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## A Queer Miracle in Georgia: The Origins of Gay-Affirming Religion in the South

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A QUEER MIRACLE IN GEORGIA:  
THE ORIGINS OF GAY-AFFIRMING RELIGION IN THE SOUTH

By

JODIE LIND TALLEY

Under the Direction of Duane Corpis

ABSTRACT

The intersection of homosexuality and faith values, a very controversial topic in the United States, has generated both social accommodation as well as “culture war.” In the past forty years this nation has witnessed the establishment of predominantly gay congregations, gay “welcoming” and “affirming” mainstream congregations, as well as virulently anti-gay religious organizations. This study investigates the origins and evolving history of gay and gay-affirming religious traditions in America with an emphasis on Atlanta and Georgia. Primarily an oral history, this project draws from eighty-two interviews as well as primary and secondary documents to construct this history. Several conclusions unfold: 1) Southern culture, though uniquely religious, has been more accommodating of gays and lesbians than heretofore appreciated; 2) citizens of Atlanta and the state of Georgia have been primary historical producers of gay and gay-affirming religious culture and institutions in America; 3) gay religious history pre-dates the Stonewall Rebellion, thus troubling and adding nuance to the traditional metanarrative of LGBTQ history; and 4) the paths of and to gay-affirming religious activism and institution building follows several distinct patterns.

INDEX WORDS: Homosexuality, Gay, Lesbian, Queer, Religion, Oral History, MCC, Atlanta, Georgia, Southern, Stonewall, Congregation, Gay-Affirming

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by

JODIE LIND TALLEY

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Master of Arts

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2006

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2006

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In loving memory of  
Saint David Edwards, David Chewning, Father Roy Pettway, Bishop Bennett Sims,  
and all the courageous gay and gay-affirming saints, martyrs, and activists  
who went before us...

And to the living saints  
Archbishop George A. Hyde, Rev. Elder Troy Perry, Dr. Louie Crew  
and every narrator who shared his or her special story  
for the benefit of this history

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## **Introduction**

In 2003 I undertook a directed readings course to study lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) history in the South, and much to my surprise I found little. I had assumed that I would find this scholarly field tilled beyond meaningful productivity, but when I scoped the glaring lacunae, I knew I would invest my thesis research time and efforts to uncover a queer Dixie history focused upon Atlanta and Georgia, an easily accessible yet promising region. Further, I knew immediately that I wanted to focus specifically upon intersections with religion, as queer religious history in general is also understudied. Additionally, my own life experiences (as a lesbian convert to Pentecostal Christianity) in the South inspired me to set out blindly in this search for a history about which I knew nothing concretely. I wondered about other LGBTQ religious individuals and “gay” congregations, and I wondered even more about the heterosexual faithful in the area who had reconciled homosexuality with their religious traditions. I assumed I would find a number of congregations, perhaps a dozen, in the Atlanta area that might take the history back to the early or mid-70s, perhaps, and I would study their experiences and report findings. Fortunately, however, my serendipitous historical mining and meandering yielded much more than I would have imagined.

Specifically, I chose to investigate the history and evolution of the (predominantly) gay and also mainstream gay-affirming congregations in the Atlanta area, as well as general intersections of gay culture and community with religion and spirituality. At a time when many churches and the country itself are torn by conflict over homosexuality, I felt this subject warranted prompt academic attention and offers the hope of informing

the ongoing debate. Across this nation gay and lesbian Americans have won new rights and acceptance in some places, but at the same time opponents have chosen to take even stronger stands against homosexuals than ever before, working to curtail civil rights and condemning gay Americans legally and socially, and usually using religion and the Bible to do so. As a result, gay Americans still commonly face denial of many social and financial benefits others take for granted, face physical and emotional attack, homicide and suicide, and general opprobrium and exclusion, especially in rural areas and small towns.

In an interview conducted for this project, Indigo Girls musician Amy Ray remembered a town hall meeting that took place in 2004 in a small rural town north of Atlanta, where the citizens debated gay marriage and civil rights. Amy had this to say about opponents' comments:

...[M]ost of the remarks were religious remarks—I'd say probably 90% of them were out of religion, and it ran the gamut from people being scared that if we allowed [gay rights] to happen, Sodom and Gomorrah would reoccur and God would send down His wrath, to it preventing the rapture from happening, or else people thought it would *create* the rapture (with a laugh), you know. It was like, I mean, really extreme, very fundamentalist ideas, and they were *all* based in fear. ...But it was all religion. And people kept trying to stand up from each side and say, "Why do we always have to keep going back to religion? Why does it have to be about religion?" And no one could say why.

While religious congregations have served Americans as nourishing sources of faith, inspiration, and community, religion in this country historically has also had to undergo reform and rebirth to overcome injustice and social problems. Ultimately, when considering social issues and justice in general, but LGBTQ issues in particular, there is no avoiding American religious realities.

## Selective Historiography

Theoretically, this thesis could credit not only many important works of history but also many *fields* of history. Is this Southern history that returns gays and lesbians? Is it instead religious history that happens to center on the South? Or is it simply queer history that happens to be based on religion? In addition this is, in fact, a work of oral history. Each of these fields boasts an impressive historiography and has informed this project at least in part. Most simply, this work can be labeled Southern queer history; however, to the extent that the religious happenings herein recorded impact(ed) national (and even international) history, this project's scope branches out from the South to inform broader studies. As Southern queer history, though, the most relevant historiography is fairly straightforward.

The most renowned queer Southern text, and the one from which I draw the most inspiration, is John Howard's *Men Like That*, an investigation of gay men's lives in rural Mississippi from WWII until gay liberation.<sup>1</sup> Howard accomplishes much noteworthy work in this history, first and foremost returning both the South, but most especially the rural South, to queer American history. His findings challenge, while adding to, the more traditional narratives that view queer America as basically urban communities, and especially centered in the Northeast (New York) and the West (San Francisco/Los Angeles). Through his many interviews with queer rural Mississippians, Howard uncovers how same-sex desiring men found one another for sexual liaison and occasionally companionship in such "sites" as the home, school, church, roadside and so forth. He also looks at intersections of gay male life and politics, bar scenes, cities, and

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<sup>1</sup> John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

race, and argues that prior to the civil rights era in the 1960s, Southern society accommodated queer sexuality by averting a direct and critical gaze, as it were—a will not to know or otherwise to forgive as long as the status quo remained fundamentally untroubled. Civil rights activism and homosexuality became conflated in the 60s, Howard argues convincingly, and queers found themselves on the receiving end of new scrutiny and persecution that continues even today. In these earlier days queers did not have to move to the big city to “come out” and lead gay lives; they could stay back home in rural hometowns and live meaningful gay existences.

The book has limitations and omissions, to be sure, but an author can only accomplish so much in any single work. First, *Men Like That* does not include women “like that,” a familiar textual oversight among queer histories, though sometimes unavoidable given available textual records in some cases or in order to maintain a manageable narrative purview. Howard seems very focused upon casual sexual encounter and not upon long-term relationship formation, which arguably reproduces a troubling stereotype about gay lifestyles. Could he not find any long term committed gay men to speak to this issue among his narrators? Did any men in Howard’s Mississippi establish households together? Was his narrative limited by the sheer happenstance of willing narrators, by his line of questioning, or by the places and circumstances under which he approached narrators? Further, he does not consider religion/spirituality or other identity- or belief-based issues carefully. Therefore, his research offers tremendous scholarly breakthroughs, yet leaves ought to be desired. To consider long-term same-sex *relationships* Howard would have had to stray considerably from his work’s core

underlying analytic framework, which focused on social use of community space, especially public space.

Published in 1985 the oldest title specifically on LGBTQ issues and the South is Mab Segrest's *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture*, which is a marvelously entertaining essay mosaic that captures the essence of being Southern, and a Southern lesbian in particular.<sup>2</sup> It typifies LGBTQ historical/biographical works in many ways that amount to the work's strength and weakness both. This text looks only at gay women (not men) and thus focuses upon issues relevant to women in the South. The book also considers its topic through the prism of literary criticism, common in LGBTQ history works that cannot draw upon living narrators or many other sources. Portions of the book are very personal while other parts are quite sophisticated and academic. As such, the essays offer a tantalizing hodge-podge of information and reflections, though this is not a work of scholarly history.

Twelve years went by before more texts materialize. In 1997 a work edited by John Howard appeared, called *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*.<sup>3</sup> In his introduction Howard describes the work as the "first book of Southern lesbian and gay history," and his goal "to try to point to a certain distinctiveness in queer cultures down South." The essays are diverse with authors taking aim at varying topics, including Howard's own 1993 study of sexual trysting spaces in Atlanta and a study of Atlanta's feminist bookstore, Charis. In one essay author Rebecca Alice Baldy states that she has never

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<sup>2</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> John Howard, ed., *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

seen “a historical study of the effects of religion on Southern homosexuals,” and this thesis certainly aims to begin to fill the void.

Also in 1997 James T. Sears offered *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968*.<sup>4</sup> This work, too, provides various and separate tales, but it is an oral history text rather than an essay collection. Seven chapters introduce the stories of three women and four men, covering the general historical contexts of their lives and, says Sears, “in reading these life stories you will enter states of mind as well as the ‘mind of the South.’” The stories are interesting, but they are also random. In trying to remain diverse and inclusive, a laudable goal, Sears cannot substantiate a regional or even local history that is anything other than anecdotal. Religion barely makes an appearance, and the reader will not find the words *church*, *religion*, *Atlanta*, or *Georgia* in the index. The one thing that ties the stories into some kind of theme is the narrow timeframe—post-war yet pre-Stonewall—but the work would have benefited from a greater number of narrators.

