisy of the religious right concerning family values," says Jerry Sloan, cochair of Project Tocsin, a watchdog group in Sacramento, Calif., that tracks the right wing. "Once they find that a child is gay or lesbian, they cast them out, although Christian values say we should love our children no matter who they are."

But Fred Clarkson, editor of *Front Lines Research*, a bimonthly journal that monitors the radical right, says the story provides a "useful lesson for everybody involved in the culture wars. Reconciliation of this sort is a very delicate thing, but the reality of gay and lesbian children on the right flies in the face of hardened religious beliefs. Personal experience can change views that are based purely in abstractions."

Although Rus Walton has continued to adhere to antigay positions at PRF, in recent months his relationship with his daughter has begun to thaw. In August, Pam Walton and her partner of eight years, Ruth Caranza, traveled to his modest home at her father's invitation. During the visit Walton confronted her father about his writings. "I said, 'Dad, I need to ask you something,'" she says. "I need to make sure you are not some wild-eyed extremist who wants to see me dead.' He said that he doesn't agree with the death penalty and that the reason we hadn't connected in the past 15 years is that he had always imagined I was some hostile ACT UP type, and he could see he was wrong about that. He said he had never stopped loving me. I understood what he meant. I felt love for him too."

Pam Walton says she occasionally allows herself to dream of reconciliation. "My fantasy is that he will come to a Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays convention with me where we will show my video, standing side by side," she says. "Then I will go to one of his right-wing conventions, and I will stand up as his lesbian daughter. He would be a national hero for standing up to the bigots on their own turf. But then again, maybe I'm just being naive." •

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