

MCC THEOLOGIES TEAM

Encouraging Healthy Theological Dialogue and Exploration



Holy Conversations: a resource for local congregations

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MCC Theologies Team

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Table of Contents

MCC THEOLOGIES TEAM

Introduction & History	1
Current Team Members	2
Statement of Purpose	3
Core Values and Guiding Principles	4

H O L Y C O N V E R S A T I O N S

Introduction	6
Goals	6
Contextualization	7
Sample Structures and Formats	8

G R O U N D R U L E S

Guidelines for Dialogue	9
Guidelines for Listening	10
Facilitator Suggestions	11

TOPICS & QUESTIONS

Ministry (Laity, Clergy, etc.)	14
Sexuality & Spirituality	22
Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues	30
Trans-formations & Trans Experiences	39
Baptism	46
Holy Communion	52
Who is Jesus?	59
Global Justice	65
Ecclesiology (Church)	74

A D D I T I O N A L I N F O R M A T I O N

Contributor Bios	82
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Introduction

In her Moderator's Report to the 2007 General Conference, Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson announced the formation of the new MCC Theologies Team.¹ Rev. Wilson reported, "While this is a team in formation whose specific agenda is still being shaped, I am very excited that we are going to begin formulating a more intentional process of theological reflection in MCC worldwide." This is a daunting task, but one that is ripe for such a time as this.

In their initial conversations, team members agreed that this is a *kairotic*² moment for MCC and an opportunity to create safe space for theological conversations that explore and nurture the diversity of our global movement. The team hopes to help empower all people – clergy and laity alike – to be reflective as well as practical theologians. It is also an opportunity for MCC to more fully engage in broader ecumenical conversations about queer and liberation theologies. Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson says, "Who better than MCC to contribute to this discourse, since we have the practical experience of doing queer theology for nearly forty years? We have important perspectives that we need to share with one another and the wider religious world."

During the 2007 General Conference in Phoenix, three Theological Cafés were held to discuss various perspectives on Jesus, baptism, and theological labels. These discussions, hosted by members of the team, were well attended and demonstrated the vast hunger people have for opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about matters of faith and justice.

The Theologies Team had its first meeting later that year, in December of 2007. In 2008 and 2009, Team members led a series of workshops entitled, "What's Theology Got to Do with It?" at Regional Conferences and sub-regional gatherings. Hundreds of people in MCC participated in these sessions, engaging in theological conversation about such things as eucharist, baptism, and the nature of the church. Participants described these conversations as "liberating" and indicated a strong interest in having similar conversations in their local churches.

This resource is a direct response to this and other requests for tools to help churches create safe space for theological conversations and to encourage people to engage in dialogue with one another about their experiences of God.

¹ Theologies is intentionally rendered in the plural in order to honor the multiplicity of theological perspectives and traditions that exist in MCC. In 2007 as the team was still being formed, several team members gathered with the Board of Elders for a day of discussion about theology with Dr. Mary Hunt. Dr. Hunt noted that this diversity of theological understanding is one of MCC's greatest resources, and that being able to respectfully engage these without resorting to litmus tests for theological orthodoxy could be our greatest strength.

² This term comes from the Greek word *kairos*, which refers to an opportune or appointed moment in time when the way is made for God's purposes to unfold. In contrast to the more ordinary word for a quantity of time (*chronos*), *kairos* time is qualitative – a moment that represents a great opportunity for God to work.

Current Team Members:

The Rev. Dr. Kharma Amos is the Chair of the Theologies Team. She is the Senior Pastor of MCC of Northern Virginia in Fairfax, VA, USA. Rev. Amos received her M.Div. from Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, PA, and her D.Min. from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA.

The Rev. B. Y. Boone is the Pastor of St. John's MCC in Raleigh, NC, USA. Rev. Boone received an M.Div. from Wesley Seminary in Washington, DC, where she graduated Magna Cum Laude. Since 1983, she has served MCC in various capacities, including 15 years on her district committee.

The Rev. Dr. Jim Burns is the Pastor of MCC of the Rockies in Denver, CO, USA. A first-career MCC pastor, he holds degrees from Oberlin College, Yale Divinity School, and Iliff School of Theology. He was honored to receive a Laity Mutuality in Ministry Award at the 2005 General Conference.

Skip Chasey is a long-time active member of MCC Los Angeles where he has served on the board of directors and worship team, facilitated a bereavement support group, and co-founded the Los Angeles chapter of PLAY (People of Leather Among You), MCCLA's outreach program to the pansexual leather community. In addition to being a much sought after speaker on issues of integrating sexuality and spirituality, Skip is a practicing spiritual director and certified Grief Recovery™ counselor.

The Rev. Dr. Edgard Danielsén-Morales is the Associate Pastor of MCC New York. Rev. Danielsén-Morales was ordained in 2002 and began his pastoral work at *Cristo Sanador* in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Prior to moving to New York, he was a tenured Professor of Chemistry at the University of Puerto Rico.

The Rev. Dr. Axel Schwaigert is the Pastor of Salz der Erde MCC in Stuttgart, Germany. Rev. Schwaigert received his Diplom in Ev. Theologie from the school of theological studies at Tübingen. He also spent a year in the Religious Studies Department at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA studying inter-religious dialogue, among other things. He received his D.Min. from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2010.

The Rev. Dr. Mona West is the Director of MCC's Office of Formation and Leadership Development. Originally ordained in the Southern Baptist denomination in 1987, she transferred her ordination credentials to MCC in 1992. Rev. West holds M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. She published *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* with Pilgrim Press and is one of four editors of *The Queer Bible Commentary* published by SCM Press in 2006.

The Theologies Team is also served by staff support by Connie Meadows.

Statement of Purpose

Put simply, “theology” is “God talk.” Since our beginning, MCC has been talking about God as we have claimed that one can be “gay” and Christian. As MCC enters into its fifth decade, the need for theological discussion, both within and outside of the church, has never been greater. While language can never fully capture the mystery of God, careful thinking and speaking about God can increase our understanding.

Metropolitan Community Churches have always been ecumenical in nature, drawing together people from diverse theological backgrounds. We believe that our theological diversity is one of our greatest strengths. In a world increasingly divided by claims of theological orthodoxy and religious fundamentalism, our ability to intentionally engage our differences within a context of unity is one of the God-given gifts we have to offer the world. In a world increasingly bereft of hope due to indifference and secularism, MCC bears witness to the life transforming nature of God’s inclusive love. Indeed, MCC’s theological mission is to tear down walls and build up hope.

THE SIX QUESTIONS

1. What is Theology? How does it relate to the Christ Story?

2. What is the Theological Task of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC)?

3. How do we define the community to which we are called to minister?

4. How might we focus or bring to bear the Christian Gospel on the needs of the community we have defined?

5. How might we reflect or manifest that focusing task in our worship?

6. What is the unique emphasis of the Christian ministry of the UFMCC?

Our founders began MCC’s theological work in the early days of our movement through the Faith Fellowship and Order Commission, which sought to promote theological conversations within MCC and published “The Six Questions” — core questions that dealt with the mission and ministry of MCC. There is no time like the present for MCC to be engaged in theological work. Because issues of sexuality and spirituality continue to be debated in religious communities worldwide, and because of the increasing interest in the academic study of sexual identities, it is time to renew our call to articulate the many theologies that are present in our lived experience as God’s GLBTQ people.

The MCC Theologies Team seeks to create opportunities and provide resources that will enable “holy conversations” within our denomination about our various beliefs concerning the integration of sexuality and spirituality, the nature of Jesus, baptism, communion, GLBT people’s unique place on the margins of society, and the priesthood of all believers, among other things. Our experience in MCC is that theological labels and characterizations can be hurtful and misleading. Our hope is to build bridges across our theological differences and empower all people to do theology.

This team will also strive to articulate the unique theologies of MCC to the larger religious world, the academy, and our partners in social justice and human rights action.

Core Values

The Core Values of MCC as articulated in our Strategic Plan

- **Inclusion** – Love is our greatest moral value and resisting exclusion is a primary focus of our ministry. We want to continue to be conduits of faith where everyone is included in the family of God, and where all parts of our being are welcomed at God's table.
- **Community** – Offering a safe and open community for people to worship, learn and grow in their faith is our deep desire. We are committed to equipping ourselves and each other to do the work that God has called us to do in the world.
- **Spiritual Transformation** – Providing a message of liberation from the oppressive religious environment of our day or to those experiencing God for the first time is what guides our ministry. We believe that when people are invited to experience God through the life and ministry of Christ, lives will be transformed.
- **Social Action** – Working to talk less and do more, we are committed to resisting the structures that oppress people and standing with those who suffer under the weight of oppressive systems, being guided always by our commitment to Global Human Rights.

Guiding Principles

These additional guiding principles inform the work of the Theologies Team and the types of Holy Conversations we hope to encourage in local churches.

- **“Priesthood of All Believers.”** We believe that the work of theology belongs to the whole people of God and is not reserved for ordained professional ministers. Both lived experience and theological education are essential resources for this work.
- **“Sacredness of the Body.”** In many parts of Christian tradition, the body has been ignored and denigrated, while other parts of the tradition have been intentional about honoring the sacredness of embodiment. We are committed to re-integrating sexuality and other forms of physical experience with spirituality.
- **“No Talking About Us without Us.”** We aspire to include in our theological conversations the people most directly affected by the work we are doing. For example (and this is by no means a complete list), if we are talking about people of color, people of color will be participants in our conversation. If we are talking about HIV/AIDS, we will actively seek out the personal testimony of people infected/affected with HIV/AIDS. If we are talking about

women, we will prioritize the information we hear from women about their lived experiences. If we are talking about transgender issues, we will include transgender persons in our conversation. If we are addressing the concerns of youth or the elderly, we will listen for the voices of children and youth, or older people.

- **“Global Accountability.”** We are a global movement. We will include people from around the world in our theological work. We are aware of the cultural and contextual nature of all theologies.
- **“In the Margins, We are Blessed.”** We learn from the Biblical story of salvation and our own experiences that God is profoundly present in the margins. We commit ourselves to being attentive to where the margins are as they shift according to history and context. We will be aware of the privileges granted to people based on race, sex, gender, and physical ability. We call ourselves to be accountable to the lived experience and needs of society’s most vulnerable and marginalized. The birth of MCC resulted directly from our marginalization as queer people, and our charisms as a movement flow from that experience.
- **“Personal Ability and Responsibility.”** As articulated in MCC’s strategic plan, “We believe in everyone’s holy privilege to work out their own salvation.” We seek to empower every person to engage in intentional theological reflection and discovery that flows from the reality of their own experience of the divine mystery. We will listen to and honor the convictions of one another, believing that we come to know more about God and God’s movement in the world through shared insights than conclusions made in isolation. The willingness to live and worship amidst the tensions of our differing theologies speaks to our desire to encounter the mystery of God and transcends the need to be “right.”
- **“Respect for Theological Diversity.”** MCC’s vision statement proclaims that “While we are a Christian church who follows Jesus, we respect those of other faith traditions and work together with them to free all those who are oppressed by hate, disregard, and violence.” We recognize and affirm that people have many different names for God and many different paths to God that are as true for them as ours are for us. This recognition does not require that we leave behind our own beliefs, identities, or commitments.
- **“Theological and Practical Integration.”** We understand that theology does not exist for its own sake. The fullest measure of our faithfulness lies in how well we put our theologies into practice through our ethical actions and in our relationships with ourselves and one another.

Holy Conversations: Introduction

One of the ways in which the MCC Theologies Team seeks to “create opportunities and provide resources that will enable ‘holy conversations’ within our denomination about our various beliefs” is by providing resources that will help encourage and facilitate those discussions in local congregations. This resource is our first attempt to do so. This primer includes a suggested structure, some background material, and discussion questions on a number of theological topics. We are also working to expand the topical resources on an ongoing basis in order to supplement this initial material. We hope this resource will become a tool for local churches that want to create safe spaces for theological dialogue. We invite your feedback about the material, your experience of using it in your context, and your ideas for additional sessions.

Goals of Holy Conversations

It is probably most helpful to begin by stating what the goals of this study are NOT before moving on to a brief explanation of what we hope this resource will accomplish.

This study does NOT:

- aim to indoctrinate participants in a particular way of understanding the topics presented;
- define what is a “normative” understanding of any topic for the whole of MCC, a particular local church, or any church member;
- attempt to provide THE one right answer to any question posed.

This study DOES invite and encourage participants to:

- reflect on their own experiences of various issues, and especially their thoughts and/or feelings about what was “Holy” about that experience (e.g. how God was present or at work in it);
- articulate and share their experiences with others, and to listen to and respect the experiences and reflections of others, whether or not they agree or disagree;

- explore the connections between their various beliefs about a particular topic and the testimony offered in the experiences, opinions, and questions of others ... including the witness of Scripture and Church Tradition(s);
- make friends with any ambiguity or tension that might be present in the midst of conversations with diverse and divergent truths being claimed;
- notice and honor God (the “Holy”) *in* the conversation itself, rather than the materials that we hope will serve to meaningfully facilitate that discussion.

Contextualization

We are very aware that a number of things determine the “Context” of a particular local church at any given time (e.g. location, language, culture, identity, ideology, religious background, demographics of the group, or major events in the life of participants, the local church, and/or the world to name a few). What contributes to a very meaningful and transformative experience in one context might not work at all in another. It is also true that the specific format and structure of conversation and/or religious education and/or spiritual formation programming will differ from church to church (see note below on suggested structures). Therefore, we have attempted to compile some background material that will be useful at introducing the topic, as well as some questions for small and large group discussion. Each session begins with personal story(ies) to root these conversations in personal experience, and then moves on to a broader discussion “about” the topic, conversation we believe works best after participants have connected with and shared their own experiences. We have suggested a closing ritual or prayer for each section, hoping that participants can honor their time together and bless one another as they move forward on their spiritual journeys. We hope that you will be able to use most, if not all of this material, but we also know that context demands more than a “plug and play” resource.

You are the best authority on your community, and on the things that are most likely to encourage this type of “Holy Conversation.” You know the hopes and fears of your community, the flash points and the issues around which there may be pre-existing tension, uneasiness, or controversy. Please use these materials in the way you think will be most effective. Supplement them with additional material and resources, structure the conversations in whatever way works best for you, and use the questions that work best for you.

Sample Structures and Formats

Format. This resource will lend itself to a variety of formats and structures, from a discussion series of varying lengths to a retreat setting. Here are a few ideas:

- **Weekly Discussion Session.** This could occur in a Sunday School format (pre- or post-worship) or a consistent evening of the week. It could run consecutively for as many weeks as there are topics, or in smaller segments (e.g. 2 sets of 5, 3 sets of 3, etc.).
- **Monthly Discussion.** “Theology Monday” (First, Second, Third, or Fourth Monday or another day of the week) or “Theology Sunday” with a lunch/session after worship. This could keep people talking regularly throughout the year, making these types of conversations fairly natural and normal over time (a desirable outcome!).
- **Quarterly or Twice Annual Retreat Day** (or half-day)

Introductory / Orientation Session. We encourage you to have a session that is devoted entirely to a discussion about the goals of the study, guiding principles, and guidelines for dialogue and listening. It is important for participants to understand what these holy conversations are all about and what the ground rules will be for future sessions. This can also be a time for you to distribute the reading materials in print (or collect email addresses for electronic distribution). If you are unable to have a session to cover these things, it will be important to devote time during the first (and perhaps subsequent sessions) to review the guidelines.

Duration. The minimum time required for a particular conversation is probably around 90 minutes. If you need time to go over the guidelines for dialogue and listening, you may want to add another 30 minutes. You could also stretch a conversation over a couple of sessions or for a longer half-day or day-long session. For the latter, you may want to add in such things as time for journaling or a creative/experiential art project as a way of helping people connect with their own experiences prior to engaging in group discussions.

Small & Large Groups. 5-6 people is probably ideal for small group discussion in order to optimize the amount and quality of sharing that can take place. If your full class is fewer than 10-12, you may elect to have all of the conversations take place in one slightly larger group. If your space allows for it, space in separate rooms with enough space for contained conversation is ideal. You could be flexible and just allow the group to talk together, or if you feel it would be helpful or necessary, you could select a group leader and/or recording person in advance.

Topic Order. The order of these sessions is arbitrary. You can choose to present and engage in discussions about these topics in any order that suits you. You may want to group subjects that seem to go well together if you are having smaller series. We are hoping to develop additional topical resources that will be available throughout the year. Please let us know if you have specific topics you would like resources for.

Guidelines for Dialogue

The following Guidelines for Dialogue are based on the work of Visions, Inc. (www.visions-inc.com). They establish basic ground rules for safe, healthy conversations that will honor the diverse viewpoints and experiences of those engaged in conversation. We recommend discussing these guidelines in the introductory/orientation session and having copies posted and/or available in each conversation. It may even be a helpful grounding exercise to briefly review these at the beginning of every conversation. In the Facilitator Suggestions section which follows, an expanded explanation of each guideline is included for the initial introduction of this material.

- **“Try On”**
Be willing to try on ideas, ways of thinking or being that you may never have considered before, even or perhaps especially if you have a gut instinct to reject it out of hand.
- **“It’s OK to disagree”**
- **“It’s Not OK to shame, blame, and attack self or others”**
Engaging our differences is something we want to do and that we benefit from, but shaming, blaming or attacking ourselves or others is not a helpful way of engaging difference. Agree not to shame, blame, or attack others or ourselves.
- **“Self Focus” – “I” language.**
Focus on your own thoughts and feelings without universalizing them or assuming others/all people agree. Use “I” language to share your experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Be aware of how you are feeling and ask yourself what your feelings might be telling you. Share your feelings when appropriate.
- **“Practice Both/And Thinking”**
Not every question has an either/or right answer. The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth, not an opposing truth. “BUT” is a warning that Both/And thinking is not being practiced. BUT is generally diminutive, not additive. BUT shrinks back while AND expands.

GROUND RULES

- **Be Aware of “Intent/Impact”.**

Someone may intend one thing with a comment, but the impact may be very different. Take responsibility for both parts of the equation. If something impacts you negatively, be willing to ask if that is what the person intended.

- **Confidentiality.**

What is shared in the group needs to stay in the group. Personal information is shared by the person who owns the information, feelings, and experiences; not by others, unless they have asked and received permission.

Guidelines for Listening

Listening well is an important part of dialogue and conversation. The following tips for enhancing listening skills are taken from *Guidelines for Healthy Theological Discussion* by David Rudolph.

- Ask questions rather than make statements.
- Take a breath before speaking.
- Allow for silence.
- Ask yourself, “Whose perspective is left out in this discussion?”
- ‘Follow your disturbance.’ Notice when you are feeling tense, defensive. Ask yourself, “Where is this coming from—my past training, a painful event?” Try to put yourself in the other person’s place with regard to their passion for their view.

Facilitator Suggestions

Make sure that the *Guidelines for Dialogue* and *Listening* are clearly explained, understood, and agreed to as you enter into intentional Holy Conversations. The Guidelines for Dialogue are reprinted below along with some additional information and/or examples, which you may like to include as you are initially introducing this material.

Introduction

Establishing shared guidelines or ground rules for dialogue is intended to enable people to deal with difficult or complex issues productively, without terrorizing and/or hurting one another.

▪ “Try On”

When you’re shopping for shoes, you don’t buy the first pair of shoes you see. You have to try on even the attractive ones to see if they fit. Sometimes even the shoes you know you’re going to love hurt your feet; and the ones that might not be your first pick end up being the best shoes you’ve ever had. In the same way, be willing to try on ideas, ways of thinking or being that you may never have considered before, even or perhaps especially if you have a gut instinct to reject it out of hand.

Sometimes stretching in this way helps us learn, grow, or develop sensitivities we would not otherwise have. Trying on a new behavior or idea does not necessarily judge old behavior or ideas as wrong. It indicates a willingness to see the benefits and disadvantages of different ways of thinking/being.

▪ “It’s OK to disagree”

This may be self explanatory, but it is a value that we need to name. It is not necessary that we all think alike or agree about every matter. That would be boring. It is OK for us to disagree with one another about an idea, an opinion, or a decision and still value and care for one another. Because we value diversity, this is all the more important to name. Differences aren’t something we need to be afraid of. The next guideline is closely related to this one:

▪ “It’s Not OK to shame, blame, and attack self or others”

Engaging our differences is something we want to do and that we benefit from, but shaming, blaming or attacking ourselves or others is not a helpful way of engaging difference. We agree not to shame, blame, or attack others or ourselves.