Four years later two more books arrive on the shelves to further enhance queer Southern history. One of these texts is Sears’ follow up work, entitled *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*.<sup>5</sup> At first glance this 2001 work sounds like a Howard piece, looking at contested use of public space or something similar. Actually, this book attempts to remain a straightforward post-Stonewall LGBTQ oral history. First it claims that the South was nothing more than a “vast desert” until after Stonewall, and, second, like his earlier work, this history does not include religion.

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<sup>4</sup> James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Westview Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, Rutgers University Press, 2001).

In fact, Sears follows the lives of a particular clique of individuals who have no interest in religion and see the gay and lesbian world exclusively through the lens of Gay Lib activism. The other 2001 text, *Out In The South*, edited by Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law was the product of the first queer academic conference in the South, which took place at Emory University (Howard's graduate academic home, incidentally) in June (Pride month) of 1997.<sup>6</sup> The essays are as diverse as the attendees, and to this extent the work is very satisfying and informative. Again, however, queer Southern religion does not feature. The topic of religion pops up only here and there in essays either to point out in passing the religiosity of the South or to discuss a Gospel drag performance ensemble, for example. The essays also tend to be personal reflection essays about subjects rather than research based, academic articles. Still, this work is much more diverse and informative than Sears' books.

With the exception of *Men Like That*, these aforementioned texts all present outtakes of gay life and history from around the South, and thus amount to early breakthrough, trail-blazing works, but by necessity the books are largely unfocused or anecdotal. Whether written by a single author, or based upon a myriad of interviews with individuals, or edited as a collection of essays assembled from a queer Southern conference, these books give an overview of varied queer experiences within a Southern context, only occasionally touching upon Atlanta or Georgia, and generally treating queer religious history and experiences as either a non-topic or as minor background noise, as it were. These works do illustrate the uniqueness of Southern queer life, returning a region and its people to the historiography. Though much work still remains to be uncovered

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<sup>6</sup> Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Lest Law, eds., *Out in the South* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001).



and completed, this collection of literature remains laudable, relevant, and often enough entertaining as well.

LGBTQ religious experience in the United States in general or outside of the South has a somewhat larger, growing historiography. *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* by Melissa Wilcox<sup>7</sup> and *God, Sex, and Politics* by Dawne Moon<sup>8</sup> return religion to the center of queer life, but both are sociological studies, not histories, and are consequently somewhat narrow in scope. Wilcox investigates two California-based Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC)—the one more conservative the other more Unitarian—to understand how gays reconcile sexual orientation with religion. After collecting seventy-two interviews in just under two years time, Wilcox examines why these gay Christians remained religious after coming out yet nonetheless left their intolerant mainline congregations for the MCC, and why many feel doubly closeted by both orientation and faith. These are valid, interesting questions, and the scope is quite manageable, though Wilcox admits that she chose the subject because of her own bewilderment by religion. She focuses therefore on the individual, personal experiences of two groups of gay MCC members to tease out answers to questions that puzzle a non-religious social scientist. It is a worthy study, to be sure, but it is not *history*. Further, since the two churches she studies are both California based, it might have been even more revealing if she chose to add one or more MCC congregations from other states, like a small town Southern MCC, for example, to determine if regional

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<sup>7</sup> Melissa Wilcox, *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

location made a significant difference in the narrators' lives and reports, as I suspect it would have.

Moon, a self-proclaimed doubting ex-Methodist, looks at two California Methodist congregations to understand how change might happen within a church, the related discourses and debate about homosexuality from various points of view. Again, this book is revealing, but the reader does not get much sense of change or transformation over time, but rather points of view in a moment—a snapshot *in* time, rather than a film *over* time. I am left puzzled as to why queer religious texts tend to be written by non-religious queer authors. Other general readership works on library shelves ask essentially the same questions or are also random collections of essays about gay experiences with religion. Each offers something special, but none is history, except insofar as popular (auto)biographies serve as such. The exceptions are works by such scholars such as Dr. Mark Jordon and Dr. Daniel Helminiak (both narrators for this project), who have written about more distant religious history (especially regarding Catholicism), theology, and spirituality. They offer fascinating scholarship and insights in works that unfortunately do not happen to inform this particular thesis.

Another work worth noting is *Gay New York* by George Chauncey.<sup>9</sup> I might say that my work could be called “Gay Atlanta,” except I focus so squarely upon religion that the title would not be at all fair—perhaps “Gay Religious Atlanta.” Chauncey documents turn of the century and early twentieth century queer history in New York City, focusing, like Howard, upon male-male sexual encounters and possibilities, but also on the more familiar queer stage that is Manhattan. In this work, queers navigate an urban cultural

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<sup>9</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

and political landscape, through middle class neighborhoods to seedy lower class bars and dives, through bourgeois hetero-normative mandates to queer subversive alternative spaces and lifestyles. Chauncey, true to form, does not fail to dazzle with historical narrative, full of detail and cohesiveness, but his focus does not include religion, long-term relationships, or, of course, the South. Many books on queer history tend to focus on gay bar history, including a recently published dissertation by Daneel Buring, cleverly entitled *Building Gay Community Behind the Magnolia Curtain: Memphis from the 1940s through the 1960s*, which he followed with an article called “Gay activism behind the magnolia curtain: the Memphis Gay Coalition, 1979-1991.”<sup>10</sup> The works further reveal Southern queer culture and follow the model of books such as Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*—both are bar-based community histories, the latter centered on lesbians in Buffalo. More specifically, Buring’s article looks at failed community/political organizing, largely by gay men.

In *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* author Lisa Duggan discusses the tragic love/murder story of two lesbians in Tennessee, but the work is really about the discursive understanding of homosexuality in America during roughly the same time period that Chauncey explores—an understanding that marks queer not only as abnormal but also as an antisocial aberration leading to madness and murder.<sup>11</sup> The main strength of this book lay in the connection of homophobic rhetoric to racist rhetoric, as both black males and all gays “threatened” a culture of white male power and pure white womanhood. Naturally this narrative adds tremendously to understanding “queer” in “the

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Burning, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: Building Communities behind the Magnolia Curtain* (New York: Garland, 1997)

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2001).

South,” but this book, too, looks not specifically at local or regional history or queer religion, but rather at an American discursive phenomenon. Her sources are both urban and elite (newspapers and medical discourse), which might well affect more elite and urban societies, but might not likely reach all the way to small towns and rural areas. Thus, Southern understandings of and reactions to queer persons in more rural or small town areas remain obscured. This thesis agrees with Howard’s research more than Duggan’s and suggests that Southern society, especially rural and small town Southern communities, had perhaps less angst about homosexuals than might be assumed. Some very preliminary evidence suggests that Southerners could accommodate the queers in their families and communities, and same-sex couples could sustain relationships as well.

### **Thesis Organization and Overview**

The thesis is divided into three chapters that look at Southern queer history vis-à-vis religion, and each chapter focuses on a few historically salient individuals and congregations. These chapters proceed in chronological fashion, though circuitously touch on topics and stories from various time periods to make larger points when useful. The details and stories in Chapter 1 came as a complete surprise after I was already rather far along in my research on this project. The central narrator is Archbishop George Hyde who founded the first known gay-affirming church in the United States. The Orthodox Catholic congregation started in 1946 in Atlanta, Georgia and demonstrates not only very early and important queer history but also launches an American religious history that is not simply Georgia-centered by happenstance or convenience. American queer history in fact finds its very roots in this Southern state and its capitol.

Towards the very end of his four and a half hour long interview, taped over twelve hours and conducted December 2005, Hyde mentioned in an offhand manner a few stories about his gay relatives. He thought the matter equally as unsurprising and matter-of-fact as the story of his gay-affirming churches, and thus I was doubly astonished. I came to learn from him and others that Southern culture, so often considered stereotypically conservative and intolerant, found ways to accommodate queer individuals and relationships. In order to make this point I use narrator comments to give a sense of what it means to be Southern and how the South does and does not differ from other regions of the United States. Happily, of all the history I stumbled into haphazardly and blindly, his story was the most amazing; unfortunately, though, since I could not have known to pursue this line of historical inquiry from the beginning, I have only a few narrators to substantiate the realities that seem to emerge from the stories. The record is wanting for still more interviews, but the socio-cultural possibilities that have turned up and that are presented in chapter one—strategies for the absorption of openly or clandestinely gay individuals and especially couples in Southern community—are tantalizing nonetheless. Again, these preliminary conclusions, suggestions really, have been drawn from a very limited study of this particular question, and further research is required to make more definitive statements.

Chapter 2 takes the history beyond the earlier years covered in chapter 1 through the 1960s. It is called The Watershed Decade because this time period witnesses a discursive and political watershed in the South with civil rights activism, a national gay political turning point with Stonewall, and the founding of the MCC denomination. The central individual is Rev. Elder Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Churches,

who experienced his personal call to ministry in southern Georgia. Perry and his stories further undergird the argument that Georgia has been at the center of gay religious history, and also shows significant queer cultural history—and even political activism—that took place before the famous Stonewall riots of 1969. This last point is important because it serves to further problematize the traditional metanarrative of American LGBTQ history, which divides the history between pre- and post-Stonewall, and which asserts that queer Americans had very few political experiences and very little “out” culture besides the so-called Homophile movement before the fateful Manhattan rebellion, especially in the South.

