
Date: Wed Jan 2 00:12:39 2013

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BC-US--The Gay Church

^Do gays need a church of their own anymore?<

^Gay-centered church founded in 1960s debates role given recent progress for gay rights<

^By RACHEL ZOLL=

^AP Religion Writer=

¶ On that Sunday in 1968 when Troy Perry borrowed a minister's robe and started a church for gays in his living room, the world was a very different place.

¶ Perry's Metropolitan Community Churches was then a lone spiritual refuge for openly gay Christians, an idea so far from the mainstream that the founders were often chased from places where they tried to worship. Four decades later, some of the most historically important American denominations, which had routinely expelled gays and lesbians, are welcoming them instead.

¶ MCC now has a presence in dozens of U.S. states as well as overseas, reporting a total membership of more than 240 congregations and ministries. But as acceptance of same-sex relationships grows _ gay and lesbian clergy in many Protestant traditions no longer have to hide their partners or lose their careers, and Christians can often worship openly with their same-gender spouses in the mainline Protestant churches where they were raised _ the fellowship is at a crossroads.

¶ Is a gay-centered Christian church needed anymore?

¶ "There are many more options than there used to be," said the Rev. Nancy Wilson, moderator, or leader, of the Metropolitan Community Churches. "But there is not a mass exodus."

¶ The denomination has never been gays-only. But for a long time, straight allies were scarce.

¶ The founding congregation, MCC of Los Angeles, opened a year before the Stonewall riots in New York. Few people had ever heard the argument that the Bible sanctioned same-gender relationships and no one of any influence in the religious world was saying it. MCC congregations became targets of arson, violence, pickets and, in at least one case, a vice squad.

¶ Al Smithson, a founder in 1969 of the fellowship's San Diego church, said his pastor would point to Orange County's famous Crystal Cathedral and joke that he was praying for a bulletproof version.

¶ The church today is a bit more diverse. MCC pastors say they see a growing number of straight friends and relatives of gays and lesbians among their new congregants, along with heterosexual parents who want their children raised in a gay-affirming environment. While some MCC congregations haven't changed much over the decades, Wilson said, many are emphasizing a broad social justice agenda including serving the homeless and poor.

¶ "We don't have a rainbow flag on our website, nor do we have it on our building," said the Rev. Dan Koeshall, senior pastor at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Diego, which draws about 220 people for Sunday services.

¶ "It wasn't a decision that caused any controversy or split. It's just been moving in that direction. We know that our target audience is the LGBT community. But we're also attracting people who are saying, 'Yes, I stand in solidarity with you and I want to be part of this.'"

¶ It's remarkable the denomination has endured at all. Metropolitan Community Churches brings together many different Christian traditions under one banner that often struggle to stay friendly in the outside world. Perry, now 72 and retired, is a Pentecostal who started preaching when he was just a teenager in rural Florida. The Rev. Mona West, the fellowship's director of clergy training, graduated from the flagship seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention. But a large number of MCC clergy train in liberal Protestant seminaries. The common denominator is a belief that Christians can be in a same-sex relationship and still be faithful to Scripture.

¶ "You can go from one MCC to another and have a radically different flavor, depending on the region, the clergy and congregants," said Scott Thumma, a Hartford Seminary sociologist and co-editor of the book "Gay Religion."

¶ The fellowship expanded relatively quickly from its humble beginnings. Within months of founding the first congregation in Los Angeles, Perry started receiving letters and visits from people hoping to establish MCC churches in other cities. Two years later, new congregations had formed as far away as Florida. Within five years, the church had spread overseas.

¶ Then, the 1980s arrived and with it, the AIDS crisis. Metropolitan Community Churches plowed its resources into ministries for the sick, dying and grieving. The fellowship lost several thousand members and clergy to the virus, and the

business of starting new churches slowed. As a result, Wilson and others say the denomination missed out on crucial period for potential growth.

¶ But the church has also lost some congregations, including its biggest, to other denominations. The Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, a megachurch with about 4,200 members, split off around 2003, and eventually joined the United Church of Christ. Cathedral and MCC officials say the break resulted from disagreements between local church members and local leaders, not a rejection of MCC's mission. The Cathedral maintains its focus on reaching out to gays, lesbians and transgender people.