Yelling, name-calling, stomping out of meetings, or refusing to talk to one another might be examples of this type of behavior, which we do not want to engage in. Other examples of shaming others might be to say to someone before hearing them out, “We’ve tried that before and it didn’t work.” Or “How could you possibly think that [e.g. something so stupid].” Shaming ourselves might be to belittle our own thoughts, such as saying, “This may be a silly idea, but ...” or “Probably no one will agree with me ...” Examples of blaming might be, “It’s all X’s fault that ...” or “If you hadn’t X, then Y wouldn’t have happened”

GROUND RULES

- **“Self Focus” – “I” language.**

There are two ways in which “self focus” can be helpful. The first is to focus on your own thoughts and feelings without universalizing them or assuming others/all people agree. Use “I” language to share your experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Phrases such as “everyone thinks,” “we all know,” or “you know” may indicate that we are not focusing on self and that assumptions are being made of how others think.

The second part of self-focus is to focus on yourself and be aware of how you are feeling in a given conversation. Be aware of how you are feeling and ask yourself what your feelings might be telling you. Share your feelings when appropriate. Especially in difficult conversation or during times of disagreement, our feelings may be telling us something. We may need to learn to externalize the feelings when appropriate, simply to name them (i.e. “I’m feeling frustrated, afraid, or angry ...”) rather than acting them out hoping others will guess and respond to them.

- **“Practice Both/And Thinking”**

Not every question has an either/or right answer. This can be especially determined by context. This may be true in X context, but in Y culture or context, the other thing is true. We can be especially mindful of this in terms of how we do or don’t bring the assumptions of “mainstream” church into queer contexts. The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth, not an opposing truth. “BUT” is a warning that Both/And thinking is not being practiced. BUT is generally diminutive, not additive. BUT shrinks back while AND expands.

- **Be Aware of “Intent/Impact”.**

Someone may intend one thing with a comment, but the impact may be very different. Take responsibility for both parts of the equation.

- **Confidentiality.**

What is shared in the group needs to stay in the group. Personal information is shared by the person who owns the information, feelings, and experiences; not by others, unless they have asked and received permission. If you aren’t sure if something is confidential or not, ask. Err on the side of NOT sharing information that concerns what someone else thinks, feels, or has experienced.

GROUND RULES

From time to time in almost every conversation involving a group or a topic matter that people feel passionately about, there can be a lack of balance between the amount of input that people give to the conversation. Some people are shy and need ample silence before they will enter a conversation; some require time to think and formulate what they are thinking before they are ready to share; others are so excited and comfortable speaking in groups that they jump in to fill any silence or have a tendency to talk over others. When you are aware of one or more people monopolizing a conversation, or others who don't seem to have contributed at all, it might be helpful to try one or more of the following.

- “Talking Stick” – identify some object (stick, ball, etc.) that one must be holding when they wish to share. This can be passed around and helps ensure that only one person at a time is talking. It can also make it more evident when there is a lack of balance and equity between conversation partners.
- Specify an amount of time that must pass between comments.
- Keep track in some way of the number of contributions made by each person; make a point of noting when someone has under-contributed (e.g., “Is there anything you’d like to add to the conversation from your experience?”) or over-contributed (e.g., “You’ve made quite a few comments, can you hold that thought while we hear some of the folks who haven’t yet shared?”). It may be necessary in certain cases for you to talk with someone outside of the group about their amount or manner of contributing. Especially if you are having multiple sessions, it might be good to work one-on-one with anyone who might need some specific feedback and/or encouragement.
- Allow five-ten minutes of journaling or personal reflection on the questions for small and large group discussion to allow people to center their thoughts prior to having those discussions.

MINISTRY

Focus

What is ministry? The Greek word we translate as ministry, *diakonos*, means service. So a working definition, proposed by R. Paul Stevens, might be "ministry is service to God and on behalf of God in the church and in the world."¹

This may sound overly broad to our ears. What about ordination, word and sacrament, titles, collars--you know, *the* ministry? Many discussions of ministry do in fact begin with the ministry of ordained clergy as it has evolved, and then asks which functions laity may be permitted to perform.

This conversation, however, begins with what all Christians share in common, the privilege and responsibility of serving God, *ministry*. As Letty Russell says, "Ministry is the response of each and every Christian to Christ's call to freedom."² We will sketch a brief history of how attitudes to ministry have developed, through history and in our UFMCC context. We will explore what it has meant, and can mean, to be clergy or laity. First however, we will begin with a few quotes, and then some brief testimonies of people describing their understanding of ministry.

Centering Quotes on Ministry

"Christians are told that ministry is something that everyone in the church does, that some people do it more than others, that not everything is ministry, that ministry may relate to certain functions more than others, but may 'happen' in almost any context, is done by some full-time but others part time, yet ministry *par excellence* is what the pastor does. No wonder good Christians are screwed up."
(R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, p. 132)

"The twentieth-century professionalization of ministry has created a clericalism by which the ordained minister becomes the skilled provider of services and church members, at least in matters of faith, become passive consumers of religious goods."
(B. Edmon Martin and Lance Barker, *Multiple Paths to Ministry*, p. 178)

¹ Stevens, p. 133

² Russell, p. 51

MINISTRY

"(Ministry of the whole people of God) will be realized only if the 'non-clergy' are willing to move up, if the 'clergy' are willing to move over, and if all of God's people are willing to move out."
(Thomas Gillespie, *The Laity in Biblical Perspective*, p. 327)

"I myself am an ordained clergyperson in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)... I must confess, however, that the growing alienation and disillusionment with the church and clerical structures that so many women share are part of my life as well. I am very clear at this point in my life that I would rather not be ordained, as I do not believe that ordination makes one any different than other baptized Christians, and I know that the received traditions and practice of ordination are frequently harmful to the health of many lesbian or heterosexual women, gay men, and laypersons, as well as to the health of the church.
(Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, p. 53)

"Neither the hairshirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."
(Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: a Theological ABC*, p. 95)

Some Testimonies about Ministry

From Linda Beckstead, MCC Omaha

Although Brenner-Beckstead Ministries has been official since 2005, my partner Susie Brenner and I would tell you that God has been preparing us for our work for nearly a decade. Susie started a Christian band, The Mustard Seeds, in Kansas City, and I began helping my pastors at MCC Omaha with pulpit fill, and assisting them with holy unions, memorial services, and funerals. Not long after our paths crossed, we realized that we'd like to begin sharing a ministry with others outside our church homes.

When Susie and I begin praying about how to proceed, I often wondered about this label of "ministry." It sounded so clergy-bound--a select group of people anointed by God. And while we both believed that God has blessed and ordained those called to become pastors, we spent a lot of time wondering whether it would be possible for God to send lay people into ministry. Perhaps the pressing question was whether God would bless us, specifically Susie and Linda, in ministry.

Over the last five years, and after much prayer, we began to better understand what we now claim as our calling. We soon defined our primary outreach: Susie was best able to connect to those who were broken or healing from addiction, and I was able to share my version of Biblical parables using my humorous, personal experiences. But we also wanted our ministry to be one of joy, and we found that in sharing music and stories each time we gather. As we continue to pray for discernment, our ministry continues to evolve, and God continues to challenge us. Our biggest discovery, or maybe it's been a confirmation, is that God is in the middle of our ministry, if we allow it.

From Ken Greene, MCC of the Rockies (Denver, CO)

When I decided that I was a gay man and that could jeopardize my career in ministry, I left the church and the traditional path to ordination. I have always viewed other activities I am involved with as ministry. I came out playing volleyball in Cheesman Park. I found many people without a connection to a community of any kind. I felt volleyball could be that place where they fit in, they were cared about, and they belonged

MINISTRY

and were important. I also carried that same sense of ministry into my real estate business. I find that many of my clients open up to me in ways that extend beyond routine conversations about their real estate needs. Making sure that they know that I care about them is a powerful way to share the gospel. This is the ministry that I feel called to. I love it. I have no backup plan.

From Carla Sherrell, MCC of the Rockies (Denver, CO)

My work and my life in the world are supporting others in developing inclusive and socially just communities. It is deeply spiritual. My awareness of this work as ministry has not come to me in a direct manner. No voice or angel came to me to deliver the message that "this is it" How do I know that this is my calling?

1) At the time I was first exposed to doing this work, I was in a quandary about the next steps in my personal and professional lives. Upon experiencing this work as a participant, my sense of loss and fear disappeared. I thought, "This is my next step."

2) The first time I facilitated this work I felt, for the first time in my life, that I completely trusted my skills *and* my limitations. The latter was remarkable. I, an African heritage, gay woman, raised in poverty, felt a deep sense of peace. This peace came from knowing that I would survive even in my fallibility.

3) Upon coming to the decision that I wanted to pursue this work, I discovered that it required *much* of me. It required that I sit still and wait for my corporeal self to connect with spiritual aspects of myself that I had forgotten how to access and utilize.

4) I discovered that this calling was grounded in humility. I came to understand that, if I was to live in the state of facilitating social justice through love, I must give my ego a rest and to pray for the wisdom to see beyond it.

I have come to believe that my calling and ministry is grounded in my own openness to transformation for inclusiveness and social justice. Raised as a Christian, I believe that the teachings of Jesus are all about this mission.

From Jim Burns, MCC of the Rockies (Denver, CO)

MCC of the Rockies had been exploring establishing a parish extension in Boulder for some time. Through a series of educational programs, we had gathered a small group of interested local people, who were meeting with Denver folks who felt called to this project.

We had offered one public worship service, and our group was planning the next one. On a whim, I asked Kelly and Lorelei, two UC Boulder students, if they'd like to consecrate communion together.

"Sure," they said, and I thought no more about it.

It wasn't until the service itself that I felt the power of what we were doing. In their own Roman Catholic tradition, Kelly and Lorelei could never hope to serve in this way, no matter how much training, education, or certification they received. Yet in MCC, they were welcome to perform this ministry at only the second service they ever attended. It was one of those moments that prove to me the power, and the importance, of MCC's witness.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Ministry

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Which of the above testimonies did you most relate to? Why?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What were you taught growing up about ministry? How has that changed as you got further on your spiritual journey?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Some of the stories described church work as ministry (preaching, singing) others talked about things outside of church (work, social activities). Are both ministry? Are they different types of ministry, or the same?

Additional Thoughts About Ministry

SERVING GOD TOGETHER: A History of Attitudes Toward Ministry

The ways that ministry and God's calling have been understood have developed throughout history. We can start with the people of Israel after reaching the Promised Land. They were called into a community marked by a covenant with God, and each person's part was to be a full member of that community, obeying the law, living justly with their neighbor, and worshiping God. Liturgical leadership was reserved to the Levites, a hereditary order of priests.

Occasionally God would call individuals out for a special purpose (Moses, Deborah, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah), but these people were exceptions to the rule. While Moses once wished that God's Spirit would fall on all people, and the prophet Joel envisioned a time when the Spirit would be poured on all humankind, most people did not experience an individual call; they simply took their place as a faithful member of the community.

Jesus preached a gospel of God's indwelling presence, and called people to repent, follow him and to participate in his ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons. It may be fair to say that Jesus called everyone he met into ministry. Some women and men he mentored closely, and others he healed and sent on their way. Jesus himself was not a member of the clerical caste of his day, and he chose to work largely outside of the temple system. Education and credentialing were never a requirement to be a disciple of Jesus.

In Acts, we see the church begin to form an ongoing structure for ordering its life together. People were commissioned to do ministry together (Paul, Barnabas, Silas) and there was the beginning of conflicts over authority (the Jerusalem leadership vs. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles). Offices began to form as need arose (deacons in Acts 6) and people were commissioned for ministry based on a number of criteria, including character, having been a witness to the resurrection, or in one case (Matthias) the casting of lots.

Paul's writings reveal his belief that all Christians are called to ministry, and that while each has different gifts and a different place in the body, all are of equal value. In the writings of the early church there are no clergy/lay distinctions made; all believers are *kleros* (*appointed, endowed*), just as all believers are *laos* (*the whole people of God*).³ All are clergy, all are laity, there is no difference. Ordination as we know it was not yet a practice, "there is nothing in the Bible like a hierarchical pattern of ordination, ordination for life,

³ Stevens, 5, 26, 32

or ordination as a sacrament that conveys grace, ordination that leaves an indelible mark on the ordained and gives the priest the exclusive right to celebrate the eucharist."⁴

The last in that list is significant, given that many believe that one of the reasons we need clergy is that they alone are empowered to consecrate communion. In fact, in none of the many New Testament discussions of proper and improper ways to practice communion is it implied that certain people are needed to officiate, the community makes the meal holy.

Different offices do emerge, including elders, presbyters, bishops/overseers, deacons/deaconesses, evangelists, apostles, prophets, and pastor-teachers. These were roles that qualified people filled as needed, not a separate status. They may have been defined differently from church to church. One office is conspicuously missing from the list of New Testament leadership terms, *hierens*, or priest, is only used to refer to Jesus (Hebrews) or to the entire community (Revelation). Not until the second century did individuals begin to be called priests.⁵

As the church continued to grow, this formalization continued. While a careful reading of the gospels and epistles reveals many more than twelve apostles, including women (Mary, Junia), a belief emerged that only the Twelve were truly commissioned by Jesus into ministry, and that they had they had the authority to transmit that status through the laying on of hands (apostolic succession). By the third century only those who were ordained by the hierarchy were considered *kleros* (clergy), all others were *laos* (laity). Reasons for this shift include a perceived need for standardization due to increasing theological diversity (aka heresies), and imitation of the structures of the Greek-Roman world. During this time women ceased to exercise the ministry of *kleros*, and the structures became increasingly hierarchical and self-perpetuating. Priests and bishops were granted enormous authority; consider this quote from the Apostolic Constitutions:

The bishop is your ruler and governor, your king
and potentate, he is next after God your earthly God,
who has a right to be honored by you.⁶

Roman Emperor Constantine's proclamation that Christianity was the state religion created a world where everyone was nominally Christian, and (much like in Israel) people were called simply to be a faithful member of the community. It began to be believed that only those who worked in the service of the church (monks, nuns, friars, priests) were truly called by God. From the fourth to the 16th centuries, clericalism grew gradually stronger.

The bishop of Rome came to be regarded as the head of
the church on earth; the language of worship ceased to
be the language of the people; the clergy dressed differently
and were prepared for ministry in an enculturing seminary;
ordination became an absolute act so that congregations
were no longer needed for the celebration of eucharist;
clergy became celibate and thus distant from the normal
experience of the laity; the cup was removed from the laity in the eucharist."⁷

⁴ Stevens, 157

⁵ Stevens, 146

⁶ Warkentin, 43

⁷ Stevens, 45

MINISTRY

It was practices like these that Martin Luther and other reformers reacted against, articulating the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Luther taught that all work, all vocations can be honoring to God and considered ministry. "The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in church, and by works done therein."⁸

While Luther, John Calvin and others also opposed some of the extremes of the clerical system, most Protestant traditions did retain the practice of ordination and the division of laity and clergy. Some of the reasons include order and stability, respect for tradition, and the now established belief that ordination was required to offer the sacraments. With only a few exceptions, such as Quakers, the distinction between clergy and laity continues to this day.

Some marginalized communities find value in continuing the clerical office. For example, not too long ago African-Americans in the U.S. were shut out of most professions; and clergy became an important source of community leadership. Many women, if they are in a denomination that ordains them, find special meaning not only in ordination itself but also in the symbols that accompany it (others seek to redefine the office in a less hierarchical manner). Many gay and lesbian people have sought out MCC precisely because they could not be ordained openly in their own tradition.

One of the hallmarks of MCC's current values is to embrace the concept of the priesthood of all believers giving laity a stake in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Metropolitan Community Church of Charlotte cite 1 Peter 2: 5-10:

"...you also, as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own, that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light..."

Many MCC churches incorporate the Priesthood of All Believers as a guiding principle. MCC defines this value in a document called "MCC Creates Communities of Justice."

"MCC affirms the universal priesthood of all believers, and lay people minister actively at all levels. Programs provide opportunities for lay training and networking, lay-oriented spiritual renewal, and grass roots theologizing in which the doctrine, beliefs and ministry of MCC are derived from people in local churches."

However, this belief system was not among initial MCC values. In the retelling of MCC's early history in the document "UFMCC First Quarter Century," Rev. Kittredge Cherry relates that ordained clergy had a dominant role in the growth of the denomination. Cherry describes a strong desire to identify with clergy at the first General Conference in 1970. Here, the first bylaws called for the ordination of deacons, exhorters—later called student clergy—licensed ministers, and ordained ministers. A layperson, Richard Ploen, was elected to the first board of elders, and was ordained on the spot! Only ordained ministers could consecrate communion, except in remote places.

Structural changes empowered lay people from 1973-84 and allowed them to serve as district coordinator, a predecessor to the regional elder system. In 1981, Michael Mank was elected as the first lay

⁸ quoted in Stevens, 77

MINISTRY

elder and a bylaws revision affirmed the “universal priesthood of all believers.” This affirmation was further defined at the 1983 General Conference when lay people were listed among those now allowed to equally celebrate and consecrate communion. This decision may have had particular significance since MCC's inclusive communion is one of its defining sacraments separating it from other denominations.

Because MCC's Bylaws state that all people are part of the priesthood of all believers, laity can participate in many of the activities that some religions reserve for clergy including preaching, consecrating communion, and providing pastoral care. The Bylaws also state that ordained clergy are professionally trained to build up the Body of Christ and equip the saints, which again underscores the denomination's commitment to empower and train laity called to ministry. UFMCC in its short history has made several changes to affirm the mutual ministry of all people; where might God lead us in the future?

Biblical Passages About Ministry

Genesis 1:26-31
Exodus 3:1-12
Numbers 11:26-30
Joel 2:28-29
Mark 1:14-20

Acts 2:1-13
Acts 6:1-6
1 Corinthians 12
1 Peter 2:9-10

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): What is your ministry? Do you know? Is it practiced primarily inside or outside of church settings?

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): As we prepared this study, Linda Beckstead expressed a profound shock at the idea that Jesus was not a clergyperson. Did this surprise you? Why or why not?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): MCC has grown and changed over the years in how we have practiced the priesthood of all believers. Are there any appropriate next steps that would further implement this value?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What was the most challenging idea you heard/read in this study?

Pulling it All Together: A Ritual of Blessing

We invite you to close with a time of individual blessing for each person and the ministry they have been called to. One by one, ask each participant if they are ready to name a ministry they currently practice or feel called to explore. Then have a representative of the group (you may rotate this role) pray that God would bless, lead, and equip that person for their ministry.

As an option, you might consider the ancient practice of laying on of hands. This is simply a method of prayer where the group gathers around the person being prayed for, and gently touches them (on their arms, back, shoulder etc.) as they pray together. It was a frequent biblical practice as people were commissioned into ministry. Please be sure to ask if everyone (recipient and those praying) are comfortable with the touching aspect of this ritual before you proceed.

Additional Resources

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Palmer, Parker J. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward and Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

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Warkentin, Marjorie. *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View*. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982.

SEXUALITY & SPIRITUALITY

Focus

A heartfelt longing to reconcile homosexuality and Christian teaching led Troy Perry to establish Metropolitan Community Church, and the integration of sexuality and spirituality remains at the core of MCC's Statement of Purpose. This holy conversation invites participants to work through the thorny spiritual issues that arise as a result of both their own sexuality and the many sexualities and sexual expressions found within MCC, and to consider how our sexual practices and experiences can be a gateway to a more intimate relationship with God.

A Testimony about Integrating Sexuality & Spirituality: One Man's Journey

Contributed by Skip Chasey

In my slightly conservative, WASP family there were two subjects that, if not absolutely off-limits, were considered impolite topics for discussion: money and sex. Because of that, and because of the paucity of sex education in the public schools that I attended, and because the Baptist church of my youth discouraged any talk of sex and sexuality other than that which came from the pulpit, I grew up somewhat sexually ignorant. Indeed, until I began college I was all but asexual. Oh, I had a small series of prom dates and short-lived girlfriends with whom I made out (only once venturing beyond first base, and then only barely reaching second), but that was more because of social expectations and peer identification than anything else. There was for me no strong sexual component to those interactions, and I had no awareness of that being unusual in any way. I certainly had no idea that I was gay; indeed, that possibility never even occurred to me.