Hyde and other narrators pointed out that gay culture consisted of different “crowds,” some the “bar-flies” who frequented the nascent gay clubs scenes in American cities and the more conservative or religious crowd (or simply those who did not enjoy the bar scene). Most queer history has focused upon the urban club scenes without much notice of gay-affirming religious organizations, a fact which makes Howard’s work on the rural South so very important. Once the MCC churches and other gay religious organizations proliferated to nearly every major city in the United States, and certainly every state and region, gay Americans could choose from among different primarily gay social scenes and groups, and for some, this made a huge difference. Chapter 2 also discusses in some detail the Stonewall Riots, the implications of the civil rights movement to queer Southern and American history, as well as the origins of the Southern “Bible Belt” culture, which is not traditionally culturally Southern.

Chapter 3 brings the history more up to date with major developments post-Stonewall in the 1970s and beyond. (Due to time and length constraints I could not take the history

beyond this decade except anecdotally throughout the thesis.) The findings in the chapter hold the key for understanding and analyzing gay-affirming religious history thereafter and elsewhere. The chapter opens with some background about the city of Atlanta, and it closes with a famous local story called the “miracle on Peachtree Street,” when churches along the famous downtown boulevard became gay-affirming around the year 1991. This happening was unusual historically because the movement, which began at Saint Mark Methodist Church sprang spontaneously from heterosexual clergy and laity. Such was the heart of the “miracle.” However, the chapter is called “The Foundational 70s,” because key historical happenings in this decade not only significantly furthered gay religious history but also establish the social patterns of religious gay welcome.

The three central stories from the 1970s also continue to keep Atlanta and Georgia at the center of queer religious history, and include Joel Evans and the Evangelical Outreach Ministry, Dr. Louie Crew and the Episcopal group Integrity, and David Chewning with Oakhurst Baptist Church. Each of these historical tales show queer Americans assume religious agency and work to fulfill the religious side of their lives and identities by either establishing independent predominantly-gay<sup>12</sup> congregations, starting gay and lesbian organizations within established denominations, or by joining and coming out as individuals in particular congregations, regardless of denomination, in an attempt to encourage the congregational leadership to adopt gay-welcoming/affirming policies and attitudes. I also include relevant gay history that took place in the 1970s, from legal

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<sup>12</sup> Not one representative of an MCC or other predominantly gay congregation would allow his or her congregation to be considered and labeled as gay. Interestingly, clerical representatives of mainstream, predominantly (or entirely!) heterosexual churches, which happened to have a gay-welcoming policy or just a few gay members, often said that their congregations were referred to derogatorily as “that gay church,” for example. So controversial is the gay issue that not only are individuals often judged and labeled by this one quality, but entire religious congregations are as well. The clergy and laity very much regret it, though usually laugh about it as well.

milestones to Anita Bryant as well as a more in-depth treatment of Carter's presidency to provide context to these stories and the decade in general.

Overall I make several key arguments in this thesis. First, gays and lesbians found at least some acceptance and affirmation in the South, including open and long-term same-sex couples, even though this was certainly not necessarily a universally accessible experience. Second, the homeland and heartbeat, as it were, of gay-affirming religion in America is the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia, and this is so for both logical historical reasons and also by sheer happenstance (though some narrators believe this happenstance borders on the mystical and fated). Third, the evolution of gay and gay-affirming religion (i.e. queer religious agency) takes one of three personal/social paths: 1) independent religious congregation/organization building (e.g. MCC), 2) LGBTQ organization establishment within an mainstream denomination (e.g. Integrity), and 3) policy change at the individual congregational level in response to members' coming out and inspiring reaction. Together these paths characterize gay religious history and help to channel discussion about the subject with a bit more clarity.

Until now, gay religious history has existed in bits and pieces, here and there, scattered among essays, autobiographies, websites, archives, far-flung interviews, and memories recorded and unrecorded. Heretofore, it has never been put together in the form of a history. Further, this history thesis considers the evolution not just of "gay" congregations but also of "gay-affirming" (and hence predominantly heterosexual) congregations, and to this extent the history significantly addresses LGBTQ allies. Usually, queer histories cover gay men or gay women exclusively, and rarely do gay histories consider queer community allies as part of the intrinsic LGBTQ whole.



Unfortunately I could only cover a portion of the history I discovered, and a more thorough treatment of the subject will await the dissertation or book project (in addition to a companion documentary in production).

### **Orality and Narrators**

Oral historians often debate the appropriateness or idealness of subject matter. Some believe that a legitimate historical subject must be minimally remote from the present, at least far enough in the past to maximize objectivity, emotional detachment, and perspective while not losing a sufficiently rich source of narration. Others, including Columbia University, value conducting oral history not only on more recent events and younger people, but also on historical subject matter *as it unfolds*, e.g. the events and fall-out of 9-11. While the former seems more like history *proper*, I argue that the latter also constitutes a fair and even important goal of History. Oral history “in the making,” as it were, can draw upon a potentially richer narrative base and, thus, more immediate and detailed information, and can generate final products that relate to and inform the present and future in ways invaluable to society. Journalists do not always do their jobs to research goings on and to inform the public; today more than ever, historians and documentarians seem to fill the information gap. Further, “in the making” oral history enriches archives for future historical use, and I find that compelling. The subject of my project more closely fits the Columbia model, but it also ties into more remote twentieth century history and even some nineteenth century history.

I prepared by reading histories, theory, and methodology relating to my subject and by channeling as much coursework toward this research as possible. When the time came to

begin interviews I compiled a list of gay-welcoming congregations from various sources, mostly on-line lists at various sites. Later I asked interviewees to check the list for omissions and offer any recommendations, a “snowballing” technique that worked well in this case. I also gave notices about my project with a couple of e-sources, such as LGBTran Religious Archives newsletter, and that yielded an important narrator and much history. Besides clerical and lay narrators I include interviews with leading local scholars/historians and authors, politicians, activists, performers, and organization heads. Most interviews documented the history of and stories related to the many dozens of gay-welcoming and affirming congregations in and around the Atlanta area, though I have employed them mostly tangentially in this paper or to substantiate certain points, due to thesis-related constraints.

At the time of thesis completion I had collected, transcribed, and consulted over eighty interviews, and I captured additional shorter interviews with interesting stories and reflections from a couple dozen more individuals in group interview sessions and panel discussions. Narrators reflect very diverse gender, orientation, ethnic/racial, class, religious, and regional backgrounds, though the primary narrators in the three chapters (Hyde, Perry, Evans, and Crew) happen to be white, gay men. Nonetheless, these men stood at the vanguard not only of queer rights and community but also gender inclusivity and progressive race relations activism. Also, the primary narrators and most of the others are Christian (reflecting the early history herein captured), and to this extent the religious research I present focuses on experiences particular to this faith.

The other narrators add their commentary throughout the thesis, though I do not necessarily identify them as gay/straight, male/female, black/white, or by other

categories. About the only quality that most narrators share in common, besides religious/spiritual faith, is some kind of education and/or professional or community success. Most are clergy, professionals, community leaders, and lay leaders. Since this is a gay/religion history, it should not be surprising that some narrators are too young to have established themselves, that some are unemployed, or never attended college. I do not consider this body of interviews “elite,” however, because many clergy preside over small or struggling flocks, many lay narrators are absolutely average Southern citizens, and because gay and lesbian Southerners and those who affirm them sometimes relinquish power or status or otherwise suffer social reprimand or reprisal—they are the minority. I do believe, however, that the collective knowledge and education, world travel, diverse lifestyles, personal histories, and life experiences of all kinds lend authority to the statements and reflections I cite.

Throughout this thesis I often quote narrators at length, and I do so for several reasons. First, extended quotes allow the reader to “hear” a narrator—word choice, speech patterns, even sounds and gestures—and this breathes a bit of life into an oral history, history that comes from and belongs to *living* individuals. Second, I value documentary filmmaking and less traditional narrative choices in academic texts in order to make a given history more readable, accessible, and even more authentic. Third, in some cases I cannot hope to tell a particular story *better* than the original storyteller, and to attempt to do so would be a disservice to the history. Finally, longer quotes ensure that the historian is not snipping and pasting smaller quotes in order to frame a history or argument in such a way that goes beyond the actual thoughts and intent of the speaker. A reader might debate some of the arguments and suggestions I make, but extended quotes almost stand

alone as mini-primary documents for evaluation and consideration. For simplicity's sake I will footnote the first statement a narrator makes in a given chapter, and all subsequent quotes will come from the same interview unless otherwise noted.

Two final notes on language must be made, one simple the other a bit more complicated. First, I consistently capitalize the word "God" and also capitalize pronoun references to both the deity and to Jesus Christ in quotes, and I do this in deference to the custom and practice of the vast majority of narrators, though I did not confirm whether narrators actually had a preference. The second language issue refers to the word "gay" itself. In the world of academia the study of "gay" history and culture is generally abbreviated LGBT or GLBT (with the words in different order), though a Q is often added at the end for "queer." As time goes by more letters are added to the ponderous acronym, and the longest version I have ever heard used in a formal setting and with absolute seriousness was LGBTIQOTS (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, questioning, and two-spirit—this last phrase referring to a relatively well-known Native American understanding of that to which the acronym refers.) The word "homosexual" is problematic not only because many in queer communities do not identify with this word, but also because the word has been identified academically as a modern cultural/linguistic construct that represents half of a false binary. The matter of language is also a very sensitive one in queer circles so I want to make careful choices.

