

## RESURRECTION METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH – THE EARLY YEARS AND FORMATION

The seventies were an interesting time for the Gay-Lesbian Community in Houston. A number of gay-lesbian organizations were formed in the period 1972 to 1980. This was a great period of activism where the community started to raise their public exposure and began to have more public pride. Gay men particularly during the period following World War II and into the seventies had been harassed and arrested by the Houston Police Department on a regular basis where lists were kept and police would go to known gay bars and copy down tags numbers. But things began to change in the seventies when people started saying we are not going to take this anymore. Thus began the Houston gay-lesbian community's coming out. Gay-Lesbian Organizations were formed for various social and political purposes and interest. This was a great period of evolution for the community.

Because a number of gay people felt unwelcome at most Houston churches, there was an attempt to start a gay church in the Montrose Gaze Community Center meeting room on Fairview Street in 1972. The effort was then moved to Arnold Lawson's living room in Montrose. A small group of primarily men held Christian worship service there on Sunday afternoons. This early group was known as the Metropolitan Community Church Gay Bible Study Group. This group of pioneers met for almost two years in Arnold's living room and then in the early summer of 1974 they took the giant step and financial risk of renting a storefront at 2020 Waugh Drive. By this time a number of women had become involved.

These worship services on Waugh Drive were held at 1 p.m. on Sunday afternoons so that if people wished to go to their regular church they could do so, and then attend services later on Waugh. These early worship services were led by lay preachers William "Bill" Baer and Floyd Brummit (sp?) who alternated Sundays doing the preaching. During the first year on Waugh the congregation grew rapidly. The church was simple with a raised platform for the pulpit and metal chairs for the congregants to sit. In the community the church came to be called MCC as its unofficial name.

The early church was very poor and money was hard to come by. There was a great need for additional chairs and one of the regular worshippers offered to donate \$100 for new chairs if the rest of the congregation would raise the other \$100. On the Sunday in question the congregation contributed \$125 in a special donation and the donor was talked into matching the \$125 instead of the \$100. More than 40 new metal chairs were purchased and there was again room for all people to sit for the worship service.

The congregation grew because there was lot of Christian fellowship for all who attend and everyone felt a great feeling of positive emotion and love at the meetings. People had found a place to worship where they felt they belonged regardless of their sexual orientation. Words can not describe the feelings that these early attendees felt and people would drive 30 miles or more just to attend the Sunday services. There were a number of "straight people" who participated in the church even in these early days.

In these early days the church on Waugh was considered a mission church of the Dallas MCC since Dallas offered support. MCC had moved from study group to mission church status. Mission churches had 25 or more committed members. On occasions one of the assistant Dallas pastors would make a visit to the Waugh congregation. The Rev. Troy Perry had visited the church in 1974 on Waugh Drive and led the services on this occasion when it was a mission church. Early in 1975 the decision was made to affiliate and become a chartered church of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches which was founded and led by the Rev. Troy Perry. There was some disagreement by some of the early founders who had put a lot of hard work and money into getting the church off of the ground. Some wanted the Houston church to remain independent. The majority prevailed and on Sunday April 20, 1975 the congregation received their charter from the Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and became an official MCC church with more than 125 charter members signing the charter rolls on that Sunday. Some attendees that Sunday chose not to become official members. The church was chartered as the Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection and was known by that name for more than 25 years, when the church was renamed Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church.

One of the memorable services at the church on Waugh for those in attendance occurred on Holy Thursday before Easter in 1974. The service was held by a former Roman Catholic priest from the MCC in Florida whose name is now lost in the mist of time. He wore a simple robe and he looked like a monk out of the middle ages. The service was special for several reasons. There were the priest and 12 worshippers at that service. The attendees bought to mind the last supper with Christ and the 12 disciples. The priest then served the wine to everyone out of his single gold chalice when he served the Holy Communion. Those who attended felt a very special holy presence during that service and they remember it to this day.

After the congregation was chartered the congregation called immediately their first regular ordained pastor, Rev. Robert "Bob" Falls. The MCC of the Resurrection became more formal and the two lay ministers were moved aside to preach no more. The church grew and the decision was made due to necessity to find larger quarters. There was standing room only in the church on Waugh by this time. The chairs were full and people were standing along the walls. A former print shop at 1214 Jo Annie Street was rented and the congregation moved. Members of the church remodeled the new church to make it suitable for services. After about a year at Jo Annie as pastor the Rev. Falls resigned due to some problems with his resume. This was a difficult time for the congregation and growth slowed. The congregation then selected Rita Wanstrom as their moderator who held the Sunday services. In less than a year the congregation found their new pastor in the dynamic Rev. Jerrie (sp?) Harvey. The decision was made when the church was on Jo Annie to change the Sunday worship time from 1 p.m. to 11 a.m. Since there was no gay-lesbian community center, a number of organizations used the MCC Church on Jo Annie for their special activities as they did in later years at the other church locations.