Such ignorance was both a blessing and a curse, a curse in that my sexual naiveté contributed to my not fitting in with the rest of the boys of my youth, and a blessing in that I experienced none of the guilt, shame and self-loathing that marks the childhood and adolescence of so many gay men. I simply didn't know. Ignorance can sometimes truly be bliss.

It wasn't until I was in college that my sexual awakening occurred. The story behind that would make for a good soap opera arc; suffice it to say that the first time I went "all the way" with someone it was with my best friend Jamie, in the shower of my parents' bathroom while they were out of town, sometime during our

sophomore year. Thirty-four years later the steady drumming of warm water upon my naked back will oftentimes bring me to arousal.

But I had figured out that I was gay even before that fateful experience—sex with Jamie simply confirmed it. And once again, by grace, I experienced virtually no guilt or shame. Having been “raised right,” I knew that I was inherently good, and I intuitively knew that if being gay was a part of who I was, then that, too, had to be good. My only concern during that early coming out time was that I might not really be gay, that I might be heading down a path that wasn’t authentically mine. It would take several more sexual experiences (alas, none of which occurred in a shower) before that concern fell away.

So right from the start my sexuality was intrinsically intertwined with my spirituality. However, my understanding of the symbiosis of that connection lay dormant until 1996, by which time I had been in two committed, monogamous relationships, one for fourteen years that ended with Victor’s death in October of 1992, and the other for three years that ended with Gary and I parting amiably, albeit sadly, in the Spring of 1997. While I wasn’t consciously integrating sexuality and spirituality in either of those relationships, or even had a conceptual understanding of such integration, I knew that each relationship, being rooted in love, was eminently pleasing to God. It was only after attending a weekend retreat for the men of MCCLA led by Rev. Jim Mitulski in 1996 that the desire to consciously integrate my sexuality and spirituality was kindled.

Both the title of that retreat—“Men Talking Sex”—and its premise were simple: as (supposedly) sexually evolved gay men, we have no trouble discussing sex and our sexual experiences using generalized language, but many, perhaps most, of us still find it tremendously difficult to talk about what specifically turns us on. Exploring and identifying the reasons behind that and actually engaging in a facilitated, supportive, intimately personal discussion of this sensitive topic was the focus of the retreat, and a profound sexual and spiritual healing occurred for many in attendance, myself included. Jim encouraged those of us who had benefited from the retreat to continue engaging in this discussion on a regular basis, and four of us did as he suggested, meeting monthly in each other’s homes for nearly two years.

What was most significant for me about that retreat and those subsequent meetings was that I finally fessed up to my spiritual community about being a leatherman or, more accurately, about wanting to be a leatherman. I say “wanting to be a leatherman” because while I had persuaded both of my lovers to engage with me in some of the sexual activities that fall under the category of “leathersex” (one with more enthusiasm than the other), and while I had for years been making more and more frequent forays into leather bars and the clandestine world of leathermen and leathersex, it was only relatively recently that I had come out—first to myself and then to Gary—about how important this form of sexual expression was to my sexual fulfillment.

The truth was that my earliest erotic memory, going back to age 3, involved bondage dominance and submission, and that erotic focus had only intensified as I got older. I knew that I was “kinky” long before I knew that I was gay. And like those who become aware of their homosexual nature at a young age, I also knew not to talk about it—that’s where my sexual shame lay. That shame didn’t stop me from acting on my desires, however, both as an adolescent (thank God for the Boy Scouts!) and as an adult, but I did so from a very dis-integrated place. And so while I may have been born kinky, I wasn’t yet “leather”—I had yet to fully expose this part of my sexual shadow to the light of consciousness—and the light of God—and do the integration work that claiming the additional identity of “leatherman” would require.

The root word of integration is integrity, which means “a state of wholeness”, and one definition of healing is “to make whole.” Integration leads to healing, and thanks be to God my burden of shame was soon lifted

following the conscious integration of all parts of my sexual self. Only by claiming my complete sexual identity, without shame and without apology, was a full integration of my sexuality and spirituality possible. This journey of integration has led me to some amazing initiatory, rite-of-passage, Self- (with a capital “S”) realization and, dare I say, mystical experiences, experiences through which I’ve made direct and embodied connections with the Divine.

Some Centering Quotes on Sexuality & Spirituality

“The Bible isn’t anti-sex. ... It sings the praises of sexual pleasure and desire.”
(Teresa Hornsby, *Sex Texts from the Bible*)

“Sexuality and spirituality are, after all, closely linked in the Bible and in our personal experience. ... Sexual experience and expression, like spiritual experience and expression, are moved and driven by a deep inner vital force in our personalities that prompts us to reach out for the kind of connection with the other that we intuitively believe will make us whole and complete.”

(J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*)

“It will not do for gay persons to try to place their gayness to one side, as it were, when embarking on a deeper spiritual quest. Gayness is all about whom and how we love, and love is the most fundamental of spiritual emotions. Gay persons also cannot set aside their sexuality, because we inhabit physical bodies of the same gender that arouses us sexually. We of all people must learn to integrate emotions, sexuality, and spirituality to succeed in the task of spiritual enlightenment.”

(William Schindler, *Gay Tantra*)

“When we touch the place in our lives where sexuality and spirituality come together, we touch our wholeness and the fullness of our power, and at the same time our connection with a power larger than ourselves.”

(Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*)

“Though the Bible handles this subject matter [sex] much differently than the secular world, it does have much to say on the subject. I can only think of one reason for matters pertaining to sex to be so frequently discussed in the Bible—sexuality must be very closely related to spirituality.”

(Bob Deffinbaugh, *Sex and the Spiritual Christian*)

“I think I am not unusual to have grown up with a deeply entrenched split between body and spirituality. In our culture this division is expressed as the split between matter and spirit, or, more specifically, between the body’s sexuality and spirituality. It is worth considering whether this is the predisposition of all established religions, or predominantly that of the Judeo-Christian cultures of the West. While living in the East, it became apparent that within Eastern religions there are two distinct schools. One sees the relationship to the body and matter ideologically as the foundation of suffering and confusion; the other views the body and the elemental energies in nature as fundamental to the vitality of our spiritual life. These two views exemplify the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric traditions.”

(Rob Preece, *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*)

“Unfortunately, the church has spent the better part of 20 centuries overmoralizing sex. There is no biblical foundation for this. If one asks why this should have happened, the only way an answer can be found is that either powerful authorities in the early church were uncomfortable about their own sexuality and projected their pathology upon Christian theology and ethics; or the bishops realized very early that

overmoralizing sexual behavior offered an enormous tool for control of the constituency of the church.”
(J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*)

“Sexuality is much more of an integral and holistic part of the human experience than the activity of genital sex. It is the source of our capacity for relationship, for emotional and erotic connection, for intimacy, for passion and for transcendence. It is a holistic expression of our human experience as body-selves. ... Consequently, sexuality is ‘neither incidental nor detrimental’...to spirituality, but an important and integrated dimension of it. ... In other words, it is through the sensuality of human sexuality (which includes but is not limited to genital sex) that individuals can experience a direct erotic connection with the God of one’s understanding. In the language of Christian theology, embodiment is incarnation—the Holy is known and experienced in the flesh.”

(M.J. Horn *et al*, ‘Sexuality and Spirituality: The Embodied Spirituality Scale’, *Theology and Sexuality*)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Sexuality & Spirituality

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): In what ways have you been able to integrate your sexuality and your spirituality? What integration still needs to occur? What, if anything, is getting in the way of a full and complete integration? What, if anything, needs healing in your life, and how might that need for healing be related to spiritual/sexual dis-integration?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How easy was it for you to engage in conversation about such a personal and sensitive topic? What insights did you gain from sharing your experiences and thoughts about sexuality and spirituality, and what did you gain from listening to others sharing theirs as well? What, if anything, was challenging for you about this conversation? Is this a conversation that you would be willing to continue?

Additional Thoughts About Sexuality & Spirituality

MCC Stories, Our Stories

Within MCC there is a wide variety of sexual orientations, identities, expressions and experiences among its members, laity and clergy alike. We are gay men and lesbian women, bisexuals and heterosexuals of both genders. We’re legally married (or desire to be), in committed relationships and happily single and sexual. We’re sexually monogamous, serially monogamous, promiscuous, polyamorous and have open relationships. We enjoy anonymous sex, group sex, recreational sex and one night stands. Our sexual proclivities run from mild to wild, with some of us joyously fulfilled by “vanilla” sexual experiences while for others of us only the esoteric experiences of leathersex, fetishism and BDSM will do. We have differing opinions and beliefs when it comes to the ethics, politics and practice (or not) of safer sex. We’re staunch in our assessments of what constitutes a suitable sexual partner, and exceedingly flexible with respect to their appearance, body type and, at times, even their gender. And some of us are contentedly celibate.

Then there are our diverse cultural differences and ethnic histories with respect to sexuality and, in particular, sexuality as it relates to our Christian faith. For example, Kelly Brown Douglas points out that “Pre-Christian Hebrew life showed little tendency toward seeing the body as an impediment to spirituality. Sexuality apparently was appreciated as a gift from God, as evidenced...by the celebration of sensuality in the Song of Solomon. Yet Christianity gradually became influenced by those aspects of Greek thought that

denigrated the body and fostered a profound split between the body and the spirit. ... [This] 'spiritualistic dualism' alienated persons from their sexuality as it demanded the denial of their body-selves."¹ But, she goes on to note, "Central to the faith of Black church people, a legacy from the religion of the enslaved, is the attestation of Jesus as Christ, the embodied presence of God, and the avowal that Black people are created in God's own image. These two theological confessions suggest the centrality of sexuality to the Black Christian Faith."²

While the Bible has a lot to say about sex and sexuality, only a few passages speak to the joys of sex and affirm our sexual nature. When the Bible was written, it was expected and accepted that people would have active and passionate sex lives—there was little need for the writers of the Bible to encourage early Christians in that regard. Therefore, when those Biblical authors addressed sexuality, they mostly focused on the perils of sexual immorality. Interestingly, very few specific sex *acts* are labeled as inherently immoral. Rather, it's a small handful of sexual *conditions* and *practices* that, rightly or wrongly, have been deemed to be immoral in most translations of the Bible: adultery; fornication; incest; lust; masturbation; bestiality; and homosexuality.

MCC has led the Christian world in examining what the Bible actually says and does not say about homosexuality, and respected Biblical scholars from all parts of the Christian church have subsequently challenged the long-standing, erroneous translations and interpretations of Scripture that pertain to same-sex loving. As a result, only the most unenlightened still believe that the Bible categorically condemns gay men and lesbian women who engage in loving sexual activity with persons of the same gender. So what about the other sexual practices that the Bible supposedly decries as immoral? Should we not likewise reject conventional wisdom regarding those as well, and instead endeavor to understand what "sexual immorality" actually meant for the people of that specific time and place (and how and why that was so), and then apply that understanding to our own contemporary situations and circumstances?

For example, what constitutes fornication for a people not permitted to legally wed, like those of us residing in most of the United States? How, in this third decade of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, could masturbation be considered sinful? And if the partners in a marriage or committed relationship are agreeable to one or both having outside sexual relationships, is it still adultery?

"This has been difficult", Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson states, "because for the most part we have seen our theological agenda as trying to 'normalize' gay sexuality for the public, struggling for our human rights, wanting simply to be included in the panorama of human life and lifestyle. We've been bogged down by the necessity to do biblical or theological *apologetics*. But what if we actually claimed a role in *reshaping the basic questions* concerning God and human sexuality?"³

"Queer Theology" is a sexual theology. Getting clear about where we fall on the sexual morality scale is fundamental to our spiritual development.

¹ Douglas, Kelly Brown, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Orbis Books, 1999) 25, 29

² Douglas, 112

³ Wilson, Rev. Nancy, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (Harper Collins, 1995) 231

Biblical Passages About Sexuality

Genesis 1:26-31a
Ruth 1:6-18
I. Samuel 17:55-18:4
Proverbs 5:18-19
Song of Solomon 1:2
Song of Solomon 4:10-15

Song of Solomon 5:2-6
Song of Solomon 7:1-13
Song of Solomon 8:1-4
Song of Solomon 8:6-7
John 1:1-14

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): How can we maintain integrity with our own sexual ethics and morality and still “be church” with others who have different morals and ethics when it comes to sexuality?

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Where as a church do we draw the line with respect to sexuality and morality? Must there be a line? Why or why not?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Reflection): For many of us, “gay”, “lesbian”, “straight”, or “bisexual” is not the entirety of our sexual identity. Would it benefit us as a church to publicly acknowledge and recognize all of the sexualities and sexual identities within the membership of MCC? If so, how would it be beneficial to us?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What would be the risks of being more open about the many sexualities and sexual identities among the members of MCC? Are the potential benefits worth the risk?

Pulling it All Together: An Integration Meditation

(Note: The meditative nature of this exercise benefits greatly from having an appropriate piece of sacred music played at low volume throughout its duration. The exercise begins with the participants sitting in a circle; if the group is so large that a single circle is not possible the participants can sit in smaller circles consisting of at least six participants per circle.)

Sitting with your eyes gently closed, hold your hands open in your lap one on top of the other, with the fingers of one hand overlapping those of the other. Begin to breathe slowly and deeply, but gently, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your slightly open mouth. On your in-breath, imagine energy coming up from the core of the earth, through your perineum (your root chakra), up the center of your body and out through the top of your head (your crown chakra). On your out-breath, imagine energy traveling down from the heavens through the top of your head, down along your neck and spine and out through your perineum.

After a couple of minutes of this mindful breathing, allow your imagination to create a mental image that is especially sacred to you. Hold that image in your mind’s eye as you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, and then return your focus to the energy that’s running through your body in both directions. Next allow your imagination to create an image that holds a strong erotic charge for you, continuing to breathe slowly

and deeply and, after a few moments, return your focus to the energy running through your body. Without hurrying, continue to shift your focus between the sacred image, the erotic image and the energy flowing between your chakras.

As the music comes to an end, allow all of the images to fade away, and then bring your attention back to your breath. Allow your breath to return to its normal pattern and, when you feel ready, gently open your eyes.

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SEXUALITY & SPIRITUALITY

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*This book, in its “Spirit and the Flesh” section, contains an essay by Rev. Troy Perry entitled *A Meditation on Religion and Leatherspace*.

ECUMENICAL / INTER-RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Focus

We live in an increasingly pluralistic world in which people from many diverse faith traditions and people claiming no faith tradition live side by side and must find ways to live peacefully and work cooperatively with one another. Because MCC has been an ecumenical community since its inception, we have experience “being the church” together in just such a context of spiritual diversity. This holy conversation invites participants to explore the sacred value of building and nurturing relationships with others across lines of denomination, background, or tradition.

Note about Terminology:

Ecumenical refers to relationships with other Christian Denominations (e.g. Roman Catholic, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Anglican...) and *Inter-religious* means others of non-Christian faiths (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist...)

Testimonies about Ecumenical / Inter-religious Relationships as Gifts from God

The Importance of Building Alliances: My Experience with the North Carolina Council of Churches Contributed by Stan C. Kimer (February 2010)

Over a decade ago, I was very active in MCC working on issues around racial justice. A natural extension of this ministry was getting engaged with the North Carolina Council of Churches’ Racial Justice Committee.

I was warmly received and started to build friendships with the various committee members who came from various other denominations: Episcopal, Methodist, AME-Zion, Catholic, Presbyterian and others. The committee was pleased to have an MCCer at the table on this important discussion and several times I heard favorable comments about how I as an MCCer was indeed concerned on much broader issues of Christian justice than just the LGBT issue.

Over time I was asked to be on the executive board and now serve as First Vice President with intentions to serve as President in the near future. I have built close meaningful relationships with people across many denominations that care about issues such as the working poor, climate and environment, immigration, racial justice and more. As I worked closely with many others on the board, they came to understand my

being a gay man as only one aspect of my personhood and Christianity. And building these alliances garnered support for the time with LGBT issues did come before the council. I was able to share openly about how it hurt me deeply when my relationship is not recognized by other Christians, and this helped the NC Council of Churches board overwhelmingly passing a statement opposing anti-gay marriage amendments to the state or federal constitution.

I look forward to my long continued involvement with the council.

**My Personal Experience with “The Fellowship” –
How Ecumenical Partnerships Transform Us
Contributed by Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson (January 2010)**

Our intentional process of “building a healthy relationship” with The Fellowship began just over two years ago.

There are three things we want to lift up about that experience

1. The first retreat we held with Fellowship and MCC leaders, in which we really laid a lot of cards on the table, expressed our hopes and our fears, was powerful and life-changing for me. The Holy Spirit was ever-present, and when Fellowship leaders left at the end of our time together, the Board of Elders of MCC were so aware that we felt “bereft.” That, already, in some mysterious way, we had become a “we.” I also felt that from then on, whatever I did as Moderator of MCC, I really had to take the Fellowship into account, deeply. A year or so later, at a Fellowship Leadership conference, I watched 200 people have an amazing conversation on sexuality, that reminded me of MCC 20 years ago, but in a very new context! I loved it! It inspired, refreshed and renewed me!
2. I feel very privileged that in this process, Bishop Yvette Flunder has become a friend. There are not a lot of people in the world who do what we do. There is something about the process of a colleague becoming a friend, someone you can trust and tell the truth to, that I needed. Bishop is the kind of person who is close to many people, who invites people into her circle with love, and I feel privileged to be included. Building a healthy relationship, with all the complexities of race and culture, especially religious culture has been challenging. I have grown in my appreciation for the Fellowship’s unique mission, and what collaboration with MCC might really mean.
3. As MCC and Fellowship folks are now often together in broader contexts, we recognize each other as “kin:” as partners and family. This has been true whether we are at a Creating Change Conference, at the HRC Clergy Call, or at Episcopal Divinity School. We have so much in common, so many convergences, while respecting and appreciating our difference. It has been fascinating to watch others observing our deepening connections, and probably wondering “what are they up to?”

I would say that working on this partnership, this relationship, with the Fellowship has been one of the highlights of the last few years for me in ministry.

**Treasuring My Experience with “The Fellowship” – How Ecumenical Partnerships Unite Us
Contributed by Rev. Candy Holmes (January 2010)**

It has been seven years of growing relationship between me and The Fellowship. Attending a Fellowship Leadership retreat in Phoenix, Arizona was my initial exposure. And I knew from that point many years ago until now that this would be a relationship that would refresh and reinvigorate me in ways beyond what I could imagine. There are many examples I could share that reflect what I mean but there is one that stands above the rest.

Through I have been in MCC for over 20 years, some years ago I found that I was still searching for how to connect the fullness of who I am as an African American, religiously progressive Lesbian with my MCC family, African American community, and other religious communities. And I will always remember sitting in a Fellowship Leadership plenary and hearing Bishop Flunder say to the audience something so profound to my spirit I remember it like it was yesterday. It is rare when you can identify such a point in time or event that changes your life and direction. But this did. She said, "Don't let anyone hollow your spiritual self out." Those words reverberated through my entire being like the sound of a clarion. The message was clear as a bell. The questions of connection are not only answered by how one reaches out, but also and perhaps first defined by how one reaches inward to embrace every part of one's personhood. And when this personal work is going on, finding ones way into connection with oneself and with others is a journey of wonderment and joy.

I treasure my personal and spiritual work with The Fellowship as MCC's liaison. The wisdom of this partnering way continues to unfold that it is indeed a good thing for God's family to "dwell together in unity." My ongoing path with The Fellowship is a source of inspiration and provokes me to continually imagine God's table as spacious and full of grace for us all.

Some Centering Quotes on Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

"Christians are one in Christ: unity is their birthright, as members of the one body of Christ. Through the modern ecumenical movement, the churches are seeking to live out this truth – to make Christian unity both evident and effective through common confession, witness, and service. They recognize increasingly that just as no member of the body can say to another "I have no need of you," so the churches need each other. They recognize that their unity in Christ is greater than the differences in belief, and the tragedies of history, which divide them."