The acronym, which I will capitalize (Acronym) and use henceforth as a formal reference, has come about to please various groups of people, in a politically correct sort of way, whose identity falls somewhere within the Acronym. In the early 70s the word for at least most Acronym-identified people was simply "gay," a friendly form of the

word homosexual, essentially. The first divide came with the lesbian-feminist movement, which broke away from a collective gay movement, as contemporary lesbians felt disenfranchised and excluded, especially from positions of leadership within the “gay” movement. Lesbian issues often went ignored in a queer form of good-ole-boys-club, as many lesbians saw it; and thereafter gay groups generally came to include both “gay” and “lesbian” in titles in order to be sensitive and politically correct. For example, the National Gay Task Force formed in 1973 quickly became the National Gay *and Lesbian* Task Force.

Contemporary lesbians, in part to make a political point, came to identify and almost stigmatize “gay” as equaling “homosexual *male*.” This was not the original definition or even common use of “gay,” but the political demands of lesbian-feminist activists in the 70s made it so, or at least made the word troublesome. Over time other groups, who might reasonably have felt identified at least approximately by “gay” (as most Acronymites feel identified by the generic-turned-loaded term “queer”) felt left out, and so “bisexual” and “transgender” (neither of which is exactly “homosexual”) came to be added to the shorter acronym. Each term added to the Acronym made it more politically correct but also encouraged the adding of still more letters (unique identities) without end at peril of offending a particular group. Where does it end?

“Queer” is often used as the new catch-all phrase that functions like “gay” was originally meant to function. However, many reject this term, too, since 1) it was re-deployed from an offensive slur, and, 2) the term is loaded with both a history of 80s AIDS activism as well as both radical political and contested academic meaning and uses. And so, letters kept joining the growing Acronym. I find this situation understandable

and yet intolerably inconvenient. Therefore I will make the perhaps controversial yet convenient choice to go back to the use of the word “gay,” and use it to mean same-sex-loving men *and* women (wherever they feel they might land on the Kinsey scale) as well as “queer” folks however they might feel or identify as queer vis-à-vis gender or sexuality. This particular history rarely touches on culture beyond the 1970s, and the focus is religious community rather than radical political or sexual history. The use of the Acronym would have been quite foreign in these decades, times when gay or homosexual were common, but neither queer nor LGBT.... Therefore I assert that this choice is not only convenient but has at least some historical merit. I will divert from this choice only when situations necessitate, such as with the use of the word “queer,” which has multiple meanings and was used/heard by central project narrators.

## Old Views and New Pews: An Accommodationist South and the Rebel Church of '46

*“[T]he South is exotic to the rest of the world; for its own people, it is ordinary life—painful, rich, contradictory. When we allow a piece of the world to remain exotic in our imaginations, we dehumanize its people and collaborate in our own ignorance....”*

--Adrienne Rich (*My Mama's Dead Squirrel*)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The South has a mixed historical and cultural reputation, and familiar stereotypes abound. In terms of gender, sexuality, and religion, most non-Southerners (and many Southerners) would describe the region using such adjectives as backward, traditional, conservative, fundamentalist, and generally more hostile to gays in general, compared with other regions of the nation. The South is also labeled as the Bible Belt, with Tennessee boasting the “buckle” that holds together the culture of the region and stands out for such events as the 1925 Scopes Trial, which sought to ban the teaching of evolution in place of Biblical ideology. To some extent the South deserves its reputation, and this is especially true with regard to race relations; however, the South has not deserved other media-driven stereotypical images that have been so securely planted in many people's minds, including ideas about religiosity and sexuality. Many Southerners, too, suffer historical amnesia and forget their own past. For those less familiar with Southern and religious history, it might seem surprising to learn that the South *never* actually existed as a “Bible Belt” until just the past few decades, beginning in about the 1970s. In fact, throughout most of the region's history, natives largely opposed fundamentalism and austere religious observance, even with violence, if need be.

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<sup>1</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1985), 14.

Perhaps not as surprising, though, regional queer history remains unrecorded and untold, yet to emerge, as one Southern historian cleverly wrote, “from behind the magnolia curtain.” From what one would read in the general body of queer historical literature, one would assume that the South has always been the cruelest, most hopeless place a gay person could find him or herself, a region with little gay history to even report until after 1969 and the emergence of gay rights activism.

This impression is largely due to queer historians’ and others’ lack of familiarity with the South and their entertainment of assumptions about the region gleaned from the few Southerners they encountered, who happened to have fled the South for places like New York City. One cannot get a full and fair impression of a region based solely on the reports of disgruntled ex-patriots, and it would take Southern gay scholars in the South to finally start to chart a forgotten history. Therefore, queer history, as it exists in the literature, has been skewed to favor places like New York and certain individuals, like the founders of the Gay Liberation Movement. Take for example a quote by Frank Kameny in a recent book (and a Southern gay history book, ironically) by James T. Sears called *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, as he discussed the effect of the Stonewall Rebellion upon the South and other regions:<sup>2</sup>

We referred to the remainder of the country [outside of New York and California] as a “vast desert,” and correctly so.... [T]o our perceptions the South remained a “desert” for long [after 1969], with the only exceptions, perhaps, being Richard Inman’s short-lived, one-man group in Florida and The Circle of Friends in Dallas, both in the 1960s...I tended, along with others of similar geographic background, almost reflexively and not through conscious, calculated decision, to view southerners as a kind of mythical, exotic people, different from the rest of us Americans in manners, speech, culture, and history, in countless ways that set them apart.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kameny is a well-known former Homophile movement member and long time gay rights activist from New York.

<sup>3</sup> James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, Rutgers University Press, 2001), ix – xi.



Sears himself adds that, after Gay Liberation was born in New York City, “Atlanta became the first southern city to march out of *the darkness*” (my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> Kameny, a born and bred New Yorker, is himself a professional academic as well as a Homophile turned militant gay activist, and he would have had little or no insight into actual Southern life with which to temper his stark assumptions, and he does acknowledge that his conceptions of the South are mere “impressions” about people who are essentially “different” from “us.” Still, this learned and experienced activist—born in 1925, an astronomer from Harvard, well-traveled and well connected with gay organizations—could only see the South as “darkness” and “desert.” Even in a book published in 2001, he makes these claims matter-of-factly, and he has certainly not been alone in such opinions. Queer historiography, even by 2006, still overlooks Southern queer history. Actual Southerners know that, while the South has indeed been hostile territory for many gay and lesbian Americans, it certainly has not been historically any *more* so than most other places, and has even offered shared space for local gays as well as social strategies for accommodating non-heteronormative relationships and individuals. Certainly gay life pre-Stonewall could not have been *as* “out” as it is today, and community accommodations may have felt less than 100 percent fulfilling, but the accommodations should not be ignored or downplayed.

Kameny, for his part, clearly has only one sense of gay culture/politics/history, only one sense of “light” in the “dark,” and that involves out-of-the-closet activism that curiously found both its culmination and genesis with the so-called “Stonewall Rebellion,” a three-day bar brawl that pitted local New York City gays and transsexuals

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 67.

against bar-raiding police. To Kameny and others who share his perceptions and priorities, only open public rebellion could constitute gay agency and bring about meaningful gay lifestyles and community, and anything short of this he considers merely “bland, apologetic, unassertive, and defensive.” He did not perceive even “bland” life in the “darkness” of the South, with the exception of the two “short-lived” episodes he mentions. The so-called bland homophile activism “commenced, with continuity, in 1951 in Los Angeles,” and this movement he labels “the modern American gay movement.” It is indeed a fair argument to suggest that something new was happening in the United States with the emergence of open, pride-imbued, gay activism (though the “roots” go further back in history than Los Angeles in the 1950s, indeed back to the nineteenth century in Europe), and this socio-cultural phenomenon is indisputably “modern,” but it is quite another matter to equate it with “light” in “darkness.” Stonewall and Gay Liberation did certainly come to inscribe gay urban subcultures with new cultural norms and expectations, to further empower groups and individuals to fulfill openly gay lifestyles, and to take unprecedented political actions, but this is *not* to say that the South was in fact a “desert” where nothing meaningful happened before New York 1969 (or even Los Angeles 1951).