¶ Still, the United Church of Christ, which has more than 5,000 congregations and roots in colonial New England, can offer much that the MCC cannot, including more resources, greater prominence and a broader reach. In some communities, local churches are affiliating with both the Metropolitan Community Churches and United Church of Christ. But at least one other MCC congregation broke away in recent years: The Columbia, S.C., church became the Garden of Grace United Church of Christ.

¶ "It makes us more than a one-issue church," the Rev. Andy Sidden, the church's pastor, told The State newspaper of Columbia, in a 2006 interview.

¶ Like many other churches coping with a weak economy, the MCC has cut or restructured staff jobs in the last five years and reduced the annual payment congregations pay the national office, Wilson said. Some smaller MCC churches have closed.

¶ Yet, despite the losses, Wilson and others see a continuing role for Metropolitan Community Churches, given the wide range of responses to gays and lesbians in organized religion, even in the more liberal churches that have moved toward accepting same-gender relationships.

¶ Of the mainline Protestant groups, only the United Church of Christ supports gay marriage outright. The Episcopal Church last month released a provisional prayer service for blessing same-sex unions. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have eliminated barriers for gay clergy but allow regional and local church officials to decide their own policies. One of the largest mainline groups, the United Methodist Church, with about 7.8 million U.S. members, still bars ordination for people in same-sex relationships, although many individual Methodist churches openly accept gay and lesbian clergy.

¶ "There's 'Come and don't say anything,' 'Come, but we won't marry you,' or 'Come and be fully accepted,'" said the Rev. Jo Hudson, senior pastor of the

Cathedral of Hope. "We're always glad when churches welcome gay and lesbian people, but it's just a different experience in a church that is historically and predominantly led by heterosexual people. Everyone is going to find the church where they most fit in."

¶ Wilson said a large percentage of newer MCC members are from conservative Christian churches teaching that gay and lesbian Christians should try to become heterosexual or remain celibate. Koeshall was a pastor in the Assemblies of God, one of the largest U.S.-based Pentecostal groups, until 1997, when he says, "I came out and I got kicked out."

¶ New MCC congregations have recently started in Peoria, Ill., and in The Villages retirement community north of Orlando, Fla. (In a recent announcement in local gay media, the Peoria congregation described MCC as a fellowship created for gay and lesbian Christians now known as "the human rights church.") Mary Metcalf, 62, a seven-year member of Heartland Metropolitan Community Church in Springfield, Ill., which started the Peoria congregation, said she was a lector and liturgy coordinator at her Roman Catholic parish until some friends brought her to a service.

¶ "When it came time for communion, when the presider said that the table is open to everyone, I started crying," said Metcalf, on a break from painting Heartland church with other volunteers. "I came from the Catholic Church. I'm straight, but I just finally had to come to a parting of the ways. I didn't think Jesus kept anyone away from the table."

¶ Still, like most denominations, MCC is seeing its strongest growth overseas. In Latin America, the fellowship had seven churches in five countries a decade ago, and now reports 56 congregations or ministries in 17 countries, according to the Rev. Darlene Garner, director of MCC's emerging ministries. A congregation in Australia for young adults, called Crave, is thriving, Wilson said. Garner's office is also developing an online church with worship, Bible study and support in several languages. MCC has already conducted its first virtual baptism on the web, a relatively new practice that is gaining popularity among evangelical churches with online worship.

¶ Thumma contends MCC should not be judged by the standards used for other denominations. Only a small percentage of Americans are gay or lesbian, and a limited number want to be active in a Christian church, no matter its outlook. Like other minority groups moving toward mainstream acceptance, some gay Christians are assimilating into bigger denominations while others choose the focus and freedoms MCC provides, Thumma said.

¶ "MCC still has a clear function," Thumma said. "Like an immigrant community, it gives gay Christians a place of their own."

Date: Thu Nov 21 09:43:57 2013

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BC-US-REL--The Pope's Rabbi,1474<

^A rabbi whose good friend became the pope<

^By RACHEL ZOLL=

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¶ NEW YORK (AP) _ It was September, not an easy time for a religious Jew to be traveling. The Jewish month of Tishrei was ending with its marathon of holy days. Kosher wine would be needed. There were Sabbath blessings to recite.

Fortunately, Rabbi Abraham Skorka had a friend with the run of a hotel who arranged for kosher meals and said "amen" to the rabbi's prayers.