(*Churches Affirming Unity, Overcoming Division*, a pamphlet of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches)

"There are many forms of Buddhism, many ways of understanding Buddhism. If you have one hundred people practicing Buddhism, you may have one hundred forms of Buddhism. The same is true in Christianity. If there are one hundred thousand people practicing Christianity, there may be one hundred thousand ways of understanding Christianity. ... It is not difficult to see that sometimes a Buddhist recognizes a Christian as being more Buddhist than another Buddhist. I see a Buddhist, but the way [s/he] understands Buddhism is quite different from the way I do. However, when I look at a Christian, I see that the way [s/he] understands Christianity and practices love and charity is closer to the way I practice them than this [one] who is called a Buddhist. The same thing is true in Christianity. From time to time, you feel that you are very far away from your Christian [sibling]. You feel that the [one] who practices in the Buddhist tradition is much closer to you as a Christian. So, Buddhism is not Buddhism and Christianity is not Christianity. There are many ways of understanding Christianity. Therefore, let us forget the idea that Christianity must be like this, and that Buddhism can only be like that."

(Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, p. 15)

“Christians as well as Jews look to the Hebrew Bible as the story recording Israel's sacred memory of God's election and covenant with this people. For Jews it is their own story in historical continuity with the present. Christians, mostly of gentile background since early in the life of the Church, believe themselves to be heirs to this same story by grace in Jesus Christ. The relationship between the two communities, both worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a given historical fact, but how it is to be understood theologically is a matter of internal discussion among Christians, a discussion that can be enriched by dialogue with Jews.

(*Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, World Council of Churches, 1982)

“In a world where Christians and Muslims live as neighbours and co-citizens, dialogue is not only an activity of meetings and conferences. It is a way of living out our faith commitment in relation to each other, sharing as partners common concerns and aspirations and striving together in response to the problems and challenges of our time. Widely accepted guidelines for genuine dialogue, need to be re-emphasised and reaffirmed. A number of common affirmations are to be renewed taking stock of the previous experience and in the light of a Christian-Muslim appraisal of the current situation. Differences are inherent in the human condition and a manifestation of divine wisdom. In recognition of such differences, interreligious dialogue is based on mutual respect and understanding. It should not be used for a theological debate in which adherents of each religion try to prove religious truth at the expense of the other. ... As Christians and Muslims understand justice to be a universal value grounded in their faith, they are called to take sides with the oppressed and marginalised, irrespective of their religious identity. Justice is an expression of a religious commitment that extends beyond the boundaries of one's own religious community. Moreover, Muslims and Christians uphold their own religious values and ideals when they take a common stand in solidarity with, or in defense of, the victims of oppression and exclusion.”

(Excerpted from *Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action*, World Council of Churches, 2000).

“Inter-religious and other inter-cultural dialogue is based on mutual respect and furthers mutual understanding. Each partner in dialogue acknowledges the sincerity of others' convictions, and the process rejects the practice of one group ‘talking about’ others, providing instead a context where all may ‘talk with’ one another. Genuine dialogue implies the recognition of, and respect for, differences. Because we are different, we each have something unique to contribute, and every contribution counts. At the same time, dialogue partners seek to discover and appreciate the common values held by all. A fruitful mutual understanding depends on honesty: both convergences and genuine differences must be recognized and held in a creative tension. We believe that conflicts involving religious and cultural differences are not an expression of an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’. On the contrary, we believe that dialogue can lead to a vision of justice and peace that is grounded in all our traditions. When we dialogue in good faith the difference becomes a blessing and leads to mutual enrichment. All religions worthy of the name are concerned with the wholeness of life. This includes a transcendental dimension but also a practical duty to treat one's neighbour as one would wish to be treated. In this sense, dialogue is not merely a subject for discussion in conferences or councils but a way of living out our faith in relation to one another. In loving and serving the God we know, we find our common calling to affirm human dignity, uphold human rights, preserve the environment and bring warfare to an end – not least among the religious and political complexities of the Middle East.”

(Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of World Council of Churches, Opening Remarks, September 30, 2009)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): In what ways have your views about God or Spirituality been shaped by relationships with people from different religious backgrounds? What Christian people from other denominations have inspired or un-inspired you? What non-Christian people or texts have inspired or un-inspired you?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights did you have listening to others talk about their ecumenical or interfaith experiences? What are some common grounds that we have with people of different faith experiences?

Additional Thoughts About Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

DWELLING TOGETHER IN UNITY:

MCC's Approach to Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relationships

Purpose:

MCC's Statement of Direction challenges us "to proclaim a spirituality that is liberating and sufficiently profound to address the issues of our chaotic and complicated world." Leadership and participation in ecumenical and inter-religious work is a critical component in fulfilling this call. As ecumenical/ inter-religious partners, we unite across denominational and religious lines to advocate an inclusive and genuine respect for the sacred worth of all people; to reduce human suffering; and to establish justice, peace and equality in the world.

God has been up to something unique with MCC since our beginnings. We are an inclusive and diverse church for **all** people. We do welcome, affirm and celebrate the goodness and worth of LGBT people and the Queer community. And yet, we are still more. We are about tearing down walls and building up hope. We are about aligning with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Neither the church nor the human family is complete without our story of suffering and redemption. We must share our stories and hear the stories yet to be told.

We affirm that Metropolitan Community Church is a Christian Church. The Christian scriptures are central to our worship life. We honor and seek to follow the healing and compassionate example of Jesus, whom we call Christ. We claim our Christian identity and respect others' religious identities. We believe that we are all children of God, and can work together to reduce human suffering and promote human dignity.

We are compelled to work for justice for all creation, including environmental protection, peace, and the end to poverty, racism, oppression for LGBT people, etc. From our beginnings, ecumenism and inter-religious work has been a part our existence. The work done by previous generations of MCC ecumenists has laid the foundation for what we will build in the 21st Century. We are inspired and ready to propel this ministry of opportunity into the global village. Our goal is to make key contributions in the area of ecumenism in the broadest and most inclusive sense. We need not look too far to know that others are watching our work and adjusting theirs based on our witness.

We also believe that much of this work involves recognizing the economic reality of our world. For example, “*Wealth and income has become so much more concentrated both in rich countries and among the rich in poor countries that the United Nations now estimates that the 15 richest individuals are worth more than the combined gross domestic products of all of sub-Saharan Africa.*”¹ How do we continue to lift up the cause of economic justice and address inequalities in the world? How do we continue to stand in solidarity with those suffering with HIV/AIDS, particularly in places where medications are not available? What does God expect of us as ecumenical/inter-religious partners?

There is a need to articulate a theology of Ecumenical and Inter-religious work for MCC. It must take place in the context of a new era of creating open, safe, respectful theological conversations which can support our “unfinished call in an unfinished world.” God our Creator has equipped us to do this good work, and we are at our best when we acknowledge and work for the dignity of all people. God is calling us to *do something*, and we need partners in order to do it effectively. Ours is a shared world, and we must care for it and minister within it collaboratively.

MCC has an ecumenical calling to the whole Christian Church. The Church universal has been wounded by the separation of spirituality and sexuality. We are called to help heal the church’s historical disconnect of body and spirit, which has contributed to the sins of exclusion, racism, sexism and homophobia. Our testimony and the embodiment of a new inclusive community can help heal the larger Christian community.

MCC has much to learn from our Christian colleagues and friends. There are churches, on a local and denominational level open to partnering with MCC in ways that will change the world, the Church and individual lives. We must be willing and open to accept those invitations, and where there is not yet an invitation, to knock at the door. MCC churches globally must be trained to engage with churches in their communities, and refuse to be isolated.

In addition to ecumenical work, there is much to be done across religious traditions, regardless of what one believes about the source and nature of revelation, or what text one calls sacred. We are connected by our humanity, concern for each other and a desire to establish peace and equality in our world. Our various religious traditions can support these worthy endeavors. As we claim our rightful place in the human family, we must do so with an attitude of humility and respect.

Historically, under the guise of faith, some religious bodies have claimed ownership of understanding the nature of God, and used violence to enforce their positions. Ecumenical and inter-religious work provides an alternative, a *space* where people from varied backgrounds are invited to share themselves and contribute to a better world. As improved global communication brings humanity closer together, fighting over religious differences increasingly makes no sense. Most religious traditions focus on what brings us together as humanity.

We are encouraged to move beyond fear of mutual dialogue with people from non-Christian traditions in ecumenical and inter-religious work. We must hold as sacred the equality among people of goodwill and sincere faith, respecting their religious traditions. We can then become partners in addressing the evils that continue to plague the human family. This is what it means to “build bridges that liberate and unite.”²

¹ Ian Douglas et al, *Waging Reconciliation: God Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* (NY: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2002), 87

² MCC’s Statement of Purpose

Ecumenical and inter-religious work is not centered on working toward the spiritual conversion of the *Other*, but rather on mutual dialogue and respect to further the work of justice, compassion and reconciliation.³ Heeding the call to hospitality in scriptures, we welcome the stranger and the other. To welcome all means there is no *other*, only a new *we*. Ecumenical / Inter-religious work breaks down barriers creating an atmosphere where all are present at the table.

MCC functions under a wide umbrella of Christian understanding that requires tolerance for difference and continuous learning and dialogue. More than ever, we are aware that Christians have multiple understandings of Jesus and live and work in a religiously pluralistic world. If we expect to be honored as Christians, then the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Jew, the Muslim, the Agnostic, the Humanist, and all others must also be heard, respected, and honored.

MCC's ecumenical / inter-religious work should not be (covert) stealth proselytizing or an attempt to convert.⁴ Rather, it must be a work that involves mutual respect so that we can hear what the other is saying even as we wish to be heard. The vitality created by this mutual respect serves to enhance our experience of the sacred. In such an environment honest relationships are built, and friends working together can make a significant difference in the world. We must be prepared for radical openness and inclusivity. If we believe the answer to the question, "Would Jesus Discriminate?" is "No!", we must live that out and be faithful participants in the global Body of Christ and the whole human family.

Biblical Passages About Ecumenical / Inter-religious Issues

1 Corinthians 12
Acts 10
Acts 15
Acts 2
Galations 3:28
John 10:16
John 4:7-24

Luke 10:29-37
Luke 17:17-18
Luke 7:9
Matthew 15:21-28
Matthew 8:5-11
Micah 6:8
Psalm 133:1

³ Work by Bishop Steven Charleston, Episcopal Divinity School

⁴ The Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): Do you think God calls us to be in relationship with people of other faith traditions? What examples can you think of when Jesus interacted with people of different traditions?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How should we interact with other denominations and faith groups that condemn us for our celebration of queer sexuality? What unique gifts does MCC have to offer other denominations or faith traditions? What does MCC as a denomination/movement have to learn from other faith groups?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How can we hear, respect and honor “the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Jew, the Muslim, the Agnostic, the Humanist and all others?” In what ways does doing so diminish or enhance our own faith convictions and practices?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Is it ever valid to “share the gospel” and attempt to bring people from other faiths to Christianity? If so, how can it be done? How do we balance the evangelistic call with the call to mutually respect and honor people of other faiths?

Pulling it All Together: Praying Across Traditions for Peace

The following prayer authored by Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy is a resource of the World Council of Churches. It is suggested that the group gather, light a candle, and join together in praying this prayer in unison as a way of closing this Holy Conversation for the current time.

Eternal God, Creator of the universe, there is no God but You.
Great and wonderful are Your works, wondrous are your ways.
Thank You for the many splendoured variety of Your creation.
Thank You for the many ways we affirm Your presence and purpose,
and the freedom to do so.
Forgive our violation of Your creation.
Forgive our violence toward each other.
We stand in awe and gratitude for Your persistent love for each
and all of Your children: Christian, Jew, Muslim,
as well as those with other faiths.
Grant to all and our leaders attributes of the strong;
mutual respect in words and deed,
restraint in the exercise of power,
and the will for peace with justice, for all.
Eternal God, Creator of the universe, there is no God but You. Amen.

(Excerpted from Current Dialogue 24/93, p.36)

Additional Resources

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TRANS-FORMATION & TRANS EXPERIENCES

Focus

For years, MCC has been learning and striving to empower and include transgender and gender variant people at every level of our congregational and corporate life. In our society at large, transgender people and issues of vital importance to them and their families often get neglected or pushed to the sidelines. This is also true too frequently in our churches. The focus of this discussion presents an opportunity for participants to grow in their awareness of the variety of gender variant experiences, and more importantly, to explore the nature of transformation that is one part of transgender journeys.

A Testimony about Trans-formation & Trans Experiences

I AM: A Journey into the Realm of Gender Variance

Contributed by Emma Lee Chattin

I AM

A poem written for the 11th Annual TransGender Day of Remembrance (Remembering Our Dead), November 20, 2009

I defied the gender binary.
I challenged the first pronouncement ever made about me.
I questioned the evidence my body presented to me,
and I took issue with the guidance of my parents,
who assumed,
and nudged my life down one path
without even asking me
if that's where I wanted to go.

I confounded my society and my culture,
and I ignored what I was told was the norm.

I lived on the edges
and I defied definitions.

I am far more than the names I have been called.

I have done many things and lived many lives.
I am the rule-breaker, the exception, the trickster ¹,
the one who divides and multiplies the gender binary
until it becomes a string of infinite possibilities.

In ancient times I was celebrated
as one who walked in many worlds.
I was revered as the one who embodied transformation
and who showed the world
we can change

But ancient wisdom has long been forgotten
and now I pay the price for our forgetfulness.
We tend to behave badly toward
that which we do not understand,
and therein lies the pain.
Like all of creation, I am a mystery.

I don't seek to be understood.
I just seek to be accepted.

¹ "In mythology, folklore, Native American oral tradition, and religion, a trickster is a god, goddess, spirit, man, woman, or anthropomorphic animal who plays tricks or otherwise disobeys normal rules and conventional behavior." ... "Frequently the Trickster figure exhibits gender and form variability, changing gender roles and engaging in same-sex practices. Such figures appear in Native American and First Nations mythologies, where they are said to have a two-spirit nature. Loki, the Norse trickster, also exhibits gender variability, in one case even becoming pregnant." (from Wikipedia)

Transformation often happens somewhere on the journey between our attempts at understanding something, and accepting it. I think good religion should teach us about mystery and about living in the place (space?) between questions and answers. If it teaches us anything at all about assurance, it should be the assurance that controlling, or even fully understanding the things around us, is really not necessary.

When I turned six my father had a long conversation with me about the correct presentation of my gender. I was going to school with other children, after all, and so I had to present myself as a boy. There would be no more wearing dresses around the house or walking in high heels, and my long hair would have to be cut, sheared off to a short buzz of fuzz. I was devastated. I had no say in the matter. My entire sense of my self had been taken away from me with the wave of an electric hair clipper and a garbage bag full of play clothes. My parents could not understand that I was a girl, and there was nothing that I could say to make them understand. So I cried, and told my dad, "Ok, so you won't let me be a girl, but one day you'll see- I'm going to grow up to be a woman!" My father told me that would never happen. It was a very difficult year for a very young child.

One evening, my family gathered around the television set to watch Star Trek. The episode featured a woman who completely transformed herself, presenting variously as a woman, a much younger woman, a man, and an African American man. My parents focused on the latter transformation, saying that the imagery should hopefully spark good discussion in America's living rooms (it was, after all, 1966). But the transformation that sparked my imagination was from the woman to the man, and then back to a woman again. I was captivated. Of course, the woman turned out to be an alien life form, the "last of its kind", and the "creature" ultimately died a pitiful and painful death. Looking back, it's sad to think that I had finally found someone I could identify with.

School continued to be a horrible experience for me, long days filled with an intense sense of psycho-social dissonance – the feeling of knowing who I am, and yet having everyone else perceive and treat me as if I were someone else entirely different. While I tried very hard to fit in, the sensation of feeling like an alien remained with me on some level all through my school years.

When I went to college, I learned that I was actually not “the last of my kind”, that there were others out there like me. This was a revelation! I was not alone! My excitement was short-lived, however, because I learned this in my abnormal psychology class, a class which, by the way, also taught me exactly how the world felt about me and my people (suddenly, being a solitary alien from another planet didn’t seem so bad after all).

Up until that point I had planned on becoming a minister. Many of my classes were designed with seminary in mind. I had hoped I would find some answers in the study of religion. Yet the things I was told about my people (and thus, my self) in my abnormal psychology class so devastated me, and the fact that I was attending a Methodist college that made it known, in no uncertain terms, that the church had no place for people like me, I immediately left any thoughts of religion behind, and promptly did what all good college students do when they are uncertain about things. I changed my major to psychology.

I was trying to understand myself, and yet, I felt more alienated than ever. As the years passed, I would occasionally think back to that Star Trek episode, and while I had turned away from organized religion, I never turned away from God. Eventually I transitioned my life into a body and a life that fit me much better, discovered MCC, and began a different journey all together.

Psychology provided no specific answer as to why I am as I am, and it is ironic to me that I eventually found my peace in the very thing that initially drove me away on my journey: religion.

You see, the Jesus Story is all about transformation. In fact, the entire Bible is about transformation. It’s about Change, Growth, and Becoming. Each one of us is far more than we think we are. The belief that we are not, or that we are somehow not even enough, is driven by a popular culture that finds it more profitable to keep us feeling inadequate. The fact is, you are not just a human being, you are a human becoming.... becoming something more. Sometimes much more. And it is perceptibly “alien” life-forms like me (who have been inexplicably driven from most churches) who can demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, that transformation is not only possible, it happens, and it walks among us.

Yes, I finally took refuge in another “alien”, another “other”, the Ultimate Other; one who is both male and female, and neither; one who has many names, but ultimately, simply prefers to self identify as, “I Am”; one in whose image we may be made, and yet, one who cannot be understood by us (and one who has repeatedly told us not to even try or to pretend to); and one whose presence we can experience and accept in our world without having to understand.

We humans are a curious lot. We want to understand the things around us. Sometimes our desire to do so even drives us to distraction. How many times have friends walked away from me shaking their heads, saying, “I just don’t understand it!”, as if understanding who I am is a necessary prerequisite of allowing me to be a part of their world, as if I somehow have to explain who I am at every turn of the corner. Poppycock. We humans are a curious lot indeed.

Yet our desire to understand things usually leads us on amazing adventures...
... to explore new worlds... to boldly go where.... Well, you know....

Some Centering Quotes on Transformation & Trans Experiences

“Religion [should teach] us that our lives here on earth are to be used for transformation”.
(Huston Smith, b 1919, religious scholar)

Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through.
Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it.
This is a kind of death.
(Anaïs Nin, 1903-77, French author)

“God is clearly more comfortable with diversity than we are, and God’s final goal and objectives are much simpler. God, and the entire cosmos itself, are about two things: differentiation and communion. Physicists seem to know this better than theologians and clergy.

If this were cheap liberalism, I would be merely arguing for personal rights, economic justice, or sexual freedom. If this were mere ideology, I would need to line up my credible arguments and proofs. I have very few. I, like many of you, am only a disciple of the poor man from Nazareth. He has made me content with mystery. He has made me less afraid of chaos. He has told me that control is not my task.

He, like the cosmos itself, is about two things : diversity and communion.
The whole of creation cannot be lying”.
(Richard Rohr, O.F.M, in *Where The Gospel Leads Us*)

“... Transgender Christians need to know that hope and opportunity are indeed possible for us even within the church, an institution that has usually been somewhat less than welcoming toward those of us with gender differences.

Here’s some good news to begin with: God loves gender-variant persons faithfully and unequivocally, accepting and welcoming us freely and fully into the family of believers just as we are. This fact has nothing to do with our individual merits or demerits, but with God’s loving outreach toward us and energy within us. God has chosen each of us to embody unique aspects of the Godhead within our gender and other particularities. No earthly human being, no organization, no religion, no denomination, no authority figure, and no oppressive system of belief can ever take us from God’s presence within us.”
(Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan in *Transgender Journeys*)

“The very existence of transgendered and intersex people brings into question the binary categories that our society has created with such fervor. If transgendered [and intersex] persons, by our presence, break down binary thinking by inhabiting a middle place, then this disintegration of polemic categories affects the way we do theology as well. Theology is different if we apply it to a transgendered way of thinking. If we recognize and insist on the presence of things that transcend, encompass, or fail to fit the categories at all, then we approach seemingly opposite looking things for that which binds them together, or goes beyond them altogether. This process requires the thinker not to accept seemingly divergent points at face value, and calls for a deeper and broader look at them.