Kameny goes on to describe the development of the Homophile movement as it grew into the Gay Liberation/Rights movement, which “finally became grassroots everywhere in the country, including the South.” “How it became so in the South,” he continues, “is what this book is all about.”<sup>5</sup> While I do not seek to overly criticize a gay history book that captures certain important aspects of actual gay historical goings on, I must point out

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., x.

three problems with Kameny's and Sears' assertions and goals. First, they do not seem to have taken any notice of the preeminent Southern queer historical text, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* by John Howard, published a full two years prior to *Rubyfruit*. In this earlier work the author returns the South, specifically the rural South, to the historiography. Although Howard's focus is largely limited to the fleeting sexual encounters of men in Mississippi, still Kameny and Sears should have at least acknowledged the peculiar freedoms Southern men (and women?) enjoyed when it came to same-sex trysts. Second, by not recognizing Howard's work Kameny and Sears do not engage the assertion Howard makes that there did exist freedoms and latitudes in the South, even in the most remote rural locations, for gay Southerners prior to the civil rights movement and related confrontational activism. The social boom was being lowered on gays in the 1960s and thereafter, Howard stresses, *because of* contemporary organized uprisings that brought together African-Americans, northerners (yankees), urbanites, intellectuals, youth, various left-leaning activists/radicals (especially communists) into a great "pink" threat, as it were, to the status quo. And while same-sex loving individuals in the South, as elsewhere, did face persecution in various places for various reasons at this time and prior (just like they would have anywhere else in contemporary America), this fact on its own obscures important accommodations the South made for its gay citizens that were distinctly Southern. This is Kameny and Sears' final oversight. How and why the South created and accommodated queer space and also hosted the first known gay-affirming church is what *this* chapter is all about.

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## Southern Is As Southern Does

In order to make sense of Southern accommodation of local gays, it is essential to first grasp a sense of “Southern.” What makes the South different from other parts of the nation? How will this distinctiveness in turn affect Southern religious history vis-à-vis the gay and lesbian population? The region certainly distinguishes itself in some very apparent ways, as with Southern dialects, but also in other more subtle ways that can take a non-Southerner some time to recognize. I asked narrators, both native and non-native, whether and how the South is regionally distinctive, and by and large they gave similar answers, used common adjectives, and often seemed to struggle in the same way to articulate their perceptions. While there is a solid literature about Southern culture and its peculiarities, I will share at some length the impressions of the project narrators who are able to effectively capture/articulate this general regional cultural essence (especially as it relates to religion, sexuality, community relations, and rights activism). They do so in a natural flow-of-consciousness manner, sometimes stumbling through thoughts or “messy” descriptions, even offering contradictory impressions that more exactly mirror a region’s complexity and human perceptions of society. The following is a textual medley of their answers, and I put some words in bold so the reader can (re-)skim the quotes for an over-arching impression of the South:<sup>6</sup>

There are genuine regional differences, dramatic regional differences.... The South is by nature a more **traditional values** area of the country...I love the sense of **community**, the **graciousness**, the traditions of the South...good people who care about injustice. (Rev. Joanna Adams, Presbyterian)

Civil rights has a very rich and different history I think in the South than it does in other parts of the country, [yet] being a daughter of the South...and having grown up in fundamentalist churches, I think it was just easier and comforting to have all the answers given *to* us without having to think it through. And so, in the South, I kinda think that’s our heritage—it has been

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<sup>6</sup> See the list of narrators at the end of the thesis text for interview details.

**easier to cling to those certainties** than to actually *deal* with this African-American who is my neighbor. (Rev. Kim Buchanan, UCC)

It certainly is my sense that you really *have* to deal with **religion** in Atlanta.... people I know that have moved here from other parts of the country say things like, “You know, I can’t believe how many churches there are, how much a part of everyday life religion and **churches** are.” (Dr. Saralyn Chesnut, Emory)

Well, it’s a fact that churches are special interests here...but here in particular, it’s the **mega-churches**. And then you over-lay that on the fact that that everybody is Southern and polite, and **politeness** is, in fact, a Southern trait, and that covers up for a lot of that **beneath-the-surface hatred** that actually runs rampant here. (State Representative Dr. Karla Drenner)

...**Human contact**. It’s not uncommon to walk down the street and someone says “good morning” like they mean it, and they do mean it. We had that racially even before we had integration.... So what we had was a more **genteel** way of treating people. (Dr. Louie Crew, Episcopalian, Rutgers)

I think that social interaction in the South is very **high brow**, and a type of high brow that doesn’t exist in other areas. Like I find that people who come from different areas are much more direct. Not necessarily offensive, but just direct.... In the South, there is a lot of **pretense and propriety**, and there is a way that we say things and do things here...[and] it can be frustrating. I think our discourses are just as meaningful, even if they are **slower** in rates. So I think that we do move a little slower, but I think that that shouldn’t be confused that we’re any less powerful in our voice. (Rev. Paris Eley, African-American Baptist)

I was raised Southern because my parents are Southern...you are raised Southern if your parents are Southern no matter where you physically live.... I like the South. I think it is very interesting and **maybe more human**. (Susan Fraysse, Presbyterian)

There’s a great deal of **tolerance** and **respect**...people are generally **kind** and **civil** and humane and generally want to respect people’s **privacy**.... I know this is counterintuitive, from what the media portrays. (Rev. Budd Friend-Jones, UCC)

I *do* think the South is **misunderstood** in many ways.... I mean, the South that I grew up in and that I know is **progressive**.... Like I have said, I’ve known gay and lesbian people in all kinds of roles. It was **not as public**—I mean, I think that’s a part of the thing when it comes to issues of gays and lesbians, I do think the public-ness of it has been part of the issue, but I don’t think the reality is any less or greater. There might even be *more* acceptance here. (Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, Methodist, Emory)

I heard one person with a great barb say that in the South you are greeted so warmly you don’t realize that you’ve been stabbed in the back until you’ve walked away forty minutes later. (chuckles).... I found the **hospitality** here great. One of the gifts of the South was **leisure in its time**, and I’m not sure that anywhere in the United States we’ve been able to maintain that. (Msgr. Henry Gracz, Roman Catholic)

Both politically and socially [the South has a] much more **conservative** and **traditional** approach to life, a much more **slow approach to change**, much more hesitant to have radical change...a tendency to be more **rural** and more small towns. And so things always change more slowly in those small towns. (Becky Kurtz, Mennonite)

Part of the personality of the South is we’re **slow to change**, which is both bad and good...We’re certainly rightly called the **Bible Belt**...a different sense of fervor... It’s not a matter of hate. I mean, to them it is a deeply spiritual issue...much **slower pace** of life...not that sense of ideas changing very quickly. (Rev. Kathy Morris, Methodist)

You are **polite** and you *have* to be polite...but not necessarily more hospitable, just really polite.... There's this whole sense that you don't have to live so fast and so hard that-, take your time and enjoy all the beautiful flowers that we have here (chuckles).... Nothing is so important that it can't wait until tomorrow. Which is frustrating, too. (Al Pellenberg, Atlanta Pride—gay New Yorker)

Being a die-hard Southerner, I also know there are **good people** from all walks of life...Something about the South that's unique to me has always been that there's a sense of **spirituality** that's tied to the land and to a locale that is very specifically Southern to me, the *type* of spirituality, the *type* of relationship people have with "Jesus".... I would describe it as very pastoral, very passionate, very dark.... (Amy Ray, Indigo Girls)

Atlanta at times can feel **parochial**.... It's a Southern city, and I love the South. It's hard to articulate. It's something about the **pace**, it's something about the **depth** of the people, what they've been through through time...but it's a very **friendly** city. (Emily Saliers, Indigo Girls)

More **conservative** as a generalization...a charming part of the world.... From a personal comfort standpoint, the South is more **welcoming**, it's a more welcoming culture...more **humanity** and a kind of **neighborly caring** in the South, which I like.... Atlanta has been a combination of **resistance and welcome**. Resistance to my ideas, welcome as a person. (Bishop Emeritus Bennett Sims, Episcopalian)

The South is always **haunted by God and by race**...in flight from putting spirituality and justice together.... We do still value **community**. And I think most of the rest of the country does not. And so I do think there are some possibilities out of our sense that **family** and community and home are important that may make us find redemptive values where others don't think they are necessary and don't think they are needed. The reality is they *are* needed.... There is still a sense in which there is, I think, like, regret in the South that the Sabbath is not observed.... And so I think Southerners still have that kind of sense, whereas I think the rest of the country believes that money is God, and so whatever you need to do to make money and get what you want to get and make yourself feel good, go ahead and do it. Whereas Southerners still have a few brakes on that—not many left, I don't want to paint a stark picture...there's still some **values that can hold out against the money machine** that is the United States, the consumer ethic of who we are. Probably the best place to hold out against it is in the South. (Rev. Nibs Stroup, Presbyterian)

I think the **neighborhood-ness** feels very Southern to me, and very casual kind of encounters with people and a friendliness and an **interaction** that doesn't happen in my experience in the big, big cities. (Linda Bryant, Charis Books)

[Atlanta] has a touch of Southern **gentility** about it, in which you still use Southern culture to move yourself through the world by being excessively polite at times, pretend to listen when you don't, always have **gracious** hospitality, and keep your comments to yourself and your immediate family. But it's a fun place to live. (Father Philip Maniscalco, Catholic)

People come here because it's **beautiful**, people come here because it's **friendly**. One of the things I realized when I first moved here was that southern hospitality existed. *Really, truly*, it wasn't just a phrase, it truly existed. People would drive, they'd be courteous to you when you're driving—it just truly existed. And so the consciousness that pervades Atlanta is one of southern hospitality, one of openness and friendliness. (Rev. Carole O'Connell, Unity)

There are some traditional Southern values of **civility** and **politeness** and **privacy** that impact relationships...but there's something of an **inward** mentality.... (Rabbi Josh Lesser, Jewish)