¶ Skorka has been talking about this trip ever since, in interviews and meetings with Jewish groups, for two reasons: The hotel was inside the Vatican, and the friend was Pope Francis.

¶ "He invited me to share his table for the three daily meals. He told me, 'You have to sit here' _ to sit on his right," Skorka said in a recent interview in New York. "I said, 'Look, I have to say Kiddush.' I had to say the special blessing for the holiday, for Shabbat, before the meal is served. He told me, 'Do what you have to do.'"

¶ Skorka _ rector of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires, which has ties to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York _ finds himself in the unlikely position of being close friends with a pope. When Francis was Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires, he and Skorka co-wrote a book of dialogues on Judaism and Roman Catholicism titled, "On Heaven and Earth," had a similarly themed TV show called "Bible, A Dialogue for Today," and offered prayers from each other's pulpits.

¶ Bergoglio kept a framed photo of the two of them in his study. At Skorka's synagogue, the rabbi displayed a greeting the cardinal made to the congregation on one of his Rosh Hashana visits.

¶ "There is overall a very deep respect for the other," Skorka said. "His commitment with the Jewish people is total."

¶ Each of the men feels a duty to reach out beyond their own communities.

¶ Bergoglio, 76, grew up with Jewish friends. Jews fled to Argentina in significant numbers into the early 20th century to escape persecution in Russia, Germany and the Mideast. Skorka said Bergoglio was unwavering in combatting anti-Semitism, calling it a violation of Christian teaching. One of the events the cardinal considered most important on his annual calendar was a service at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Buenos Aires that promoted religious harmony on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, the Nazi-led mob violence in 1938 considered the start of the Holocaust.

¶ Skorka said the pope is so comfortable with Jewish culture that as he vetted meals at the Vatican hotel to make sure the rabbi was given only kosher food, Francis joked he was the rabbi's personal "mashgiach," the Hebrew word for a supervisor in a restaurant or other business who oversees compliance with Jewish dietary laws.

¶ As a child, Skorka said his father talked about how Jews had been persecuted over the centuries, including at times by the Catholic Church, but also emphasized the links between Judaism and Christianity. "You must know that Jesus was a Jew," Skorka said his father told him.

¶ Skorka later looked to Abraham Joshua Heschel as a hero. Heschel, one of the most important 20th century Jewish thinkers, was a pioneer in Jewish-Christian cooperation. He negotiated with cardinals and Pope Paul VI over "Nostra Aetate," the transformative Second Vatican Council statement of the 1960s that repudiated centuries of Christian teaching that Jews bore collective guilt for Christ's death. When Skorka, now 63, began serving as a rabbi in the Conservative Jewish movement, a priest invited him to a Christian-Jewish dialogue, and his own interfaith work began in earnest.

¶ Skorka doesn't remember exactly how his conversations with Bergoglio began, but the two had come to know each other through the city's religious events. Skorka wrote articles on interfaith issues for a newspaper the cardinal read. In person, they would needle each other about whose soccer team was winning. But more than that, Skorka said they were united in trying to reach people who had fallen away from their own religions and instead worshipped what the rabbi calls the "idols" of money, power and sex. Growing secularism has hit both the Catholic church and Jewish communities in Latin America. The church has also lost many parishioners to popular Pentecostal movements.

¶ "When he speaks about evangelization, the idea is to evangelize Christians or Catholics," to reach "higher dimensions of faith" and a deepened commitment to social justice, Skorka said. "This is the idea of evangelization that Bergoglio is stressing _ not to evangelize Jews. This he told me, on several opportunities."

¶ Last February, when Pope Benedict XVI shocked the world by resigning, Skorka said he told his wife, "Jorge Mario will be pope." Skorka had read accounts of the 2005 conclave that elected Benedict reporting that Bergoglio had been a close runner-up.

¶ "When I saw him entering the balcony, with his white dress ... the emotion was very great," Skorka said. The rabbi wondered what would become of their friendship. Days passed without any word from Francis, although the pope had already started making the informal telephone calls from the Vatican that drew so much attention.

¶ But just before the new pontiff's March inauguration, Skorka's cellphone rang. It was the pope. "He told me, apologizing, 'Look, I came here to Rome and they let me no more go back to Buenos Aires,'" Skorka said. "I spoke with him, and suddenly, I told to myself, 'but he is the pope.' It was incredible for me."