In retrospect, there was an amusing incident at the church on Jo Annie. One Sunday there was loud bangs on the side of the metal building in which services were being held. A lot of the attendees got down on the floor since they thought someone was firing a gun at the building. In fact the pastor had told everyone to get down. One of the young male members then made a remark about how dirty the floor was and the congregation broke up in laughter. Service then

resumed. Someone checked outside and found that there were some, now fled, kids who had thrown rocks at the building. The reason for the concern and fear that someone might be firing at the church was that the Ku Klux Klan had burned a cross on a vacant lot next to the church and had made various threats against "those gays and their lesbian pastor" in the press. There had been some newspaper publicity about the church when the Rev. Harvey had been called as the minister and it had caught the attention of the KKK.

The church continued to grow and the decision was made to buy a church building. Money was raised for the building fund and a building was found at 1919 Decatur Street which a dying independent Baptist Church was selling. The old Baptist Church took a \$25,000 down payment and financed the remainder with the proceeds to go to a children's charity that the Baptist members supported. The MCC congregation moved there and stayed in the Decatur Street Church for more than 20 years.

After Rev. Harvey left to seek a call, Rev. \_\_\_ ?? \_\_\_ took her place.

The next minister was Rev. John Gill who stayed for more than 10 years and left to take a MCC church in Florida. He was succeeded by Rev. Wayne Johnson the current minister who has been at Resurrection for more than 11 years. The Rev. Wayne Johnson led the effort for Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church to find their larger current home at 2025 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street in the Heights. There were various interim pastors between the callings of new pastors through the years

Some of the early pioneers of the church were the previously mentioned Arnold Lawson, Bill Baer and Floyd Brummit. There was Arnold's lover \_\_\_\_\_. There was also \_\_\_\_\_ and his lover \_\_\_\_\_. There was also \_\_\_\_\_ and his lover \_\_\_\_\_. Also Clark Friesen was an early church board of director's member and later a moderator for the district. Some of the early influential women in the congregation were Virginia Galloway, Billy Stovel (sp?), and Rita Wanstrom. Virginia was an early board of director's member and a very special person who was very helpful to other members of the church. Billy was an early board of director member and the treasurer of MCC of the Resurrection for many years. The members of the church had absolute faith and trust in her integrity. Billy's lover, Dee Lamb was also active in the early days and later became an assistant pastor of Resurrection many years later. Rita was the moderator after the Rev. Falls left. Women played an important part in the early church even if they were in a minority in those days. All of the original 125 plus charter members of MCC played an important part in helping to establish Resurrection as a viable church.

The MCC of the Resurrection has suffered various schisms through the years when various groups would split from Resurrection and form their own church. Most of these efforts would fail after a while. Some of those who left would then return to Resurrection. Some of the ministers at Resurrection have referred to the revolving door at Resurrection since the membership and attendees had changed so frequently through the years. If Resurrection could have avoided its various schism and missteps, it would today be much larger than the former Dallas MCC.

(Note to the editor: Gregory Shelton attended services in Arnold Lawson's living room in the fall of 1973 and Steve Brown began attendance on the first Sunday in August of 1974. Steve had met Greg on the last Sunday of July in Houston and Greg had told Steve about the new church. Steve tried to call him but was unable to reach him. Greg was a student at Prairie View A&M on scholarship. Steve decided to attend the church on Waugh that first Sunday with some trepidation because of his employment situation, but his desire to once again see Greg over rode those fears. One could lose their job in those days for being gay. Steve attended and found the congregation so friendly and welcoming he started attending every Sunday when Greg showed up at the service the third Sunday having commuted in from Prairie View by bus. Steve took Greg to lunch and thus began a loving relationship that has now spanned 33 years. In those early years MCC was very important to them and a part of their relationship. On charter Sunday, their car would not crank, and they got a friend to take them to an open car rental place to rent a car. They were very late for the charter Sunday service as they had to drive 30 miles but they got there in time to sign the charter.)