The southern culture...is **communal** in the sense that who you are both matters to me and affects me. One of my friends...was from New York City, and she moved to Knoxville, Tennessee where I was working, and she would come in sometimes just irate, because she would stop to get gas and the guy who would come over from the gas station to where she had pumped her gas would go, "How ya doin'?" And she'd say, "Why does he need to know how I'm doing?! It's none of his business! He doesn't even know me! How I'm doing has *nothing* to do with this transaction!" But in the South it has *everything* to do with it, because we're **tied to one another**, we're connected to one another, and that's the grand part of who we are. We see ourselves as being far more **connected** than a lot of other cultures even within our own nation that are more focused on being independent. But therefore when we're connected we also are responsible to each other, and we feel like what you do has something to do with me. (Rev. Daniel Matthews, Episcopalian)

[I]n the North it is OK to dislike individuals, in the South it's OK to dislike *groups* of people. You can dislike all those queers, but if it's a member of *my* family or somebody *I* grew up with, we'll overlook that, you know, because he or she is our friend or our family member. And **in the South we hate the groups and love the individuals**, as opposed to, you know, some other parts of the country where they may love the groups and hate the individual. So I think it is a Southern thing to **overlook these quirks**. (smile and chuckle) (Bob Beard, Presbyterian)

These quotes together demonstrate common perceptions of the South, again, from both natives and transplants. Three themes in particular jump out immediately, two of which describe a South that visitors can readily experience and the last requiring more familiarity with the South to fully appreciate. First, many perceptions of the South focus upon commonly experienced and expected social behaviors and attitudes, a kind of Southern sense of "manners," one might say. Certain adjectives stand out: politeness, genteel, hospitable, warm, civil, and humane, for example. Some narrators, when describing the South, added jokes or side stories to demonstrate a point, including relevant quips about Southern drivers. Monsignor Henry Gracz (aka Father Henry) of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Atlanta noted:

People have described one of the things about Southern drivers...you consistently don't look for turn signals. You try and look which direction the front wheels are turning, because it's not unusual to have somebody in the *far* left lane, exit three for four lanes over to the far right lane, with no signals, and probably with less than fifty feet of turning space.<sup>7</sup>

From my own experience in traffic and from narrators' corroborative stories as well, Southerners do not honk at other drivers in traffic as often as drivers do outside the

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<sup>7</sup> Monsignor Henry Gracz, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 11 August 2004.

South, they are more likely to politely accommodate the driving needs of others on the road, and even to tolerate poor driving skills or choices with patience, at least compared to drivers in fast-paced cities like Los Angeles and New York. Taken at face value, this traffic behavior perhaps reflects cultural priorities, and also serves as a convenient metaphor for Southern society—the sense of friendliness and a greater communal whole within which an individual locates identity and within which he/she respects an unspoken “Golden Rule.” In more rural areas strangers even wave to one another as they drive down streets and dirt roads. “Indeed, ‘you *always* wave’ is a lesson taught early to many Southern children,” writes Jocelyn H. Donlon in *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture*.<sup>8</sup> While a few narrators asserted that such politeness is only skin deep and that hypocrisy lay beneath the social finery, most insisted that Southerners are in fact more caring and concerned for other people, that the civility is more than skin deep. Regardless, this first of three pillars of prescribed Southern social behavior—communal concern and friendliness—factors into social relations of all kinds.

A second theme focuses on the temporal experience of Southern life. Many individuals spoke of the “slow” pace of Southern living, including Al Pellenberg who described the day he made the decision to leave Manhattan. He was making a trip to visit his family on Long Island and remembered running to the platform to catch the shuttle to Penn Station, and even at the young age of 28 or 29 he said to himself, “Jesus! You are going to have a heart attack if you live the rest of your life like this!”<sup>9</sup> Monsignor Gracz was among many who noted that Southern culture actually values what he called

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<sup>8</sup> Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Al Pellenberg, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 23 March 2005.



“leisure,” the making of time to enjoy “the beautiful flowers,” as Pellenberg said, or to be with family (a major sub-theme) or to keep the Sabbath.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a shopper cannot buy alcohol on Sundays in Georgia, among other “blue laws” respecting the Sabbath and keeping “package store” workers (if no one else) from working that day. Some counties in Georgia and around the South are “dry” in toto, and this reflects the conservatism and religiosity still inherent in Southern culture, another major sub-theme.<sup>11</sup> Returning again to the traffic example, most Southern drivers are never in such a hurry that they feel the need to honk their horns at others or show intolerance of inconveniences in traffic, as one would experience in places like Los Angeles. It is simply not worth it to be so upset as to break social protocol, or ultimately to be “rude.” In fact, Pellenberg confirms this phenomenon of Southern aversion to rudeness when he described a trip that the Atlanta Pride Committee made to California to meet with Pride organizers there. “And when they came back,” he noted, “one of the overriding things that was in just about all of their heads was how [in slight Southern accent] *goddamn rude everybody had been*. I mean, here this group of people were as guests of the Pride Committee and people were just rude to them, didn’t have time for them...there was no sense of caring.”<sup>12</sup> After this experience, Pride Atlanta went on to orchestrate workshops for volunteers to make sure that Pride Atlanta volunteers *never* behaved rudely in even the least little way.

A third and final theme arises clearly from the narrators’ comments and is the most interesting, the most difficult for non-Southerners to notice readily, the most relevant to the history presently addressed, and is perhaps an assertion at which some individuals

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<sup>10</sup> Msgr Henry Gracz, interview with author.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, dry counties and towns exist all over America, but by far most are in the South and parts of the Midwest, and this fact serves simply an illustrative piece in a bigger cultural mosaic.

<sup>12</sup> Al Pellenberg, interview with author.

outside of the South might take umbrage. Narrators frequently cite a strong sense of Southern “community” that does not exist in other places in the nation. Linda Bryant called it “neighborhood-ness,” describing a sense of community that exists even in urban neighborhoods, and others note this impression as well.<sup>13</sup> Reverend Matthews lingered on the subject in his interview, as he noted how a non-Southern New Yorker reacted to the Southern sense, not so much of the kind of friendliness and hospitality that the gas station attendant demonstrated, but to a Southern sense of community and communal social behavior, since there would be little *need* for warmth and civility were Southerners not so concerned about this strong sense of harmonious society.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, Southern sociability and attitudes focus upon the value of collective group stability; therefore, individuals are likely to experience Southern community and behavior as hospitable and friendly, unless a particular individual resents either the communal ideal or his/her place within the community. Still, by and large, Southern individuals participate in collective performances of Southern “charm” and “gentility” as a strategy to maintain a prescribed communal dynamic, even if this social dynamic features hierarchical, patriarchal, heteronormative, racist, segregated, or other power-skewed norms—balanced in the relational choreography of propriety if not in terms of actual justice. The reward for individuals who do so participate involves not only the benefit of being on the receiving end of politeness and friendly behavior, but also (and this is key) the tolerance of eccentricities on the individual level, so long as these eccentricities do not disturb greater group bonds. Returning once again to the Southern traffic comparison, a certain logic appears: individual drivers might inconvenience others on the road or even make outright

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<sup>13</sup> Linda Bryant, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 5 April 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Daniel Paul Matthews, Jr., interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 22 September 2004.

illegal driving moves in traffic, because drivers collectively know that they, too, benefit overall from this milieu of patient, civil status quo, and their own mistakes and mishaps will likely be met with similar forbearance.

Narrator Bob Beard observed keenly that when many Southerners actually openly attest to disliking a person or otherwise behave in an unfriendly manner, they focus upon big abstract groups (“othered” groups) rather than individuals, or else an individual whose identity becomes conflated with a rejected outsider group.<sup>15</sup> Given Southern history, this does not seem surprising. In earlier eras it would have been common for a white Southerner, for example, to disparage the African-American population as a whole even while treasuring a personal relationship with a particular individual of color who seemed like family. The same would prove true with Southern gays. It would be easy to make acts of sodomy illegal or to publicly reject homosexuality, but the gay person in one’s own family or community would be hard to persecute, so long as that individual did not disturb the surface civil status quo. Susan Henry-Crowe of Emory’s Candler School of Theology made this point in her comment about the problem of “public-ness” vis-à-vis homosexuality in the South.<sup>16</sup> As long as one kept his or her place in harmony and civility (whether that has meant African-Americans maintaining segregation without dispute or a gay couple remaining discreet about their relationship), then generally individuals are met with acceptance or at least tolerance. The problem, of course, has been the injustice inherent in the Southern social structure that historically privileged men over women, white over black. The tides of history would persistently bring change to

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Beard, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 November 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 20 August 2004.

the South, but the rules of Southern society would ensure that change took place (and takes place) slowly and with tremendous resistance.

Interestingly, at least two narrators noted “privacy” as being part and parcel of the Southern sense of “community” and “friendliness.” Rabbi Josh Lesser, of the city’s gay-affirming Jewish congregation, Bet Haverim, said:

I think Atlanta is an interesting city where a lot of different values are kind of merging and in conflict. I think there are some traditional Southern values of civility and politeness *and privacy* that impact relationships, and I think there’s the significance of having such large different ethnic groups and religious groups and racial groups in the South. (my emphasis)<sup>17</sup>

One would think the opposite would be true, that strong community might require nosiness and social sanctions against socially erring individuals. In the case of the South, the opposite is often true, that private matters can remain private as long as greater harmonious communal values are upheld. The disturbance of the greater social fabric warrants reaction, rather than the peculiarities of individuals, it would seem. In other words, disturbance of the harmonious status quo at group level or otherwise in the *public* sphere warrants resistance, but Southern eccentrics have often been given a wide berth in the South. Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe shared about her experience heading a workshop in south Georgia. She brought up the gay issue publicly, stating that she and other “church people” she knows have gays and lesbians in their congregations and that fact needs to be acknowledged. “A number of people came up to me and thanked me for saying that,” she said, and they shared with her stories about gay people they knew. Lay people are more willing to talk about gay issues than it would seem in the press, she concluded. Rev. Henry-Crowe was gently guiding a group of Southerners to attest publicly to that which they already knew privately, and sought to help guide the larger community

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<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Josh Lesser, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 21 July 2004.

harmoniously toward something new. Who better to do so than a respected Southern member of the clergy?