¶ Francis gave the rabbi an email address to use so they could stay in touch, and they exchange emails every week or 10 days.

¶ That's how Skorka ended up as a guest for several days last September in the Casa Santa Marta, the hotel Francis chose as his home so he wouldn't be isolated in the Apostolic Palace.

¶ Skorka said the pope's study was filled with papers on chairs and books on the floor. ("Don't imagine everything is ordered," the rabbi said, laughing.) One of the books had been sent and inscribed by the dissident theologian Hans Kung. "Both of us stood one very close to the other trying to read the German dedication," Skorka said. "Something like, 'You already did a lot, but the world expects from you to continue doing very important things.'"

¶ The rabbi said the pope is aware that some religious conservatives, inside and outside the church, are unsettled by his approach. Francis has said Catholic leaders have been driving people away by talking too much about divisive social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. The pope has dropped some of the more regal trappings of the papacy. He uses a Ford Focus instead of fancier cars in the Vatican fleet and wears only the most basic clothes.

¶ "He is receiving very, very harsh criticism from people who don't like a pope without red shoes, and a pope who speaks to people in a very simple and direct language, and a pope who will transmit to people that he is close to them, that he

in some way hugs them through jokes and through simple words and through simple expressions," Skorka said. "The criticism he is suffering from is not new for him. He already had this kind of pressures and other kind of pressures during his serving as archbishop of Buenos Aires, so he knows exactly how to handle these pressures. He's a very strong man and he will go ahead."

¶ Jewish leaders, meanwhile, are ecstatic about the rabbi-pope friendship. Pope John Paul II earned enormous gratitude from Jewish groups for his leadership on Jewish-Catholic relations. Benedict also made outreach to Jews a priority. But, Jewish leaders say, this is the first pope so personally involved with Jews before he was elected.

¶ "For Pope Francis, this is just part of his life. He was a regular in shul (synagogue)," said Rabbi Noam Marans, director of interreligious relations for the American Jewish Committee, a policy and advocacy group based in New York. "It's an intimacy based on experience."

¶ The relationship also stands out for many Jews because of where it began. Jeffrey Lesser, an Emory University historian who specializes in South America, said Jews, especially from the U.S., have traditionally viewed Argentina "as a particularly anti-Semitic place," even though Argentine Jews, who number about 200,000, have been able to establish themselves in the country as leaders in education, government and other areas.

¶ Skorka said the two men plan to see each other again in January, when Francis is scheduled to meet in Rome with Argentine Jewish leaders. And the rabbi hopes to accompany the pontiff if he travels to Israel and the Palestinian territories next year, a trip that is under consideration.

¶ Skorka said he hopes to pray with the pope before Jerusalem's Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray, and in Bethlehem, "to show the world it is possible."

Date: Thu Mar 14 15:29:53 2013

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^Inside the conclave: extra omnes to habemus papam<

^Inside the conclave: What happened inside the locked doors of the Sistine Chapel

^By RACHEL ZOLL=

^AP Religion Writer=

¶ VATICAN CITY (AP) _ Three rounds of ballots had been cast with no winner, but it was becoming clear which way this conclave was headed.

¶ When the cardinals broke for lunch, Sean O'Malley of Boston sat down next to his Argentine friend, Jorge Bergoglio.

¶ "He seemed very weighed down by what was happening," O'Malley said.

¶ Hours later, the Buenos Aires archbishop would step before the frenzied masses packed into St. Peter's Square as Francis, the first pope from the Americas.

¶ Cardinals take an oath of secrecy when they enter a conclave, promising never to reveal what goes on inside. But as is customary, the cardinals involved share memories of their experience.

¶ ____

¶ It began Tuesday afternoon with a procession.

¶ Reciting a hypnotic Gregorian chant, the 115 princes of the church, dressed in red robes over white lace tunics, filed two by two into the frescoed masterpiece that is the Sistine Chapel and took their seats at four rows of tables. One used a wheelchair and was helped to his place by his colleagues.

¶ Then each man moved to the front and took an oath not to reveal what was about to occur: "we promise and swear not to break this secret in any way, either during or after the election of the new pontiff."

¶ With a cry of "extra omnes" _ "all out" _ the massive double doors swung shut, the key was turned and the conclave was under way.