When we begin to move away from oppositional categories, we see how two things that were once thought to be opposites can exist at the same time in a positive tension.”
(Justin Tanis in *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Trans-formation & Trans Experiences

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): When were you first taught what it meant to be a woman or a man? What did you learn? How did you fit (or not fit) into that understanding? When was the first time you were ever aware of crossing a gender norm? What happened?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Søren Kierkegaard said that we live our lives forward, but they can only be understood backward. Looking back over your life, what are some of the moments that stand out to you as transformative moments? Do those moments share anything in common with one another? Has your desire to understand something ever stood in your way of accepting it?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights about yourself and the world around you did you gain from thinking about and sharing your experiences and listening to the experiences of others?

Additional Thoughts About Trans-formation & Trans Experiences

MCC Stories, Our Stories

There is a wide spectrum of gender expressions that claim a home in the world of MCC. Not all of them can be easily tagged and labeled. In fact, few of them can. Many gender expressions, behaviors, and presentations look similar on the surface, but the underlying feelings that give birth to these expressions can be quite different. Individuals may self-identify in a multitude of ways (for example, I identify as GLBTIQQ, for all are valid parts of my journey). It's best never to assume anything. It's also important to know that within many gender sub-cultures, it isn't really good form to ask questions about an individual's origin and history. Those who have undergone transformative gender experiences generally move in mysterious ways. Yet, by replacing curiosity with acceptance, I think we are taught something very important about the world in which we live, and how we may best live our life within it. We, ourselves, are able to enter that space between the question and the answer, a place where I believe transformation is not only possible, but natural; even necessary.

I believe there is an essential transformative connection between the many letters that form the LGBTIQQ community. Yet I look at our community sometimes and I am moved to tears when I see such a sea of souls who share so much in common, but yet, who are sometimes unable to connect with one another simply because they don't understand each other (hint: *understanding is not a prerequisite to acceptance; in fact, the pursuit of it can even prove an obstacle to the process*).

The fact is, we in the LGBTIQQ community are ALL Gender Transgressors, either in appearance, behavior, expression, or choice of life partner. We are all transgressing gender norms in some way. I believe that this is a patch of Holy Ground upon which we may all converge, and meet one another without assumption, expectation, or preconception. This is the place where we may all come to rest.

There are some people in this world who claim to know God, to understand God, and to be able to introduce God to others; yet, all the while this may be far less fruitful than encouraging individuals to seek out God for a personal experience of their own, one without assumption, expectation, or preconception.

And the Divinity I have encountered, by the way, is totally Trans. ☺

Biblical Passages About Transformation

2 Corinthians 5:17

Romans 12:2

Galatians 3:23-28

John 3:1-12

Ezekiel 37: 1-22

Acts 8:26-40

Matthew 19:12

Genesis 17:3-5, 15-16

John 20:13-17

Genesis 1:1-31

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): What are the most powerful testimonies of transgender people that you have heard? What might the life experiences of gender variant people have to tell us about God, in whose image we are all created? What insights about the experience of “transformation” does gender variance offer?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Assuming that full inclusion of gender variant people means that they are woven into the community rather than being set apart in some way, are gender variant people included in your local congregation (e.g. are there visible transgender leaders in your community, are transgender stories included as sermon illustrations, does your community observe the Transgender Day of Remembrance, etc.)? How about the larger context of MCC as a movement?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How can MCC welcome people across the gender spectrum without exploiting gender variant people (e.g. tokenizing them or making them “poster children”)?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights did you take away from your small group discussion? What was the most challenging/meaningful idea you heard/read in this study?

Pulling it All Together: A Labyrinth Ritual

The Labyrinth has been around for thousands of years as a tool for spiritual self-discovery. The singular path calls and directs one inward to the center, and then, back outward.

A suitable ritual invoking reflection along one’s gender path could be developed around the Labyrinth. As one moves inward with each step, one would be encouraged to recall and reflect upon some of the more significant moments of gender identity or dissonance over their life path, eventually reaching the center of the Labyrinth (and themselves). On the path back out, one would then be encouraged to think about the many ways they may authentically express their gender identity to the outer world around them.

Search your local area for a full-size labyrinth. Many churches and/or organizations have labyrinths they will allow others to use. If a full-size labyrinth is not available, you can make copies of an image of a labyrinth for people to “walk” by tracing the path with their fingers.

Additional Resources

Boenke, Mary, Ed. *Trans Forming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones*. Imperial Beach, CA: Walker Troom Pub, 1999.

Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Brown, Mildred L. and Chloe Ann Rounsley. *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism--For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston: Beacon, 1998.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors : Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.

Howell, Clare and Joan Nestle and Riki Wilchins, Eds. *GenderQueer: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 2002.

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007.

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey and Vanessa Sheridan. *Transgender Journeys*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003.

Rothblatt, Martine. *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender*. New York: Crown, 1995.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.

Tanis, Justin Edward. *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003.

Tigert, Leanne McCall and Maren C. Tirabassi, Eds. *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, And Spirituality*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004.

Wilchins, Riki Anne. *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*

Movies:

Call Me Malcolm

Ma Vie En Rose (My Life in Pink)

Transgeneration

MCC Web Resource:

MCC Transgender Ministries: <http://www.tdor.mcccchurch.org/>

BAPTISM

Focus

The Sacrament of Baptism is understood and appropriated in a variety of ways both in the church and in Metropolitan Community Churches depending on who you are in dialogue with. The focus of this discussion presents an opportunity for participants to grow in their awareness of how this Sacrament has and continues to impact the spiritual journeys of our brothers and sisters.

Some Centering Quotes on Baptism

“Baptism is a sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.”
(John Calvin)

“Baptism serves our faith as a token and proof of our cleansing; it is a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are abolished, remitted, and effaced. As Christians, we ‘ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our minds with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.’ Baptism also ‘serves as our confession’ before others; hence, baptism is an ethical action.”
(John H. Leith, et al.)

“Baptism celebrates a work that is complete in the work of Jesus Christ; it also celebrates a work that is never complete in human history, namely, our sanctification. Baptism looks to the future.”
(John H. Leith)

“‘Baptism belongs to the church’ no other organization or society practices it. Yet baptism is not the church’s act, but Christ’s act in the church. ... Baptism is a sign of identity Christ gives the church lest we forget that we are God’s people, and become content to be just another human organization. The sacrament is given by the power of the Holy Spirit to the community of the Spirit.”
(Laurence Hull Stookey)

“What we receive in baptism is not an identity negotiated in conversation with our communities or culture such as our sexual and gender identities are; it is an identity over which we have no control whatsoever. It is sheer gift. ... It is God’s great ‘yes’ to us based not upon our own merits, but upon divine love revealed in Christ. The nature of elements of our Christian identity may be obscure to us and how we best act out our identity in various contexts might be a legitimate subject of dispute, but the identity itself is not negotiated, it is given.” (Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*)

I'm ceded—I've stopped being 'Theirs—
 The name They dropped upon my face
 With water, in the country church
 Is finished using, now
 And They can put it with my Dolls,
 My childhood, and the string of spools,
 I've finished threading—too—

Baptized, before, without the choice,
 But this time, consciously, of Grace—
 Unto supremest name—
 Called to my full—The Crescent dropped—
 Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
 With one small Diadem.

My second Rank—too small the first—
 Crowned—Crowing—on my Father's breast—
 A half unconscious Queen—
 But this time—Adequate—Erect,
 With Will to choose, or to reject,
 And I choose—just a Crown—

(Emily Dickinson, c. 1862)

A Testimony About Baptism: Stories of Grace

Contributed by Kharma Amos

When I was 12 years old, I responded to the altar call at the First Baptist Church in my hometown in middle America. Tears ran down my face as I came forward in a public affirmation of my decision to become a Christian and to invite Jesus into my heart and life. I met the Pastor down front and while the folks around me continued to sing the melodious (and myriad) verses of *Just As I Am*, I prayed 'the sinner's prayer' with the Pastor and celebrated the fact that my life would forever be changed by this moment of salvation. If I'm honest, I will admit that part of what I hoped I had been saved from was being me -- not just the me who was a sinner like every other person, but the me who was a sinner (I thought) because of my history of abuse, self-mutilation, and my inherent sense that there was something 'different' about me that was abhorrent to God (among other things). I was baptized a few weeks later along with a few other pre-teens and teens, as well as three adults, on Easter Sunday in front of overflow crowds who celebrated our new life in Christ. It was a proud and public proclamation that I had chosen Jesus and would remain safe in his arms no matter what for the rest of my life. My baptism was a holy moment in my life that I truly understood as an "outward and visible sign of an inward grace."

When I was 14, I left the Southern Baptist church and began attending the United Methodist Church where a few of my friends went and where I felt more comfortable with the style of worship and the content of the messages I heard. I remember picking up a booklet at some point in time about Infant Baptism. I also remember the automatic response I had: "This was wrong." I do not recall whether I had heard this message overtly or not, but I had clearly learned during my time in the Baptist church that baptism was something reserved for adults as a part of their profession of faith in Christ. I argued passionately with my friends in the United Methodist Youth Fellowship about this. How could an infant make a choice to be

Christian? How did a baby even know the stories of Jesus? I listened with some skepticism as they explained to me that the Baptism of infants was a covenant made by the parents and extended family and church to place the child in the care of Christ and the church and to raise the child in such a way as to lead to their own profession of faith when they were able. When I first witnessed an infant baptism, and the family, godparents, and others presented the child as one of God's own and covenanted to raise her in the church and to teach her about Jesus so that she might come to choose to be a Christian in a public "Confirmation" of these vows when she was able, I had the sense there was definitely something sacred about it.

The first Baptism at which I officiated as an MCC minister was for a transgender woman who had, in her understanding, recently completed her transition from male to female. She had been baptized as a Christian some 50 years prior to this as a young boy named Robert (a pseudonym), and had lived most of her life feeling out of sorts with this identity and life. Now, she was ready to ask for the fullness of God's blessing on the Christian journey she would be undertaking as Roberta. And on this part of the journey, she was choosing to live with nothing less than full authenticity and wholeness. Many people from MCC who had been with Roberta during her transition gathered with her at the swimming pool of one of our church members. They sat around the edge of the pool with their legs dangling in the water and their hands hovering over it in a gesture of blessing as we prayed together and asked God to let this water wash over Roberta as a reminder that she was (as she was) the Beloved of God. She renewed baptismal vows similar to those she had a lifetime ago, and publicly acknowledged her desire to live as a Christian, following in the footsteps of Jesus as her complete self. And as we pronounced her chosen name, the one that fit her, and baptized her, I would not have been the least bit surprised if the heavens hadn't opened and the Spirit had descended as a dove. This water ritual was undeniably "an outward and visible sign of an inward grace," and a sacrament of transformation.

Many ministers who take Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) or who serve in various capacities as a chaplain are asked to interface with people who hold diverse beliefs about baptism. It is not uncommon in hospital settings for MCC ministers to be called on to perform baptisms for still-born infants and/or deceased individuals. Many other denominations prohibit their clergy from performing such a ritual because, for a number of very different reasons, it diverges from their stated doctrine about Baptism. To be fair, not all MCC ministers would feel comfortable performing such a ritual either. However, hospitals often ask us to because in MCC, we embrace such a broad spectrum of understandings about Baptism that we are able to enter this conversation more openly and freely. There are a lot of questions that surround this, of course, but the poignancy and deep need for God's comfort and grace makes many of them seem less urgent and/or important. In a play on words from one of the teachings of Jesus (about the Sabbath), some ask, "Is humankind made for Baptism or was Baptism made for humankind?"

Some Historical Notes

"The early church adopted a form of baptism from their Jewish upbringing, called proselyte baptism. When Gentiles wanted to take upon themselves the laws of Moses, the Jews would baptize those Gentiles in the authority of the God of Israel. But in the New Testament, people were baptized in the name of God [the Parent], God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – which meant they had elevated Jesus to the full status of God. Not only that, but baptism was a celebration of the death of Jesus, just as Communion was. By going under the water, you're celebrating his death, and by being brought out of the water, you're celebrating the fact that Jesus was raised to newness of life. ... There's no hard evidence that any mystery religion believed in gods dying and rising, until after the New Testament period. So if there was any borrowing, they borrowed from Christianity. ... The practice of baptism came from Jewish customs, and the Jews were very much against allowing Gentile or Greek ideas to affect their worship. ... These two sacraments [communion

and baptism] can be dated back to the very earliest Christian community – too early for the influence of any other religions to creep into their understanding of what Jesus’ death meant.”

(J. P. Moreland, interview by Lee Strobel)

In light of this early history of baptism, it is also important to remember that during the colonial period there were many native peoples who were forced into baptism and their names changed without their consent in a missionary effort in large part by the Catholic Church to spread Christianity.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Baptism

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What did baptism symbolize for you in your formative years? Does the symbolism still “ring true” for you today? If not, in what ways has the symbolism and meaning of baptism evolved over time? What life experiences helped to shape your current understanding of baptism?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights did you gain both through sharing your thoughts and understanding about baptism, as well as listening to what others had to share?

Additional Thoughts About Baptism

Some Additional Quotes

“Common to both infant baptism and adult baptism is the affirmation that we are recipients of the gift of God’s love and are claimed for God’s service. Just as in the Lord’s Supper we are fed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation, so baptism declares that something is done for us. Whether baptized as children or adults, our baptism signifies primarily what God has graciously done for us, and it is upon this that faith rests.”

(Daniel L. Migliore)

“It can be argued that the two forms of baptism – infant and adult – together express the full meaning of baptism better than each would alone. ... Adult baptism gives greater play to the conscious and free response of a person to God’s forgiving love in Jesus Christ. It stresses explicit public confessions and personal commitment to the way of Christ. But if practiced exclusively, adult baptism may tend toward a view of faith as preceding rather than responding to God’s initiative.”

(Daniel L. Migliore)

“Infant baptism, on the other hand, declares the sovereign grace and initiative of God. It demonstrates that even when they are helpless, human beings are loved and affirmed by God. ... It expresses loving reception into a confessing community that takes responsibility for helping this child to mature in faith as a member of the Christian community. It makes clear that baptism is a beginning of the process of growing into Christ and that this process of growth cannot take place without a supportive community of faith.”

(Daniel L. Migliore)

MCC Stories, Our Stories

In Metropolitan Community Churches, we include a wide spectrum of beliefs about the sacrament of Baptism – what it means, how to do it, who can do it, what prerequisites it requires, etc. As an MCC minister, I have had the joy of baptizing infants whose parents and church family covenant to care for them and raise them in Christian community, administering a “believer’s baptism” for adults who are choosing to walk the path of Christ for the first time, and re-baptizing people who are embarking on a completely new phase of their life and who feel they need to re-contextualize the sacrament as their most authentic selves. I have baptized people by sprinkling and pouring water and by immersing people in baptismals, rivers, lakes, oceans, and swimming pools. MCC is an ecumenical denomination that respects and includes varied theological beliefs about baptism and its power and significance.

What implications does this have for how we talk about Baptism, what we say about it, and what we hope the end product of our discussion will be (e.g., one “Right” idea about Baptism, a fuller understanding of how Baptism has reflected and/or facilitated our transformation, more and/or more diverse examples of God’s grace at work in our lives, etc.)?

Biblical Passages About Baptism

1 Corinthians 1	Galatians 3
1 Corinthians 10	John 1
1 Corinthians 12	John 3
1 Corinthians 15	John 4
Acts 1	Luke 12
Acts 10	Luke 20
Acts 11	Luke 3
Acts 16	Luke 7
Acts 18	Mark 1
Acts 19	Mark 10
Acts 2	Matthew 20
Acts 22	Matthew 28
Acts 8	Matthew 3
Acts 9	Peter 3
Colossians 2	Romans 6
Ephesians 4	

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): If Baptism were a requirement for Membership in MCC, would there be any difference between receiving a member who was baptized as an infant but who would not voluntarily choose to be baptized as an adult, and receiving someone who did not wish to be baptized as an adult but whose parents did not baptize them? What would make one more or less “qualified” for Membership in MCC?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How can we testify to the power we have experienced in this “outward and visible sign of an inward grace” (if we have) and also listen to the alternative ways others have experienced this? What, if anything, do we risk losing of the power or meaning of our own experience of baptism by accepting the validity of someone else’s experience that may differ?

Pulling it All Together: A Water Blessing

Setup: Create a small altar or table with a cover, a bowl containing water, and perhaps a pitcher to pour the water into the bowl. You may want to select some music about water to play in the background (or water sounds from nature – ocean, rushing river, etc.) and/or select a few songs that the group can sing together. Song suggestions include: *God, You Have Moved Upon the Waters* (Marty Haugen), *Wade in the Water* (African American Spiritual), *Take Me to the Water* (African American Spiritual).

Have the group gather in a circle around the table. Invite them into a few moments of silence as you pour the water into the bowl. Sing a song together and/or offer a brief opening prayer before inviting each participant to come forward and place their hand(s) in the water, noticing how it feels – e.g., how cool or warm it is. Invite each of them to bless themselves by touching or splashing the water to their heads/hands/body ... stating the name by which they want to be called ... and some type of blessing (e.g., “You are God’s Beloved,” “Remember Your Baptism and Who You Are in Christ,” “Be refreshed and at peace in the Divine,” etc.). After this, allow people to return to their seats and sing together a final song and/or offer a brief closing prayer.

Additional Resources

Alexander, Marilyn Bennett and James Preston. *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 by the World Council of Churches

Migliore, Daniel. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004.

Smith, Marjorie Proctor. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.

Stookey, Laurence Hull. *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982.

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COMMUNION

Focus

In MCC, Communion is considered one of two Sacraments, gifts from God. Communion is understood and practiced in a variety of ways both in local congregations and our larger MCC movement. One constant characteristic of our celebration of communion in MCCs around the world is our “open” Communion table. This means that all may come and participate in the Celebration feast, with no prerequisites or exceptions. This may be one of the most common links between MCC churches in various contexts. It is also one of the primary things that distinguishes us from other churches. The focus of this discussion presents an opportunity for participants to grow in their awareness of how this Sacrament has and continues to impact the spiritual journeys of our brothers and sisters.

Testimonies About Communion

Transformed at the Table

Contributed by Catherine Alexander

I grew up with hints of southern roots in the black Baptist church where receiving Communion was closely tied with being baptized. There were a great deal of ritual acts performed when it came to important milestones on the Christian journey, like baptism, church membership, and receiving Holy Communion. At what was considered to be an appropriate age of understanding and consent to follow God (usually between 11-14 years of age), a child or young adult was invited into fellowship, into church membership, and to receive Holy Communion. It was a very special event that took place nearly exclusively on the first Sunday of each month.

Each first Sunday the Pastor would come down from the pulpit and stand behind a long table that was dressed up by the women of the “Altar Guild”. The colors meant something and were (as I was to later find out) in keeping with the seasons of the liturgical calendar (green, white, red, etc). The Pastor was usually surrounded by Deacons who were donned with white gloves (to go along with the white suits in the summer and black suits during the rest of the year). The Pastor would then proceed to tell *the* story: the account of Jesus’ last supper as recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. We were told primarily of Christ’s death on the cross for us and the significance of performing this ritual as a way to fulfill Christ’s commandment to “do this in memory of me”. The emphasis was placed on remembering his life and death, and on making the significance of those actions personal. As the Pastor blessed the bread and cup (wafers and Concord grape juice), the congregation typically started singing in beautiful, melancholy tones the hymn “Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees”. I think it was there at the table surrounded by beautiful yet haunting

COMMUNION

strains of choruses filling the sanctuary, that I developed my absolute love for the actions, attitudes, stories, and music of Holy Communion.

Everyone who was baptized and made a profession of faith in God and Jesus—in the particular way the church understood it and decreed it—could obey the command to “do this in memory of me” and participate in Communion. Everyone else could sit and watch, or sit, watch, and then respond to the call for baptism after Holy Communion was concluded.

I attended Catholic school from Kindergarten to High School graduation and even played guitar for mass on special occasions. I could not understand why the Catholic students could receive Holy Communion and we Protestants could not. Certainly this added to the mystery and mystique of the bread and the wine, and it got me thinking, even at an early age, about not only the significance of this meal, but the mechanics of it. To start with, I pondered these questions: Why did some use wine and some used grape juice? When was it appropriate to use a real loaf of bread versus the little paper-thin wafer or the hard dough-pellet? And perhaps more importantly, why were some invited to the table while others were not? This final point was particularly difficult to reconcile with my understanding (albeit fledgling) that Jesus invited *everyone* to the table.