These unique aspects of Southern community and accommodation are often overlooked or forgotten historically and popularly, especially as the fairer blooms of Southern culture have been slowly choked by the recent introduction of a genuinely exotic cultural weed—religious fundamentalism. Some more personal stories will even better bring the matter to light.

### **History Buried in Memories and Graveyards**

The key examples I use to suggest the strategies and opportunities for Southern accommodation of gay (or otherwise eccentric) Southerners comes from the life story of the man whose actions launched gay religious American history, Archbishop George Augustine Hyde. Understanding both the Southern ability to tolerate the individual as well as to resist that which threatens a greater community whole will help to make sense of later socio-cultural developments in the South—to wit, the birth of gay-affirming American religion in this unique region and the rise of reactionary fundamentalist politico-religious traditions in the wake of the civil rights movement and counterculture.

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I drove from Atlanta up I-75 to nearby Marietta and found my way to the city cemetery just south of the town square, following the Bishop's general directions. The signs said, "Confederate cemetery," and I was not sure how to feel. Dixie flags, a cannon, rows upon rows of the small, unmarked graves of "heroes." Had the Bishop told me wrong? Before long I realized one side of the cemetery is for local families rather

than fallen veterans, and after calling the Cobb County library for mapping details I drove the narrow trails between the plots until I finally found it. I had to stare for a moment, almost fearing it might be a mirage in the humid Southern heat. HYDE, read the large rectangular stone, marking the general area. I jumped out of my truck and ran over, looked down upon the grassy patch before me and there they were—Josie and Daisy, just as he said.

Archbishop George Hyde's family goes back to the Crow line of Cherokee Indians, back to an early shop owner who plied his wares in Five Points when Atlanta was little more than a whistle stop called Marthasville, back to the carpenter of Cobb County Courthouse and the carver of Stone Mountain, and back to generations of antebellum rural farmers. He was born in 1923 to a Methodist mother and Southern Baptist father. His maternal grandfather was a Methodist preacher in Marietta, but when his mother married, "she naturally became the obedient wife and became a Southern Baptist. And we were sent to the Southern Baptist church," he says, "and we had to be in Sunday school *every* Sunday, come hell or high water."<sup>18</sup> When he was a young boy he recalls visiting Aunt Josie and Aunt Daisy, who had lived together for many decades, but only later in life would he learn that they were not so much cousins or mother-daughter, as the family story went, but more like a long-time couple. Not only that, but his "Uncle George Hyde" was well known in the family as being gay, and he and his partner are buried together in a separate cemetery in Shiloh, Kennesaw, just north of Marietta.

I was most surprised to hear this family history, as I was only expecting to hear his own life story, which was amazing enough, during our interview. I had first heard about

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<sup>18</sup> Archbishop George Hyde, interview with author, Belleair, Florida, 10 December 2005.

him while researching the history of religion and gay Atlanta/Georgia when the LGBTran Religious Archives sent me an email letting me know about “the Bishop,” as he is often called, who founded, they said, the first gay church in the United States in 1946. (The Bishop would object to the “gay church” label, though, as would every MCC and gay-affirming congregation after him.) It seemed too incredible to be true. His and his family’s story would prove inspiring and also show how gay Southerners could navigate their society as either identified homosexuals or unlabeled same-sex-loving persons.

Archbishop Hyde was not an individual caught up in historical forces that impelled groups to action, as was the case with the civil rights movement or anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam conflict; instead, the Bishop was a man with personal religious (he would say “spiritual”) convictions that led him to break from the flock rather than run with it. It started when he was sixteen years old in his parents’ Southern Baptist church. “Finally...I had a little debate with the pastor,” he said, “and left the Southern Baptist church, became a religious wanderer, so to speak, ‘cause [the Baptist pastor] could not answer my questions. And so I said, ‘Well, I’m sorry, but I just can’t be a part of this; it’s just a farce.’ And that did not endear me to *anyone*.” I asked what he had questioned. “Well, questions about morality,” he said. “I saw things that I did not think were right. One of our church members got a divorce and she was immediately shunned. You did not speak to her; the church just (gesture like throwing away) (shakes head). And that just seemed wrong to me. I still don’t like divorce, but still, again, that’s a person with feelings. And if what she did is wrong, how can she ever correct it if we don’t have anything to do with her? So I asked him about *those* things. And he said, ‘Well, that’s just the way it is.’ He had no answer.”

His religious wanderings found him strolling home from school one day through Atlanta's Grant Park when he spotted "this man sitting there all dressed in black with this funny looking thing [indicating collar area], a clerical suit is what it was.... He was a priest of the Syrian Orthodox Church." The young Hyde was familiar with many religious traditions that had houses of worship in Atlanta—Baptist, Methodist, Jewish, and Catholic—but this new religion came as a surprise, and he found it "fascinating." Years later this seed of interest would produce its fruit in Saint Mary's Seminary in Perryville, Missouri. "What inspired you to go to seminary?" I asked him. "Well, the people who were in the churches were doing it wrong in my opinion, and I could do it right.... That's the way I thought." Before long the Catholic seminary experience caused the Bishop to question yet more. "I found them to be very medieval in some ways...they were modern Pharisees in that they so over-emphasized certain externals that had become an end in themselves. Spirituality was (gestures like throwing off to the side) for somebody else." He objected to rituals performed "rote" rather than for "spiritual" reasons, like "it's more important to swing the censor three times and six times for *this* occasion, or to have the priest and deacon standing three feet way over here, not two feet, you know. It's silly!" The Bishop did not hesitate to tell his colleagues and instructors that they were "wrong." "Well, a mere student doesn't tell a Ph.D. in religion that he's wrong! And so you get chastised for it. And that happened a lot. I was a rabble-rouser." Finally he realized he just could not remain in the program. When he decided to leave early in 1946 he shared the sad news with a good friend in the seminary, and the two hugged goodbye in a public area of the seminary.



Before he had a chance to actually depart, however, he was taken to task in the Chapter of Faults, a mandatory assembly that gathered monthly to hear personal confessions of sins in a group setting and/or to publicly confront others with their unacknowledged transgressions. Sleepily sitting in the pews early that morning, the Bishop heard his name called out.

One of the boys says, “I want to charge George and Carl with fondling one another in an immoral manner!” The embrace [goodbye]...and he went on and on. Well, I’m supposed to stand up and say, “Thank you so much for bringing that to my attention, I had forgotten it or did not place great importance on it, and I’m sorry.” I didn’t. I got up and I said, “Listen, you little snot,” and I walked down and I addressed the father superior and all the priests and all the students. And one of them later called it my Martin Luther speech. And I said, “You have distorted Christ’s message, and you have gone far outside the legislations of Christ, and imposed your own legislation, and you with a twisted mind, a twisted morality...[you say] the simple thing of expressing your feelings or friendship for another person is sinful. There’s nothing sinful about two men embracing one another, but you’ve made it so. And you have accused me of this and that and the other,” and so I said, “but you are building in every corner of the church closets in which to shut away those who have a moral standard different from yours. And I’m not going to put up with it, and I’m going to spend *my* life tearing those closet doors off the hinges!” And with that I bowed to the father superior and turned on my heels and walked out. (smiling) And they were glad to see me go.<sup>19</sup>

Hyde immediately caught a train back to Atlanta to start his life over from scratch, but his religious convictions would once again cause him to “rabble rouse.” The cause this time would be the mistreatment of a young gay Catholic at Sacred Heart Church in downtown Atlanta that same year, a youth who had gone into the confessional and shared with the attending priest the fact that he was a “homosexual.” The priest commanded him to confess that he was an abomination before God. The young man refused repeatedly to do so, exciting great ire in the priest, who finally screamed at him to “get the hell out” of his church. Remaining faithful to his religious tradition in spite of that encounter, the young man returned for mass that Sunday and walked to the front of the church to receive communion along with the hundreds of others present. The priest passed him by. The Bishop imagined the pain and embarrassment the young man must have felt: “What does

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

he do now? I'm sure he just *melted*," Hyde reflected. Word of the incident got back to the Bishop who told the youth that he would attend mass with him the very next Sunday. "They won't *dare* pass *me* by, because I'm the bishop's protégé," Hyde told him. "How wrong I was!" At mass *both* men were passed over for communion. The story began to spread, and the following Sunday a couple more individuals joined the men in the communion line, determined to literally stand up for their right to be recognized as worthy fellow Catholics and children of God. They were all passed over. "Guilt by association," the Bishop figured.