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¶ No matter how beautiful the chapel, Chicago Cardinal Francis George said, the acoustics aren't great.

¶ The presiding cardinal, Giovanni Battista Re, had to explain each step in the ritual twice, once to each side of the room.

¶ Other than that, there was only silence.

¶ "The conclave is a very prayerful experience," O'Malley said. "It's like a retreat."

¶ Each man wrote a few words in Latin on a piece of paper: "I elect as supreme pontiff..." followed by a name.

¶ One by one, they held the paper aloft, placed it on a gold-and-silver saucer at the front of the room, and tipped it into an urn.

¶ And then the tallying began, with three cardinals _ known as scrutineers _ reading out the name on each slip.

¶ When they finished counting, it was clear the field remained wide open, said Cardinal Sean Brady, leader of the church in Ireland.

¶ "There were a number of candidates," he said.

¶ A cardinal threaded the ballots together and put them in a stove.

¶ Outside in St. Peter's Square, as black smoke billowed from the chimney, the cheering crowd fell silent and began to thin.

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¶ On Wednesday morning, the cardinals filed in again and repeated the ritual of voting.

¶ Each man filled out his ballot and walked to the front of the room.

¶ "When you walk up with the ballot in your hand and stand before the image of the Last Judgment, that is a great responsibility," O'Malley said.

¶ There were two votes before lunch, and the field was narrowing.

¶ But the smoke was black again, and the crowd was again disappointed.

¶ This time, however, they didn't leave the square.

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¶ At lunch, O'Malley sat down besides Bergoglio.

¶ "He is very approachable, very friendly," he said. "He has a good sense of humor, he is very quick and a joy to be with."

¶ But with the vote going his way, Bergoglio was uncharacteristically somber.

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¶ In the first afternoon ballot, the cardinals were getting close to a decision. But not quite.

¶ They started over, and the scrutineers read out the names.

¶ And it began to dawn on the men that their work was done.

¶ "It was very moving as the names were sounding out," Brady said. "Bergoglio, Bergoglio, and suddenly the magic number of 77 was reached."

¶ The cardinals applauded at 77, and again once the tally was complete.

¶ "I don't think there was a dry eye in the house," said Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York.

¶ ____

¶ A cardinal asked Bergoglio whether he accepted the papacy.

¶ "I am a sinner, but as this office has been given to me, I accept," he said, according to three French cardinals.

¶ Bergoglio announced the name he would assume _ Francis _ and went to change into the papal robes in the Room of the Tears, so named because many have wept at the enormity of the task they face.

¶ When Francis returned to the chapel, "his first action was to go to a cardinal in a wheelchair and go to the back of the chapel to greet him," Brady said.

¶ Aides brought in a platform with a white chair for Francis to sit on as the cardinals came one by one to pay their respects.

¶ The pope declined, Dolan said.

¶ "He met with us on our own level," Dolan said.

¶ Dolan said he felt a strange emotion as he kissed the pope's ring.

¶ "It's very difficult to explain," Dolan said. "You obviously get to know your brother cardinal. But all of a sudden the identity is different."

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¶ It was time to face the public.

¶ More than 100,000 people had jammed into the square, and Francis prepared to greet them from the balcony.

¶ Vatican workers lined up to shake his hand, but Francis was worried about a delay, Dolan said.

¶ There were too many people outside waiting in the rain, and he didn't want to keep them.

¶ As Francis stepped out on the balcony, cardinals rushed to the windows to look out over the crowd.

¶ It was nighttime, and George expected a "sea of umbrellas."

¶ Instead, he saw flashing lights of cameras across the square.

¶ "It looked like jewels," George said.

¶ The crowd jumped up and down, poking umbrellas in the air.

¶ Strangers embraced.

¶ ____

¶ After the address, a car came to take the new pope to dinner, and buses for the rest of the cardinals.

¶ The car returned empty.

¶ "As the last bus pulls up, guess who walked out," Dolan said.

¶ Francis had dinner with the others.

¶ They toasted him, "then he toasted us and said, `May God forgive you for what you've done,'" Dolan said.

¶ By the time the night was over, cardinals said, the new pope seemed comfortable in his new robes.

¶ "Last night, I think there was a peace in his heart," O'Malley said, "that God's will had been accomplished in his life."