Over time, as I questioned, spoke to learned individuals, studied, and grew through personal experiences, I came to understand more about some significant aspects of the “rest of the story”. I had walked away from God for a while after the death of my brother (a gay man who succumbed to AIDS). In my journey back, God brought me close in a very tangible way through the celebration of Communion. When I came to MCC of the Spirit in Harrisburg, PA, I was not exactly sure what I would find along the lines of theology, race, class, gender identity, etc. I entered worship with a great deal of trepidation; it was a real journey into the unknown. I can remember the two moments that everything came together for me and I realized that I was home. First was the very warm, heartfelt welcome I received from Susan, and second was the celebration of Holy Communion. It was there that I encountered the very real presence of God in community. It was at the open table celebrated each week that I came to connect more deeply to God and to community. For me, the weekly celebration of Communion at MCC is something I look forward to with anticipation. I connect with the personal prayer and am sent forth with a blessing and strength for what faces me in the week ahead.

As I became more involved in MCC ministries, I was eventually asked to be the Communion celebrant. I was both honored to be asked and fearful that I’d mess up this really important part of the worship service. The times I have participated in Communion as a celebrant have been some of the most encouraging, challenging, exciting and awe inspiring moments of worship and ministry for me. The more I discover about the physical and spiritual power of sharing in and being the community that the open table of Christ represents, the more I want to come back and celebrate.

Our Experience of Communion: Being Changed, Changing Others

From Rev. Elder Troy Perry, with Thomas L. P. Swicegood

Excerpted from Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and The Metropolitan Community Churches

[The following account describes what took place when the National Council of Churches Governing Board Members were invited to worship with MCC during their deliberations about our application for membership (the vote about which was inevitably postponed).]

COMMUNION

Most of us were unaware as we approached Holy Communion that the National Council of the Churches of Christ did not, and had never been able to, offer the Blessed Sacrament. Although in their thirty years of existence they had managed to bring members of their various communions together in worship, Council services had always been abbreviated and noncommittal because, among other things, they could not agree upon what constitutes the Eucharist.

Metropolitan Community Churches, on the contrary, needing to be truly ecumenical with so many different denominational wellsprings, never had any difficulty celebrating Holy Communion, which we have served since our very first service in 1968.

We believe in a communion open to all who will partake. Since we never try to keep anybody away, it is not part of our consciousness that there are those people who are determined to prevent others from receiving the Holy Sacrament.

On May 11, 1983, at our services in San Francisco, two lesbian ministers, Reverend Freda Smith and Reverend Nancy Wilson consecrated communion with faith, grace, and devotion – but being women, their role in the proceedings was as foreign to some representatives of the National Council as was the ecumenical communion itself. Many of the Council's denominations had never permitted women to have any active participation at the altar, and certainly not in the celebration of the holiest of all rituals of faith. Yet our presentation was so free from self-consciousness that the leaders of many churches quickly recovered from shock and joined with our gay and lesbian community at the Table of the Lord.

People streamed forward toward the altar. We welcomed people from mainline churches, black churches, and Orthodox churches. Many were the highest-ranking officials in the National Council. Important leaders from America's churches stood in line to receive Holy Communion from Metropolitan Community Church. At separate stations, eight of us – the Reverends Nancy Wilson, Freda Smith, Sandmire, England, and Evans, and myself, and two lay participants, Michael Mank and Adam DeBaugh – were honored to serve.

Adam felt a surge of excitement when, during communion service, he saw an Episcopal bishop walking in his direction. Because of early conditioning, Adam admitted afterward that he wanted to say, "Oh no, Your Grace, you serve me!" Meanwhile, Nancy received numerous gay members of the National Council coming to the altar side by side with their lovers. Nongay members of their Governing Board were able to adjust to what was happening.

The moment was historic! Gay people were ecstatic!

I saw a fellow who works for one of the wire services standing some distance from me in the line to the altar. His reporter's notepad was protruding from a coat pocket, forgotten as he waited, inconspicuously crying. He just stood, patiently waiting in line for his turn to move forward, not trying to reach for a handkerchief to wipe away the wetness. I think that writer was not gay, but merely overwhelmed by the service.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Communion

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What is your first memory of Communion? In what ways were you invited or not invited to participate? How did you originally understand the significance of what was happening? What did it mean for you?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What was your first experience of Communion in an MCC (if different than above)? What did you understand it to mean? What questions did you have? In what ways (if any) has your understanding of Communion changed during the course of your life?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What insights did you gain from reflecting on your own experience of Communion and sharing with others? What did you hear from others that struck you in a particular way (affirming or disturbing)?

Additional Thoughts About Communion

MCC Stories, Our Stories

As a blended denomination and congregations, MCC is able to bring together a wide variety and mixture of Communion styles and ritual practices. Because we are not tied to a specific liturgy, MCC Communion celebrants have a great deal of freedom in the conduct of Holy Communion. Along with that freedom comes the responsibility to celebrate the ritual in a way that strengthens the faith of participants and brings honor to God. In some denominations, one may encounter restrictions surrounding who can participate in Communion, what one must do to be “worthy” of taking Communion, to whom one must confess before taking Communion, and how one must receive Communion (e.g., touch the bread, only the minister touches the bread and cup, etc.). In MCC, we practice an Open Communion, which means that anyone can come and participate fully. Also, based on our belief in the priesthood of all believers, both ordained ministers and laity may consecrate Communion in MCC churches. It is often (though not always) the case in MCC congregations that each person has the opportunity to receive a personal prayer or blessing along with the communion elements.

In the global fellowship of the Christian community, Communion and its place in worship is understood and conducted in a variety of ways that are meaningful for the community of faith. Communion is both physically experiencing the past through our actions of remembrance, and looking forward expectantly to the future. The celebration of Communion involves remembering Jesus, and re-membering (calling back together as One) the mystical Body of Christ, consisting of all the members of the Christian church around the world and throughout time.

Symbolically, the breaking of bread signifies hospitality, unity, a sense of communal sharing, and involvement in each other’s lives. What is Communion, why is it holy and what makes it a celebration? What are our stories of being in communion with God and God’s people? How are we transformed by being fed at the open table?

Some Quotes About Communion

“The Eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹ In the Eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God himself [*sic*] acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. ... The Eucharist, which always includes both word and sacrament, is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God. It is the great thanksgiving to the God for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, for everything accomplished by God now in the Church and in the world in spite of the sins of human beings, and for everything that God will accomplish in bringing the Reign of God to fulfillment. Thus the Eucharist is the benediction (*berakah*) by which the Church expresses its thankfulness for all God’s benefits.”

(*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. World Council of Churches.)

“Personal communion with God is possible only in and through God’s own generous initiative in coming to meet us in grace. The sacraments are a way encounter God and are a means of grace.”

(Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 4-6.)

“At a moment when right-wing American Christianity is ascendant, when religion worldwide is rife with fundamental and exclusionary ideological crusades, I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centered on sacraments and action. What I found wasn’t about angels or going to church or trying to be ‘good’ in a pious, idealized way. It wasn’t about arguing a doctrine – the Virgin birth, predestination, the sinfulness of homosexuality and divorce – or pledging blind allegiance to a denomination. I was, as the prophet said, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.”

(Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*, xiii).

“Throughout history, the desire to be in each others’ presence and share the activity of eating and drinking seems to be a universal human characteristic. The practice of Communion, instituted in some way by Jesus and celebrated by the Christian Church throughout the ages, is known by a variety of names, including Communion, Holy Communion, Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, the breaking of bread, the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, and The Love Feast. Communion [*is*] used in this conversation.”

(Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church*)

“We see in the biblical accounts of Holy Communion in the first century, that in the institution of a Communion meal, there was already a great deal of diversity in the local church. We see an important characteristic of Christian worship in that there were regional variances within substantial unity of practice. In the New Testament churches Holy Communion was celebrated in the context of a meal but later the ritual of the “Love Feast” or Communion, became separate events. ... As these services continued over time, a single pattern with many possible expressions of the pattern firmly lodged itself in the Christian consciousness of how to celebrate this Communion known as the Eucharist. ... This term suggests the *giving of thanks* and is a central dimension of the feast, inherited from Judaism which characteristically approached God with a thankful recital of God’s acts.”

(James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*)

“What is crucial is that every Christian community in the New Testament seems to have practiced and found deep meaning in a meal centered on Jesus’ habit of eating and drinking with his followers. ... Across that wide spectrum of the meals of Jesus we can see enacted illustrations of the scope of God’s care and concern. Jesus’ table fellowship is a manifestation of the new creation, which embraces all who are

COMMUNION

discriminated against in the course of human activity. ... In the New Testament tradition then, eating and drinking with Jesus in enactment: the Eucharist is a feast in which we, with the risen Christ, incarnate the hope we have of a righteous realm in which Christ's sacrificial love destroys barriers among human beings and between humanity and God. To this feast, all are invited by God on equal terms."
(Laurence Hull Stookey)

Today, the celebration of Communion "continues the meals of Jesus during his earthly life and after his resurrection, always as a sign of the Reign of God. In his last meal, the fellowship of God was connected with the nearness of Jesus' suffering. After his resurrection, he made his presence known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. ... Christians see the Eucharist prefigured in the Passover memorial of Israel's deliverance from the land of bondage and in the meal of the Covenant on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24). It is the new paschal meal of the Church, the meal of the New Covenant, which Christ gave to his disciples. Christ commanded his disciples thus to remember and encounter him in this sacramental meal, as the continuing people of God, until his return. The last meal celebrated by Jesus was a liturgical meal employing symbolic words and actions. Consequently the Eucharist is a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicate to us God's love in Jesus Christ, the love by which Jesus loved his own "to the end" (John 13:1)." *(Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches)*

Biblical Passages About Communion

1 Corinthians 11:23-35
Exodus 24
Luke 22:14-20
Luke 5:1-11

Mark 14:22-25
Matthew 14:13-21
Matthew 26:26-29
Revelation 19:9

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What do you think is "sacred" or "sacramental" about Communion? What aspects of the celebration of Communion in your local church are most meaningful? Is anything missing from your common experience that you wish were included?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Is there anything that should be required in order for someone to receive Communion? If so, what? Is there any part of the Communion ritual that you believe is essential?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How can we best bring together and value our various experiences and understandings of Communion without attempting to reconcile them into one "right" answer? What can be said about how "MCC" (as a collective group) understands and/or practices Communion?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What do you think MCC's testimony is about Communion – and about how God is present with us at the table? What does MCC have to offer the broader church and/or world that comes out of our Communion experience?

Pulling it All Together: Expanding the Guest List

Luke 14:15-24 recounts Jesus telling a story of a great banquet. In the story, the householder sends a servant with the instruction to go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the homeless, the jobless, the lonely, those in need who may not have anyone to care for them, the hurting, anyone who is searching, so that my banquet table can be filled. Unfortunately everyone who was approached began to beg off, one after another, making excuses. The first said, 'I bought a piece of property and need to look it over. Send my regrets.' Another said, 'I just bought five teams of oxen, and I really need to check them out. Send my regrets.' And yet another said, 'I just got married and need to get home to my spouse.' The servant reported back, 'Sir, I did what you commanded— and there's still room.' The householder then told the servants to go to the country roads. Whoever you find, bring them in. I want my house full!

As a group, write an “invitation” to the communion table that you believe honors this type of inclusive call to the banquet. How will you word your e-vite? What type of RSVP will you request? How do you want the invitation to be passed on by others?

As a closing ritual, we suggest that you celebrate communion together as a group: breaking bread, sharing the cup, serving one another, offering prayers as you see fit. At the point in the ritual when you offer the invitation to the table, speak the invitation you have written together in unison.

Additional Resources

- Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.* Faith and Order Paper No. 111. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.
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WHO IS JESUS?

Focus

We call ourselves Christians acknowledging our approach to God, individual and communal, through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. As we acknowledge that we come from many different Christian traditions, we note that our Christology may be very different from one person to the next. In this discussion we focus on the reality that we are a diverse people who have a wide range of understandings regarding just who Jesus of Nazareth was and who the Christ is and how Jesus is connected to the church that we understand to be the body of Christ in the world.

Some Centering Quotes about Jesus

“Who was Jesus? That disarmingly simple question is ... asked passionately by Christians – and non-Christians – of the most widely varying theological stances. While certainly not all of that interest is in touch with the academic quest for the historical Jesus, all who seek to answer the question have a vision of who Jesus was, whether that person is a television evangelist who talks about “JEE-sus” with every breath or is an Orthodox priest who almost shudders to say the name.”

(Walter F. Taylor, Jr., *New Quests for the Historical Jesus*)

“Jesus persists in veiling himself in indirect references and metaphors. ... It is almost as though Jesus were intent on making a riddle of himself. ... Whoever or whatever Jesus was, he was a complex figure, not easily subsumed under one theological rubric or sociological model.”

(John Meier, *Marginal Jew*)

“... For those of us who are Christians, we are all involved in an unending conversation about Jesus. It has gone on from the time of his first followers – a conversation that includes memory, testimony, significance, meaning, application, praise, prayer, and, of course, difference and conflict. The terms of this conversation change over time and from one cultural setting to another. ... How Christians think and talk about Jesus changes, even as there are some constants. Indeed, for Christians, the unending conversation about Jesus is the most important conversation there is. He is for us the decisive revelation of God – of what can be seen of God’s character and passion in a human life. There are other important conversations. But for followers of Jesus, the unending conversation about Jesus is the conversation that matters most.”

(Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*)

“People say [that] Jesus is found in the Bible and the church. So many say it that I think it must be true, but for me the experience has not been one of finding him anywhere. For me, Bible and church, liturgy and creed, word and sacrament, have not served to facilitate a human quest through which we might recover Jesus and restore history. Rather, they have served to disclose a divine quest through which Jesus himself redeems history and recovers humanity. In short, I never once have felt as though I were finding Jesus in any of this, but I frequently feel as though I am being found. I think of the story that way: not as the place where I look for Jesus but as the place where he finds me.”

(Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History*)

A Testimony About Jesus

Who Is Jesus?

Contributed by BK Hipsher

Having been raised the eldest daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher in the south during the 1960's and 1970's, my impulse is to answer this question with the well learned answer often rehearsed as a child, “Jesus Christ is the only son of God who died for my sins on a cross at Calvary and whom I acknowledge as my personal Lord and savior.” Having been received into the Episcopal Church in 1989, I am tempted to respond with portions of the Nicene Creed and answer, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God....begotten, not made.... For us and for our salvation ... he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary....For our sake he was crucified... suffered death and was buried. On the Third day he rose again.... he ascended into heaven... He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” Having studied many of the great feminist and queer theologians and as an unapologetic student of Carter Heyward and Virginia Mollenkott, I might answer, “Jesus was the man who showed us what it was like to live a human life as the incarnate Christ present on earth, teaching us what it means to really love each other.” And from my close association with Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, I might answer that Jesus embodied a unique and particular prophetic presence as a human being, showing us what it means to live a human life always giving priority to the expression of God's love for creation.

It is important for me to acknowledge that all of these answers have been and on some level continue to be true for me, simultaneously. And, logically, if this diverse collection of answers is true for me, then how much more diverse are our collective answers to the question, “Who is Jesus?”

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Jesus

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Who is Jesus for you? How has that understanding changed over the course of your life?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What are the images of Jesus that come into focus as we discuss our personal answers to the question, “Who is Jesus?” Was there anything in your small group discussion discomfiting, challenging, or threatening to you?

Additional Thoughts About Who Jesus Is

MCC Stories, Our Stories

“I identify with Jesus as the radical liberator, as the one who liberates humanity and the earth from the bonds of oppressive forces. He shows us the example of brotherhood, of love, of service so that we can all be free to be all we are created to be. He is someone who is human and divine and who liberates me from demonic forces and those forces are what motivate people to oppress others.”

“Jesus Christ is the only Son of God who died for my sins.”

“Jesus is the human male who modeled for us transgressing gender, doing transforming acts, transcending the dominant culture norms to show us a queer vision of humanity transporting us to an understanding that we are called to do the same.”

“Jesus Christ is my personal savior.”

“Jesus is the pattern or model of how we are supposed to live our lives in the world.”

“Jesus is our brother.”

“Jesus is God incarnate.”

“The historical figure Jesus cannot be reconstructed from the records we have. Very few sources other than sacred texts can corroborate the existence of an individual man called Jesus who lived in first century Palestine and did great deeds.”

These are some actual quotes from people who identify as MCC. They show in a microcosm how diverse our answers are to the question. And as we unpack the question “Who is Jesus?” we must decide if we are going to include the concept of the Christ. Some of us assume that the human baby Jesus was as much the Christ as the man who was crucified. Some of us believe that the Christ pre-dated the man Jesus and existed from before the beginning of creation. Some of us believe that the work of salvation was accomplished when Jesus died on the cross and in that act he proved that he is the Christ. Some of us believe that the resurrection is the defining moment affirming Jesus as the Christ. Some of us believe that the church is the body of Christ in the world and tasked with completing the work of salvation by working for justice. Some of us believe that Jesus died but that the Christ arose. Some of us believe that we are all children of God not favoring an image of Jesus as the only Son of God. And some of us believe that the Christ is within all of us even inhabiting the space between us, knitting us all together into one family.

Additional Quotes About Jesus

“Jesus was divine in the same way we all are – together, in mutual relation with our sisters and brothers. No one of us alone is ‘God.’ God is the Holy Spirit connecting our lives, moving with us and through us. God is our Sacred power for healing and liberation. God was Jesus’ sacred power as well. ... Jesus seems to have been rooted deeply in a commitment to Spirit that he experienced as available to everyone; a God who cared more about people’s well-being than propriety, customs, or laws; a Source of social and personal transformation; a Wellspring of liberation and healing, judgment, and forgiveness. Jesus’s historical

WHO IS JESUS?

significance – his Christic, or redemptive, meanings – originated in his faith in the power that he experienced in relation to sisters and brothers. ...

I believe that the ‘something special’ about Jesus was his *passion*: the fullness of his embodied life, the depth and power of his embodied spirit, the openness of his body to risk and struggle in the spirit of God.”
(Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who are Right*)

“Womanist theology begins with the experiences of Black women as its point of departure. ... Black women must do theology out of their tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism. To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood. ... with Jesus Christ, there was an implied universality which made him identify with others – the poor, the woman, the stranger. To affirm Jesus’ solidarity with the ‘least of the people’ is not an exercise in romanticized contentment with one’s oppressed status in life. For as the Resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross for Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppressive existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation.” (Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*)

“The recovery of the dangerous queer memories of Jesus and his sexuality transforms my Christian practice into a new and dangerous memory. As I retrieve the historical Jesus, I discover an activist advocating an egalitarian vision of God’s reign. Jesus was just as dangerous to the hierarchical, exclusive, privileged, and gendered network of religious/political relations of power in first-century Palestine as twenty-first-century queers and ACT UP are to the Catholic hierarchy. ...

The Queer Christ is an attempt to construct a christological discourse that interprets Jesus’ embodied practices in a positive, queer-affirming theological discourse. To say Jesus the Christ is queer is to say that God identifies with us and our experience of injustice. God experiences the stereotypes, the labeling, the hate crimes, the homophobic violence directed against us. ... If Jesus the Christ is not queer, then his *basileia* ([reign of God]) message of solidarity and justice is irrelevant. If the Christ is not queer, then the incarnation has no meaning for our sexuality. It is the particularity of Jesus *the* Christ, his particular identification with the sexually oppressed, that enables us to understand Christ as black, queer, female, Asian, African, a South American peasant, a Jewish transsexual, and so forth.”
(Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ*)

Biblical Passages About Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25
Matthew 3:11-4:4
Matthew 9:1-7
Matthew 9:27-31
Matthew 9:35-36
Matthew 15:23-28
Matthew 16:15-25
Matthew 17:4-14
Matthew 26:26-29
Matthew 26:59-68
Matthew 27:41-51
Matthew 28:1-20
Mark 1:7-8
Mark 2:1-12

Mark 7:24-30
Mark 8: 27-33
Mark 9:11-13
Mark 10:46-52
Mark 14:18-21
Mark 16:1-11
Luke 2:1-7
Luke 5:17-26
Luke 9: 18-22
Luke 22:21-23
Luke 24:1-12
John 13:21-30
John 20: 1-18

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How can we maintain our own integrity about who Jesus is for us while making room for others' views that sometimes diverge greatly from our own?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What part do the creeds play in our mutual respect for diversity of understanding with regard to Jesus and the concept of the Christ?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Christology is central to our theology as Christians. What does it mean for us as MCC to keep listening to each other when we do not agree or understand each other's Christological focus or understanding of the answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?"

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What do we risk as a denomination if we insist on making room for a variety of opinions and ideas about Jesus and the concept of the Christic presence in the world? What do we gain?

Pulling it All Together: Reflections About Jesus

No matter what our particular or varied views on Jesus, we all gather around the gospel stories of the life and work of Jesus in the world. As we consider the many ways we can answer the question "Who is Jesus?" we must wrestle with the fact that we have an incarnational theology. We believe that God is somehow made known here on earth among us in human form. That reality has enormous implications for us as human beings. If the life of Jesus is important to our understanding of incarnation and what it means to be a Christian, then we must come to terms with what it means to be ourselves, the unique, beloved child of God that we were created to be. One of the great teachings of Jesus is referred to as the Great Commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. In an incarnational theology we must come to terms with loving ourselves in all our diversity before we can begin to learn to love our neighbor. Because implied in this teaching is the idea that we can only love another as much as we have learned to love ourselves, our own particular incarnation of Christ in the world.

Ritual Suggestions

Have the group write their own creed, inclusive of everyone's perspective without trying to reconcile it. Once the creed is written, have everyone recite it together. (Hint: the phrase "We believe" can indicate that even if all of us do not subscribe to a particular belief, together, "we" (or some of us) might.)

Another option: Build a group collage by having everyone contribute a picture that represents the image of Christ in themselves. Each person would share about their picture before adding it to the collage.

Additional Resources

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GLOBAL JUSTICE

Focus

From the very beginning, “Justice” has been a core value and driving force for Metropolitan Community Churches around the world. Salvation, Community, and Social Action were the “three-pronged gospel” that Troy Perry began preaching, and social (and political) activism in the cause of creating a more just and equitable world has always been a priority of MCC. In the past few years, MCC has increasingly been known around the world as “The Human Rights Church,” which we believe is an indication of our continued commitment to the pursuit of justice. But, what is justice? How do we most effectively work for justice in the world, in our communities, and within our churches? This session invites participants into a Holy Conversation about Global Justice, and the ways in which individuals and communities can best participate in the Divine imperative to do justice.

Centering Quotes on Justice

“... Oppression and liberation are the very substance of the entire historical context within which divine revelation unfolds, and only by reference to this central fact can we understand the meaning of faith, grace, love, peace, sin, and salvation.” (Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*)

“Black theology’s answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated briefly: The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.” (James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*)

“In the past thirty years, an explosion has taken place in Christianity. All around the world popular movements are rising up out of the culture of silence and finding their voices. In Latin America, Asia, North America, Europe, and the Pacific Rim, the spirit is moving and communities of the oppressed are forming, crying out against their suffering and the social, political, economic, and religious structures that give rise to that suffering. But that is only half of the story. These cries of protest are the signs not of a mass outpouring of hatred and revenge, but of a movement committed to working for liberation toward abundant life. Realizing that ‘only justice can stop a curse,’ these communities have begun a new practice of Christianity, experimenting with new ways of being the church, engaging in the practice of justice, and reflecting critically on the meaning of this practice. Theology done in these communities grows out of solidarity with those suffering and in need and is rooted in particular social justice contexts.” (Mary Potter Engel and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Lift Every Voice*)

"I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. ...

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust. Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true *ekklesia* and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom ... They have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment. I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future."

(Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*)

"I would like to highlight our understanding of the concept of peace. We need to have a deep understanding of peace-- that peace signifies salvation, especially in the African world-view—wholeness and integrity. It also signifies community, righteousness, justice and well-being. So, we have many ways, and one of the significant ways we highlight, especially in the South African context when we talk about peace, is that justice creates peace. And I want to underline this ... One of the important ways we [talk] about peace, especially in the African context, is a word which is commonly known as *ubuntu*, a deep sense of humanity, of relatedness, that as people we are part of the corporate body of the people of God. The notion of corporate personality as we know it in the Old Testament is that you cannot exist as an individual, but we are a part of the larger community. So that concept continues to play an important role in our understanding of peace, shalom. Shalom is a very wholistic concept in our own struggle within the African context."

(Bonganjalo Goba, *Peace in Africa: a personal perspective*)

"Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightening; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed on them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

(Frederick Douglass, c. 1857)

"... Love has its price. God wants to make us alive, and the wider we open our hearts to others or the more audibly we cry out against the injustice which rules over us, the more difficult our life in the rich society of injustice becomes. Even a small love of a few trees, of seals, or of schoolchildren who cry at night in torment ... is costly. Many cannot afford even a small love for creatures and prefer not to have seen anything."

(Dorothy Söelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*)

Some Testimonies about Justice

A Plan for Hope and Justice in Pakistan

Contributed by Pat Bumgardner

In Pakistan, MCC has the opportunity to literally be part of what can and will bring longed for social change, freedom and “salvation” (if we understand that term in its Gospel context as “safe” – what those who are “saved” find is safe space for who they are and what their lives were intended to be about) to women and children, particularly girl children, and to directly address the issue of poverty.

Statistically we know that roughly 70% of the poor in the world are women. Change their realities and you change the shape of the global economy. In Pakistan, a small group of lesbians that both Rev. Elder Ken Martin and I had the opportunity to meet with have a plan. For \$1500 one of them can obtain the kind of 6-month training that will allow her to acquire out-of-the-home employment that is acceptable for women. That woman could then rent a safe space where she could be joined by the others in the group. They would live communally and frugally until enough could be saved to educate the second woman, who would then also go to work and contribute to the support of the group. This strategy would continue until all in the group were educated and employed. And it is one that could work for establishing other “safe spaces” for other young lesbians. It could work with the community of “eunuchs” in Bagria. It is a concrete example of what it means to be on the ground, to be listening to those who are trying to live under extremely oppressive circumstances and who have developed a plan that we must not close our eyes to. It holds great potential not only for Queer people in Pakistan, but for the revitalization of communities of faith that MCC has already given birth to and who are looking to and need to connect to the wider, global LGBTQIA community.

The Pakistani plan for providing safe space as the groundwork for social change is a strategy worth embracing on a global level. In Kuala Lumpur, for example, \$330 US per month will enable our fledgling parish extension to rent enough space to not only house a worship community, but to also provide safe space for young activists engaging a range of issues, including HIV/AIDS and gender equality. (MCCNY, in its relationship with the Kuala Lumpur community is very clear, we did not “found” or “plant” a church. We connected with a movement for equality in the works, we listened to what people were saying, we shared some resources, and we are now celebrating the accomplishments and progress being made toward opening the first Queer Community Center in Malaysia that will house a community of faith at its heart.)

SAFE SPACE is a primary and urgent need among Queer communities around the globe. Many things become possible when dreams and hopes, as well as trials and tribulations, can be openly shared. Global Justice is about connecting with that need as a way of laying a foundation for people to begin to organize and work for change collectively.

An Eye Witness Account of MCC's Relief Efforts in Haiti

Contributed by Tania Guzman (February 2010)

We have just arrived back in the Dominican Republic and are exhausted from the events of the day. The team of five volunteers and three drivers from ICM Santo Domingo departed for Haiti at 4am on Thursday, February 11th. From the church were Rev. Tania Guzman, Wilkin and three Haitian church members (Webster, Gregory and Jonel) who are very familiar with navigating Haiti and whose families still live in the areas affected by the earthquake.

We developed a very effective system that involved having the church members contact their families and select one person for us to deliver the food to. When we approached the drop off points, we contacted the individuals via cell phone. Once we arrived at each point of delivery the contact person was already there waiting for us and we only had seconds to get all the food out of the bus and leave before we were noticed and crowds would gather.

Each person receiving the delivery was so grateful and happy and blessed our efforts and the journey. When we arrived, we were greeted by friends of our church members who arranged to meet us and helped us make the deliveries. As it turned out, 2 of these friends are members of POZ, the GLBT organization that was meeting during the earthquake and lost some of their members in the building collapse. They were so grateful and touched by the church's efforts to help.

We wanted to capture photos to share with the world but it was difficult because we had to move so quickly. We hope that our stories will suffice. It was bittersweet for our Haitian church members because they could only see their loved ones for the few moments we were unloading things for them. Their parents wanted to hold on to them, but we only had what felt like seconds to be with them and then we had to let go.

We were able to make deliveries to 22 families and had more food left which we just handed out to people on the street very quickly as we drove through some of the affected areas.

I have been following the situation in Haiti through the news media since the disaster happened, but it was hard to actually be there and see the devastation with my own eyes. There were tents everywhere; in public areas, even on the medians of what were once very busy streets. Most of them are not even real tents but bed sheets and pieces of fabric. There is still a lot of chaos and unrest and the streets were filled with thousands of people who were in desperate need of food and relief.

This experience was overwhelming. Our hearts went out to those that we were able to assist. This was a life changing experience for each of us.

We still have funds remaining and we were able to do a lot of bargaining for things because we want to continue to help where we can. It was the consensus of our group that we need to make another trip, this time with tents and tarps so that they can have shelter from the elements.

A Day on the Road with Soulforce Equality Ride 2010 **Contributed by Sabrina Diz**

Today we visited the much anticipated Baylor University. Two years ago when Soulforce visited the campus they chalked in front of the chapel and were asked to stop. All but five Riders and one student stopped at which point the ones that continued were arrested on trespassing charges. Yes, I said "chalked" which is the same as writing on sidewalk and streets with chalk. When they were taken to jail they were cavity searched, kept overnight before pretrial even though they were arrested mid-day, and a Trans Rider was mistreated as he was placed in a female cell. All this, may I repeat, for chalking on a sidewalk.

Mia and Jaxon, the Stop Planners for the school, coordinated a different approach this year and negotiated with administrator's permission on campus to speak to students, faculty, and staff. So at 9am we walked onto campus excited to engage in dialogue and common ground. Nick and I volunteered to join in on a Philosophy class led by Dr. Dougherty who was the only Professor on campus to facilitate any kind of discussion or incorporate our visit into a class. This, I am sure, had a lot to do with the fact that Baylor did

not send any type of e-mail announcing our visit and kept it very silent up until a day or two ago that they sent an e-mail that could be considered condescending (at best) by many. Kudos to Prof. Dougherty who I feel had the best intentions. It was disappointing that the dialogue that this opportunity fostered was greatly hindered by time constraints and an administrator that sat in on the conversation. However, the questions posed by Dr. Dougherty were insightful and the responses to the questions we posed back at him were honestly answered.

The rest of the day Riders spent engaging students and challenging them to think about the policy, how this policy aligns/contradicts Christian teachings, the intersection of justice and faith and sexuality, and just asking and answering questions. Personally, I had some really great discussions. During one of these with a student I tried to explain the difference between a sexual act and an identity. A question posed to me that I had not been asked before was, “If a lesbian couple does not engage in sexual activity, how is this different than two female friends?” I must admit it took me by surprise because it was so obvious to me, but I had to take a step back and admire this person for being courageous enough to admit ignorance and willing to be vulnerable by asking an honest question. These are the kinds of questions that students want to know; the kind of questions that could be answered within the safe spaces of a Queer/Straight Alliance if Baylor would allow one to exist.

Promptly at four o’clock, in accordance with our agreement, we boarded the bus and left campus. We rolled to a nearby park where Jaxon and Mia had planned a Variety Show. Under a pavilion with the sun shining down on us people shared a part of their lives with a friendly and eager audience. We had a little bit of everything. The show included spoken word, dance routines, slam poetry, queer skits, original music, and amazing ‘coming out’ testimonies that had the crowd in thunderous applause. In my own Equality Ride experience and after such a depleting day, this reminder of the wonderful and amazing community and culture I belong to, affirmed and replenished my belief in my faith, my cause, and my friends.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Justice

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Have you ever experienced being treated unjustly? If so, how? What is your experience of working toward justice in this or any other situation?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Whom do you think we might identify as the most vulnerable people in the world today (e.g. the widow, the orphan, the outcast)? What are the current situations of injustice in the world about which you feel most passionate? Why?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What did you most appreciate about your small group discussions? With what stories or experiences did you most identify? How does it “feel” (emotionally and/or physically) to talk about justice?

Additional Thoughts About Global Justice

MCC's Calling to Global Justice

Contributed by Pat Bumgardner, Chair of MCC's Global Justice Team

“Justice” is a many-splendored concept in MCC, perhaps partly because that is also the case in the Scriptures we reverence. It is a concept rooted in God’s all-embracing love, God’s covenant with creation, God’s desire that all of us have the fullness of life, and God’s sense that not all of us have an equal shot at that fullness.

MCC’s Global Justice Team is currently working or partnered in Latin America, the Caribbean, Malaysia, Pakistan, parts of the United States, Canada, Eastern Europe, and parts of Africa. We have contacts seeking to discuss partnering with us in places like Iraq and Iran. We are currently addressing issues as divergent as marriage equality in the United States and HIV/AIDS among children in Zimbabwe.

The areas we are working on include justice for families and how that impacts social change, how to use technology to reach a broader audience (while not overlooking the fact that many, many people around the globe do not have access to computers, email, Youtube, Myspace, etc.), how to build our constituency, developing partnerships with activists and other human rights organizations, training young activists from a spiritual perspective, integrating Queer rights as part of the overall human rights agenda, reviving passion around HIV/AIDS and launching HIV/AIDS and drug literacy curriculum in local congregations, how to raise money beyond the borders of MCC, immigration and asylum issues, sexism and social change, establishing a Global Justice Center to host meetings and offer trainings, how to prioritize needs and developing protocols, how to best intersect with other teams and how to resource our constituents, global poverty, safety and support for activists in places like Jamaica, Uganda and Nigeria, learning from movements and leaders on the ground, developing non-violent strategies for social action, developing evaluative tools, community building, learning about existing legislative and human rights codes around the globe plus the histories of work and the interactions of other faith traditions --- and we are trying to do all of this with a budget that represents about half of what it takes to live in any major metropolitan area of the United States for one year. In short, we are attempting the miraculous and falling short in the following areas:

- using existing technology where possible to maximize our reach
- establishing a credible voice for MCC on matters of war and peace
- having enough time and resources to work on an overall Global Justice Plan
- dealing with human slavery and sex tourism
- engaging the terrorism/illegal imprisonment/torture issue with our congregations
- time to develop a global theology around Queer rights that offers a serious counter to Western Queer Theology
- developing tools to define and measure success

We often operate much like a triage center: When the head of state in Gambia, for example, threatens to behead Queer people, we drop everything to respond and hopefully save lives in that moment in that place. The needs of Queer people around the globe are so vast that it has been difficult to come up with an overarching strategy of engagement.

In general, however, we operate under the guidelines so succinctly articulated by that champion of global justice, The Rev. Elder Diane Fisher:

- go only where we are invited
- assume we have a lot to learn
- listen to our hosts
- forge partnerships
- respond when requested
- understand that our priority is furthering the human rights effort on the ground

Sometimes the latter principle is viewed in opposition to the more traditional “missional” efforts of the Church. I believe our Team views prioritizing the human rights effort on the ground as a way to ensure that if and when congregations develop, they will grow out of a solid understanding of the Gospel as a radical social manifesto in which the pursuit of human rights is first and foremost.

We see ourselves as people of faith called to stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed, to be partners in working for change, to be witnesses who call attention to human rights abuses, to be voices in the international community for justice, to tear down walls and build up hope, and to build on hope and create a common future. Doing these things is human rights work. It is work that is rooted in the original three-prong vision of our Founder, The Rev. Troy Perry. I think I am on solid ground when I say, there is a strong sense among Team Members that God has called this ministry to the forefront of MCC once again, as a way of helping all of us refocus on that founding vision. It is a way to help MCC in its efforts to become not simply a church, but a movement of faith, in which the colonialist heritage and by-products of the tradition we represent are overcome. It is a way to help all of us reclaim the prophetic call to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). It is one way to renew, re-invent, and re-invigorate ourselves and our sustaining vision.

There is a great revolution going on globally in terms of Queer rights/human rights, and MCC is awake, playing an active role, and can play an even greater one. We have a chance to work with, learn from, train and shape not only today’s spiritual activists, but tomorrow’s world leaders.

Queer rights are human rights and human rights are Queer rights. Our challenge is to rise above the dominant ethic of globalization that thrives on a gain for one as a loss for another. St. Paul wrote long ago, when one member suffers we all suffer; when one rejoices, we all rejoice. If we are truly to become a human rights church, this must become our guiding ethic.

Our challenge, as always, is fidelity to the Gospel vision of the Reign of God unfolding here and now. That Reign is one of the “just and equal sharing of the earth’s rewards,” as the hymn posits. TIME magazine in March or April of 2008 highlighted ten ideas that it said are changing the world. Number one was “common wealth” --- what we pray for in the prayer Jesus taught (Thy common/wealth – Thy kin-dom – Thy Reign come). Actually mirroring what we pray for remains our greatest challenge, as we together – leadership and congregants and partners around the globe – seek to pool our resources financial and otherwise for the singular purpose of fulfilling the dream of God that we all have the fullness of life.

Biblical Passages About Justice

Deuteronomy 10:17-19
 Deuteronomy 16:20
 Deuteronomy 27:19
 Micah 6:8
 Psalm 33
 Psalm 37
 Psalm 82
 Psalm 106

Isaiah 1:17
 Isaiah 42
 Jeremiah 22:3
 Amos 5:24
 Matthew 12:15-21
 Luke 18:1-8
 Matthew 20:1-16

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What is justice? In what ways is the work of justice related to your understanding of God and/or your faith/spirituality?

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Many times, people become aware of injustice when it affects themselves or someone close to them. How might we expand our sensitivities to situations of injustice that are not about “just us,” and that are truly “Global” in nature?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): In the essay above, Pat Bumgardner describes the challenge of planning strategically for justice work in the face of so many competing needs and limited resources. How do you think we might best prioritize and allocate resources for justice in MCC? In your local church?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What connections do you see between queer rights and human rights? What are the strengths of MCC’s work for justice on behalf of LGBTQI people that we might put to use for other justice-related causes?

Pulling it All Together: A Justice Covenant

As you close this “Holy Conversation,” it seems fitting to allow participants to take or commit to take some action to work for justice. Ask participants to come together and spend a few minutes thinking about the situations of injustice that are most important to them, and planning at least one thing that they will covenant to do about that situation (e.g. pray, demonstrate, give, become involved in an organization, write a letter/make a phone call, etc.). Gather in a circle and ask each participant to state aloud what they have decided. Close with a prayer of commissioning (sample provided below).

God of justice and liberation, you have called us to “do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with you.” It is our sincere desire to do so, to make a difference in the world around us, to participate in the healing of the world and of ourselves and our communities. We ask you to continue to awaken us to the suffering of those around us and to infuse us with compassion, courage, and the strength to make a difference. You have heard the hopes of our hearts, and the actions we promise to take. Please work through us, and through the larger body of Metropolitan Community Churches around the world that way may be your hands and feet, your voice and heart in the world. And now, let us recite together the prayer attributed to St. Francis, who said:

[God,] make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon:
where there is doubt, faith ;
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light
where there is sadness, joy
O divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.
Amen.

Additional Resources

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ECCLESIOLOGY

Focus

Ecclesiology is talking and thinking about the church (Latin: *ecclesia*, from Greek *ek-kalein*, “to call out of” and *logos*, “word”). This includes talking and thinking about such things as: the nature of the church, who belongs to the church, how do we recognize church, how do we organize church, what do we expect from church, and many other questions. To have this holy conversation about ecclesiology is especially important for MCC for two reasons. The first reason is that we are a young denomination. As such we do not have centuries old traditions and models. MCC is something new and unique and we therefore have the responsibility and the opportunity to be church in many new ways. The second reason is that the people who make and build our church, all of us, come from very different backgrounds and church experiences. There is no consensus or even a common language when we talk about church. When we talk about church we might mean many different things. Yet we all live in this one body, this one church in many congregations around the world in many languages and cultures. There are many ways to be MCC. Therefore we have to engage in this holy conversation again and again.

Some Testimonies About Ecclesiology

Finding a Home

Contributed by Axel Schwaigert

I “found” MCC at least two times. I had read about this church in America that was predominately gay, but I had never actually experienced it. The first time I met actual people from MCC was on the “Kirchentag” in Germany, a large biannual gathering of protestant Christians and churches. About 150,000 people gather for four days of discussion, sharing, meeting, service and celebration. One of the information booths was from MCC Hamburg, a small congregation about 600 miles away from my hometown. Finally there was an opportunity to really meet MCC, in the flesh, so to speak! But instead of going straight to the table, talking to the people there, I started to circle the booth. Again and again I walked past the place, where several young women and men stood, talking to people. I was afraid to actually approach them. What would I say? What would they ask, say, think? Should I out myself as gay man? What if they were not nice or not welcoming? Finally I gathered all my courage and went over. I was greeted with friendliness, openness and welcome. This was a place where I could belong, where I was welcome. This could be home for me. I spent the remaining three days of the gathering at the information booth of MCC Hamburg. I finally had found a place where I could be in church and totally myself.

The second time I “found” MCC was a few months later on a vacation to Key West, Florida. We had planned to visit MCC Key West and arrived just in time for the beginning of the service. I cannot remember the sermon or the music but there is one thing I will never forget: my first Holy Communion in MCC. It was the first time that I saw two men, two women, holding hands while receiving communion. I saw small groups of people and couples approaching the altar in the fullness of who they are. I remember my tears and in that moment I knew this church would be the church of my future. In the tradition I came from people only talked about inclusion and openness. But they did not provide for the opportunity to receive what I understand as the center of my worship experience together with the person I love. I knew that I needed a place where I could come into the presence of God with all that I am, including the person I would love. Church for me needed to be the place where I am understood, where I am welcome, where I can grow and where I can bring my entire life with all its aspects to God.

The Founding of Metropolitan Community Churches
From Rev. Troy D. Perry with Thomas L.P. Swicegood in
Don't Be Afraid Anymore

... I lay on the bed in my room upstairs, tired from a night without rest, but nevertheless unable to sleep. I said, “Lord! You know I’ve prayed and I know you love me. You’ve told me that. I feel your Holy Spirit. What should I be doing? I can’t help but thinking of Tony [a friend who believed God hated him because he was ‘queer’], alone, bitter, cut off from talking to you. I wish I could find a church somewhere that would help him. I wish there was a church somewhere for all of us who are outcast.”

Suddenly, as if there was an electric spark in my head, I began asking myself, “What’s wrong with Troy Perry? Why are you waiting for somebody else?” Then I prayed a little later that same morning, harder than ever before, and in the sort of talking I do, I said, “Lord, you called me to preach. Now I think I’ve seen my niche in the ministry. We need a church, not a homosexual church, but a special church that will reach out to the lesbian and gay community. A church for people in trouble, and for people who just want to be near you. So, if you want such a church started, and you seem to keep telling me that you do, well then, just let me know when.” Whereupon, I received my answer to an impossible dream. A still, small voice in my mind’s ear spoke, and the voice said, “Now.” ...

On October 6, 1968, twelve people attended the first service of Metropolitan Community Church, [which I had advertised in *The Advocate*]. It was held in the right half of the little pink house in Los Angeles that Willie Smith and I called home. Instead of a suit and tie, I departed from Pentecostal fashion and wore black robes for the first time in my life. The change was initiated because of an older friend, Reverend Revel Quigley, a gay Congregational minister, knew that my outreach would attract people from a wide spectrum of very different religious backgrounds. ...

As I prepared to receive people for worship early on that Sunday afternoon, I had two fears. Worst was my fear that nobody would come. My other fear was that people would attend for a week or two, and then everything would collapse. ... Beginning the service, I told our gathering what Metropolitan Community Church was going to be, and I told them I would preach what God had told me to preach, a three-pronged gospel:

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” included me as a gay male, unconditionally, because salvation is free – no church can take it away.

ECCLESIOLOGY

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 would stand up for all our rights, secular and religious, and we would start fighting the many forms of tyranny that oppressed us.

(NOTE: The following is excerpted from Troy Perry's book *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*.)

I offered communion. Only three came forward to take the bread and wine, but they were weeping. And then I served communion to myself. We dismissed with a prayer of benediction. Then I invited everyone to stay for coffee and cake. We gathered and we just couldn't quit crying. We all sat around and said we had felt the Spirit ... One young man came up to me, and said, "Oh, Troy, God was here this morning! I haven't been in church in eight years. And even when I left the church, the one I'd been in, I never felt anything like I felt here this morning, in this living room." ...

As we started to grow and attract people from all kinds of different backgrounds, I knew that we would have to get down to cases about settling problems of organization, administration, doctrine, and the church services. They had to be settled soon, so that everyone would be able to know and rely on the church, to really be a part of its body, of its identity.

I knew that I was not starting another Pentecostal church. I was starting a church that would be truly ecumenical. I had asked the religious backgrounds of those first twelve. They were Catholic, Episcopal, and various Protestant sects. I fervently sought to serve a really broad spectrum of our population. ... But it is not the mechanics of worship that we were concerned with. It was the substance of the act of worship that was the core of our service. We did have diversity. We needed that. Ours was a working church, an active, growing church. We knew that the worship of God comes from the heart. So we were always free to move and grow. That's the way it has always been. We felt that the diversity and the freedom and the real sincerity of worship would bring us together in unity. ... When we finally obtained our charter, it was the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. In that organization we establish missions and new congregations, and our whole program of social, economic and political action.

Some Centering Quotes on Ecclesiology

"Our bread was given, not earned. We had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do but sit there together, saying sonorous words in unison, listening to language we did not hear anywhere else in our lives. *Take heart. Go in peace. Bear fruit.* ... We also sang things we could more easily have said. *The Lord be with you. And also with you.* None of us would have dreamed of doing this in the grocery store, but by doing it in church we remembered that there was another way to address one another. *Lift up your hearts. We lift them up unto the Lord.* Where else did any of us sing anymore, especially with other people? Where else could someone pick up the alto line on the second verse of "Amazing Grace" and give five other people the courage to sing in harmony? Sometimes, when we were through, we would all just stand there listening until the last note turned entirely into air."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*)

“It is a reading of the past that makes sense to those seeking certainty in an uncertain landscape. But it is also a political agenda to convince Christians that God has a particular future in mind for us—a future that, not surprisingly, looks exactly like a policy statement from the religious right. Theirs, however, is not the only version of history available to spiritual nomads. Other Christians are remembering the past differently, reaching back to the ancient wisdom of the village church, a tradition, that, at its best, both grounds a community and opens its doors to wayfarers. Two colleagues of mine once referred to this as ‘porous monasticism,’ a kind of Christian community of practice that is both spiritual and open at the same time. Its doors are not barred by threats of eternal damnation. Rather, signposts of Christian practice—the things people do together in community for the sake of God and the world—mark its sacred space.”
(Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*)

“[T]he Church, capital C—is not really a ‘thing’ or entity so much as it is a network in exactly the same way that the Internet or the World Wide Web or, for that matter, gene regulatory and metabolic networks are not ‘things’ or entities. Like them and from the point of view of an emergent, the Church is a self-organizing system of relations, symmetrical or otherwise, between innumerable member-parts that themselves form subsets of relations within their smaller networks, etc., etc. in interlacing levels of complexity.”
(Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*)

After Her Death

I am trying to find the lesson
for tomorrow. Mathew something.
which lectionary? I have not
forgotten the Way, but, a little,
the way to the Way. The trees keep whispering
peace, peace, and the birds
in the shallows are full of the
bodies of small fish and are
content. They open their wings
so easily, and fly. So. It is still
possible.

I open the book
which the strange, difficult, beautiful church
has given me. To Matthew. Anywhere.

(Mary Oliver)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Ecclesiology

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Which tradition do you come from, if any? What aspect of church is personally important to you?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What are your own images and words for “church”? What images and words do you find helpful, which are unhelpful or problematic?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): With so many traditions and images for church in MCC, what makes us ‘ecclesia’?

Biblical Passages and Additional Thoughts About Ecclesiology

Contributed by Axel Schwaigert

There are many ways to talk about church. The way we engage in this conversation depends on the tradition we come from and the specific question we want to discuss. One way to talk about church is to distinguish between the invisible and the visible church. Church is always both: the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:23; Eph. 5:30; Rom. 12:5 ff; 1 Cor. 10:16 ff, 12: 27 – 31; Col. 3:15 – 17; 1 Cor. 12:12 – 31), and the Communion of Saints. (Eph. 2: 19 – 20; Col. 3:12) The church is a mystical and spiritual gathering that ultimately surpasses our human understanding.

The church is built out of real humans with strengths and weaknesses. It is an organization with different historical, cultural and regional forms, with rules and regulations, sometimes living in peace, sometimes fighting. (Acts 2: 42 – 47; Acts 4:32 – 37; Acts 5:1 – 11)

As the Body of Christ in the world we are deeply connected to God. We are called out of the world, out of the nations to be a holy and royal priesthood, (Exodus 19:6; Rev. 1:6) the people of God (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 21:3). The old language of the Nicene Creed calls the church “one, holy, apostolic, catholic.” These words can have many different meanings. “One” can mean that in front of God the church is one, one Body of Christ, united from all her different forms into “One” by the love and grace of God. “Holy” can mean that through this love and grace the church is already today called out of the sins and separations from God into the triumphant, celebratory and ecstatic moment we will see on the last day. “Apostolic” can mean that the church is called into the inner circle of Jesus’ friends and disciples, sitting at the table of the great feast in heaven, together with all the saints past and present. “Catholic” (worldwide) can mean, that the church is called to the whole world, that no part of the world--be it regional, national or personal-- in body and spirit is left out of it.

As the Body of Christ we are deeply connected to the world. We are sent forth into the world, to all nations to change the world and be God’s people in the world. (Mark 16:15ff) We are called to be sisters and brothers, helpers, healers, teachers. As such we live with the need to organize ourselves, to give the church a structure and develop ways of living together. There are many ways of organizing church. None of them is perfect and they all have their specific place in time and in cultures. It is again and again the task of the many

parts of the Body of Christ to find the right way of being. Some of these structures need to be large, some are small and local. Some are better suited for a certain situation than others, but none is better or worse out of itself.

There are different ways being church manifests. Some see signs of the church when the sacraments are administered and the Gospel is proclaimed. Some see signs of the church when the Spirit is moving the people. Some see signs of the church when a certain organizational structure is present or the connection to a certain office or hierarchy is maintained. Some see it where good deeds and social action take place and others see it where there are buildings and times of worship and meditation. The church is also a place of community. Some might come because it is a place to meet friendly people, because it is the one place and time a week where people are welcoming and smile at you.

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How did you find MCC? What was important to you, what did you enjoy? What is important to you about MCC today?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What ‘signs of the church’ are important for you? Why?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Based on the additional thoughts above, how would people who are ‘not church’ recognize MCC as a church?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Which ideas in this conversation have been most helpful to you in thinking about the church? Which have been most challenging?

Pulling it All Together:

Reflections on the Church as a Living Tree

As the church, as a denomination, as a congregation, as a group we are like a tree. Planted by God we have our place and time in the life of the world. Roots grow deep into the soil of our own history and the history of others. We are rooted in the thinking, talking and believing of those who went before us. Some of the ground we stand on is good, fertile ground, some is hard rock and our roots have to grow around them. But we need both: the light soil that gives us nourishment and the hard rocks we can hold onto when storms shake us. And even the roots of the smallest plants can break the hardest rock. In this foundation we drink the living water, which is Christ.

We have a trunk, lifting the leaves high in the air, connecting them to the ground and the water. And even if the trunk sometimes seems dead and immobile, with a lot of dead bark around it, it still lives, supports, grows and protects the whole being. Without the trunk, all that holds us together and lifts us up in the church, we only would be a bush, blown away by the winds of time.

And we have a branches and twigs, leaves and blossoms. Each one is unique and different from the other, and yet all are the same, part of one tree. Together they form the crown, being seen from far away, that shelters the birds in the air and gives shadows in the heat of the day and safety in the cold of the night. Where the branches and the leaves grow, we do not know, the Spirit of God calls and leads us, every branch and every leaf. And the Spirit calls us to bear good fruit, our fruit, different from others, yet all precious for those who hunger.

And together with other church trees, large and small, tall and wide, in different colors and with different names, we form that forest that is the Creation of God.

Closing Ritual

For a small group, where people know each other quite well: A ritual of appreciation.

Provide small objects, one for each participant. These objects should be similar, but different. For example: different colored stones, real or artificial blossoms or flowers, differently colored tea lights, simple Origami objects in different colors. For this ritual the group should, if possible, be gathered in a circle. The objects are placed in a basket or on a beautiful piece of cloth in the middle. It is important that this center is somehow decorated and looks beautiful and precious. For this ritual we take something out of a treasure to give it to others. Each participant is now in turn invited to take one of the objects and give it to one other participant, telling the other person very shortly why she/he is important to the church, what he/she is doing for the church, why the church is a better place because of that person. "I am glad that you are part of MCC /of our church/of this group, because ..." Each person should receive only one object. The participants can take the objects home as a reminder of how important they are to the church. The leader should make sure that everybody is appreciated. Close with a prayer of blessing for all that are present and for the church.

For a larger group, where people do not know each other well: A ritual of good wishes for the church.

Provide small objects, one for each participant. These objects should be similar, but different. For example: different colored stones, real or artificial blossoms or flowers, differently colored tea lights, simple Origami objects in different colors. For this ritual the group should, if possible, be gathered in a circle. The objects are placed in a basket that can be handed from one to the other. In the middle of the circle provide for a centre, a piece of cloth, a burning candle. It is important that this center is somehow decorated and looks beautiful and precious. Each participant is now in turn invited to take one of the objects and place it in the centre of the circle. With this he/she is invited to formulate a good wish or blessing for the church/denomination/congregation. "It is my good wish and blessing for MCC/our church/this group that it may grow/ meet again/ have enough money to finally fix the leaking roof..." Close with a prayer of blessing for all that are present and for the church.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Catherine (Cathy) Alexander is a seminary student at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC. and she attends MCC of Northern Virginia. She is also a retired Navy Officer who works as a management consultant in the Washington Area. Cathy has a passion for worship, and applied sacramental and liturgical theology.

The Rev. Dr. Kharma Amos is the Chair of the Theologies Team. She is the Senior Pastor of MCC of Northern Virginia in Fairfax, VA, USA. Rev. Amos received her M.Div. from Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, PA, and her D.Min. from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA.

Linda Beckstead retired from teaching in May 2009 to join her partner Susie Brenner to travel around the country performing at churches and other venues as Brenner-Beckstead Ministries. Linda has a BS in Secondary Education, Language Arts, and an MA in Curriculum & Instruction, both from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is a published writer and has been an adjunct writing instructor for various UNL classes including one to help Native Americans earn teaching degrees.

The Rev. B. Y. Boone is the Pastor of St. John's MCC in Raleigh, NC, USA. Rev. Boone received an M.Div. from Wesley Seminary in Washington, DC, where she graduated Magna Cum Laude. Since 1983, she has served MCC in various capacities, including 15 years on her district committee.

The Rev. Pat Bumgardner is the Chair of the MCC Moderator's Global Justice Team and Senior Pastor of MCC New York. She is an active campaigner for the rights of LGBT in New York City, has been marrying same-sex couples on the steps of City Hall to protest against laws forbidding such marriages. She is currently a candidate in the Doctor of Ministry program at Episcopal Divinity School.

The Rev. Dr. Jim Burns is the Pastor of MCC of the Rockies in Denver, CO, USA. A first-career MCC pastor, he holds degrees from Oberlin College, Yale Divinity School, and Iliff School of Theology. He was honored to receive a Laity Mutuality in Ministry Award at the 2005 General Conference.

Skip Chasey is a long-time active member of MCC Los Angeles where he has served on the board of directors and worship team, facilitated a bereavement support group, and co-founded the Los Angeles chapter of PLAY (People of Leather Among You), MCCLA's outreach program to the pansexual leather community. In addition to being a much sought after speaker on issues of integrating sexuality and spirituality, Skip is a practicing spiritual director and certified Grief Recovery™ counselor.

The Rev. Emma Lee Chattin began attending MCC in 1997 and is a member of the Metropolitan Community Church of Northern Virginia. She was ordained in 2004, and thrilled to have her father, Rev. E. Lee Chattin, who served as a United Methodist minister for 40 years, participate in her ordination service (along with her uncle, who is a United Methodist minister as well). Emma currently preaches regularly at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Harrisonburg, Virginia and as a supply preacher at many MCC's throughout Maryland, DC, and Virginia. She and her spouse, Heather James, reside in Fairfax, VA.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sabrina Diz is a Social Justice and LGBTQ Rights activist originally born in Miami, FL and now living in Silver Spring, MD. She has been a member of the Metropolitan Community Church of Northern Virginia since 2007, and has been inspired to work against religious oppression and spiritual violence since she first heard about MCC's inclusive theology. Sabrina has a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Maryland University College and will be pursuing a Master's in Social Policy. As member of the Soulforce Equality Ride in 2010 she travelled to 16 faith-based colleges and universities that held discriminatory policies against LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff to advocate for more inclusive policies.

BK Hipsher works with Sunshine Cathedral in Ft. Lauderdale and MCC Toronto on virtual church projects such as Second Life and multi-site church plants using webcasting for worship and teaching. She is currently working on a Doctor of Ministry degree at Episcopal Divinity School. Her Christology is shaped by her upbringing in the Southern Baptist tradition, her adult life as an Episcopalian and Anglican, her experiences in MCC, and her ongoing study of feminist liberation, queer, and postcolonial theologies.

The Rev. Candy Holmes has been active in the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) since 1987. From her Baptist, Pentecostal, and Interfaith background she weaves a tapestry of various gifts and abilities. Her ministry includes diversity work, ecumenical/inter-religious endeavors, social justice activism, healing, worship and conference planning. She is a member of MCC's Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Strategic Team. Rev. Holmes also serves as MCC's Ecumenical Liaison to The Fellowship (a coalition of trans-denominational Christian churches/ministries led by founder Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder.). She serves as the Planning Chair for the MCC People of African Descent Conference and is a member of the MCC People of African Descent Advisory Council. She is currently completing a Masters of Divinity degree at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Rev. Holmes is a member of MCC of Washington, DC, and resides in Laurel, Maryland with her wife the Rev. Elder Darlene Garner.

Stan Kimer is a retired IBM executive and a long time lay leader across all levels of MCC ministry. He's a member of St. John's MCC in Raleigh, NC, USA; was chair of the MCC Commission on the Laity 2001 – 2003, is currently President-elect of the North Carolina Council of Churches, and chairs MCC's Ecumenical and Inter-religious team.

The Rev. Troy Perry is the Founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, which he also served as Moderator until his retirement in 2005. He has been one of the most well-known and outspoken activists for LGBT (and human) rights since the beginning of the queer liberation movement. Troy has been honored by numerous Humanitarian organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union. He has honorary doctorates from Episcopal Divinity School, Samaritan College, and Sierra University. He published his autobiography *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay* and the sequel, which includes the story of MCC, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore* and has been a contributor to numerous other publications.

The Rev. Dr. Axel Schwaigert is the Pastor of Salz der Erde MCC in Stuttgart, Germany. Rev. Schwaigert received his Diplom in Ev. Theologie from the school of theological studies at Tübingen. He also spent a year in the Religious Studies Department at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA studying inter-religious dialogue, among other things. He received his D.Min. from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2010.

Carla Sherrell is Program Director with *The Sum*, a Colorado non-profit that supports schools, other non-profits, businesses, and governmental organizations in becoming inclusive communities across ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientation, religious, and other socio-cultural group affiliations. She has over 30 years of

CONTRIBUTORS

experience as a teacher, counselor, and equity/diversity facilitator. Carla is obtaining her doctorate of education in Educational Leadership and Change with a focus on structural inequality and diversity.

The Rev. Dr. Mona West is the Director of MCC's Office of Formation and Leadership Development. Originally ordained in the Southern Baptist denomination in 1987, she transferred her ordination credentials to MCC in 1992. Rev. West holds M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. She published *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* with Pilgrim Press and is one of four editors of *The Queer Bible Commentary* published by SCM Press in 2006.

The Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson has served as the Moderator of MCC since 2005. She has been on the Board of Elders since 1976 and has served as Pastor of MCC Detroit, MCC Los Angeles, and Church of the Trinity in Sarasota, FL. Rev. Wilson earned her B.A. in Religion from Allegheny College in Meadville, PA and a M.Div. from SS Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Detroit and is currently a D.Min. candidate at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA. She published *Our Tribe: Queer Folk, God, Jesus, and the Bible* and has been a contributor to many other works.