"Now that was *brave*," he continued. In one of only two large Catholic churches in the relatively small city of Atlanta at the time, it took much courage to stand up and visually confess to being homosexual or at least sympathetic *to* homosexuals. After about six weeks, a total of eighteen people were standing together boldly crying out for spiritual equality in the church. The priest became very angry once again and shouted at Hyde calling him "an S.O.B." and threatening to call the police to arrest them all for "creating a disturbance," though he never did. This brave and bold group would become the founding core of the first known gay-affirming congregation in the United States, and one of the earliest *integrated* churches in Georgia, after First Congregational (now a predominantly African-American UCC-affiliated church that welcomes its gay members and ministry leaders too).

So meanwhile, we got together, (pause, thinks) misery loves company. (smiles) And met at my little apartment, had dinner...we had two girls, non-gay prostitutes, who heard about [us]. They went to church too, and they felt that maybe *they* belonged in our little group. Wonderful! We had three black people. That was unheard of in 1946 Atlanta! I mean, it's almost illegal to sit side-by-side on a bus—well, it *was* illegal. And...the blacks did not have a church; they had to go to their church that was in a schoolroom in one of the Catholic schools. They did not go to Sacred Heart or to the Cathedral. It just wasn't done. So here we were, eating with these black people—"mercy, goodness, you people are radical!"

The main Catholic church in Atlanta, Sacred Heart, was depriving people—gay and straight, black and white—of what he considered to be “spiritual food.” The communion was not an empty ritual to Hyde, but meaningful spiritual nourishment that individuals who sought it actually *needed*, and he found it unconscionable that Sacred Heart would assent to such a “Pharisee” sin, as he described it. Many gay faithful and their supporters, then and now, similarly consider Biblical literalism (often used in the defense of anti-gay feeling) a kind of Pharisee sin, a kind of religious legalism that would undermine the greater purpose of Christian religion and spirituality. Rev. Davita CarterMcCallister, the first openly gay clergyperson at First Congregational Church, described her somewhat less “rabble rousing” experiences:

When I went to seminary, like a lot of LGBT people, I went with this “I am *not* gonna be gay.” You know? I am gonna be a preacher, I’m gonna respond to the call of God on my life, and I *cannot* respond to the call of God on my life with this *foolishness*...I mean just this very self-loathing sort of perspective about the *only* way I could function in ministry...When I went to seminary, I had two kinds of professors. I had the kind of professor—one was my church administration professor—who felt like homosexuality was the scourge on the earth. (smiles) You know, and all homosexuals should be burned, starting now, why wait till hell? And I had the sort of seminary professors who said, “How dare you not look at this Bible critically when it was used to enslave your people? How dare you tell me that you are a literal biblicist when literalism is what caused your people to be in shackles? You oughta be ashamed of yourself!” And they were *that* brutal. There was no sort of warm, fuzzy, let’s find our way into the text! (laughs) I mean, “you have gotta be out of your flippin’ mind if you are a person of color and you are gonna pick this up and tell me, if you simply read it, without any interpretation, without any prayer, without any discernment, it’s just gonna jump up on its own and tell you the inspired will of God. You are crazy!” Is what they said.<sup>20</sup>

Still, the controversy surrounding gays and lesbians in the South, again, tended historically to derive from some kind of public display or action rather than from any kind of fundamentalism. Rev. CarterMcCallister, along with First Church member Bette Thomas, and worship minister, Dr. Norma Raybon, discussed this fact:

Davita CM: ...And where we have had a number of members of our congregation that we all *knew* were gay, that has *never* been something—they would not, in LGBT terms, be considered

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<sup>20</sup> Rev. Davita CarterMcCallister (last name spelled with no space or hyphen as a unique lesbian married name), interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 7 Sept 2004

“out.” We have a lot of closeted families. And so if you would talk to our senior minister, what he'd say is, “Oh, I have a number of them, and we accept them, wherever they are in the process.” I think that was easier to say, though, when all of them were closeted. (all chuckle)

Bette Thomas: Right.

Davita CM: And so it was like, we'll take you wherever you are, as long as you, you know...!

Bette Thomas: As long as you keep your mouth closed.

Davita CM: As long as you keep your mouth closed. And that's not an indictment against First Congregational Church--that is *very* much a part of African-American communities. In general in the African-American community, there are a number of people that we know that are gay, lesbian, bisexual, even, you know, transgendered or curious. But, you know, there's a very familiar expression in the African-American community--you know, you can *be* gay, but there's never any excuse for *looking* gay. (Norma and Bette laugh) Can't look gay; mamas are serious about that! And what that means is, what you do in private in your home, that's fine. But *we* shouldn't have to see it, acknowledge it,

Norma Raybon: Shouldn't have to witness it, huh?

Davita CM: We don't have to witness it or be aware of it, and something like standing up from the pulpit and acknowledging a partner makes us now have to acknowledge that that's true. Whereas before, we could have just-, I think, I thought, somebody said, (Bette: I heard), I heard, you know what I mean...

Norma Raybon: Or we would never discuss [Davita: That's right.] or admit to it ! (Laughter)

Such a strategy of qualified acceptance would offer the greatest degree of overall social harmony—on the one hand, gays are not denied their place in society, but on the other hand, gays would be expected to remain discreet so as not to force public acknowledgment and reaction. This social dance is not necessarily uniquely Southern. Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe also noted that many Emory students from around the country could be “out” at school but not at home. Their families and community would *know* about them, but the matter would remain “sort of an unspoken thing,” and the “unspokenness” can be very painful for students, certainly in these days when so many gay American expect and do enjoy fully out lives.

Overall, we see the distinction between theological fundamentalism and simple, common social propriety as the causes of gay social exclusion or even just suppressed public expression. How individuals or congregations would become fully affirming would depend upon which issue required challenging—biblical literalism or social propriety. Literalists would require long, in depth studies of the Bible in the original,

ancient languages, and perhaps even direct inspiration from “the Holy Spirit” as well. Those who simply expected gays to be discreet often needed only a nudge from “out” friends and family or clerical leading, as with Rev. Henry-Crowe, to change their expectations. But these developments are part of a much more recent history.

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“BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD,” her headstone reads. Josie was born in 1860 to Marietta and Christopher Columbus Bradberry, and died in 1944. On a tombstone directly adjacent, the lone name Daisy appears, born 1879 and no death date. “SHE HATH DONE WHAT SHE COULD,” it reads, and nothing more. The 1880 census lists Josie Bradberry residing with her mother, Marietta, and an apparent sister. By 1900 Marietta is still head of the household with daughter Josie, the sister is gone, and there is the addition of a “granddaughter,” Daisy. By 1930 Josie, age 69 and allegedly “widowed” is listed as head of household and property owner with Daisy Richardson listed as “daughter” (and curiously “married” with age of “first marriage” forty-two) as the only other resident. It is most odd that this married woman does not live with her husband of merely eight years, but rather works as a “seamstress/dressmaker” and lives instead with her “mother.” It is curious, too, that neither had children. The Bishop remembers visiting Aunt Josie and Aunt Daisy when he was very young, though he came to learn that the two were not actually related as reported and the mother-daughter story was fabricated but upheld by all. Had these two attempted marriage only to find the experience wanting and unacceptable? Were the “marriages” part of the “cover up,” as the Bishop calls it? Regardless, the two are buried together with no sign of either husband or of either alleged married name. The two were

known in the family as being a non-related (or perhaps distant cousins) love couple, despite the surface tales. Since they left no journals and the family stories and gossip are somewhat limited by now, we can only speculate about how they imagined their identities and how they negotiated their social spaces. To be sure, they were accepted by one and all, even to their burial plots. The same would prove true for the Bishop's Uncle George, who was simply and openly *known* to be gay, and he is buried *with his partner* in the Shiloh cemetery just north of Josie and Daisy. I asked the Bishop how he knew about Uncle George, and his answer was simply "family gossip." "But they're buried together," he continued, "small plot, two graves, and they got both names on the headstone—Hyde on one side and his family name on the other side. And [my cousin] said, 'Didn't you ever wonder about that?' I said, 'I didn't know it.'... She said, 'I'm surprised your mother never told you.' I said, 'Mama and I never talked about sexual things.' (laughter)"

Clearly there was room in Southern society not only for furtive trysts but also for long-term relationships that continued even in the grave, accommodated by family and community members who perhaps acted as accomplices, or who perhaps just chose not to prod and question but rather to remain willfully unaware, and perhaps at times some could only forbear eccentrics with some grumbling and scolding—certainly it varied case by case, person by person. What seems to have mattered was discretion and the bigger social harmony. I heard other stories from seasoned citizens of the Atlanta gay community tell similar stories when I relayed this one from the life of the Bishop. Pastor Charlene McLemore described her grandfather's sister, whom she also remembered visiting as a small child in the 1940s. This very "masculine" woman had never married

or had children, did all her own farm work, including plowing, and the family described her as “an old maid.” The label is familiar and does not mean “lesbian,” to be sure, and so it is easy to understand and deploy, vague and non-threatening; but, it was employed in the case of this great-aunt despite the fact that she lived and shared her life with another woman, a situation for which the rural native Tennessee McLemore/Dingus families possibly did not have a word at all.

A same-sex couple, regardless of the nature of their feelings and relationship, could find ways to live endorsed lives either by sincerely or superficially taking up socially understood and sanctioned roles (perhaps as live-in cousins or “confirmed bachelors” or old maids) or perhaps they could find acceptance as the family/village eccentric, as it were. Love feelings could be expressed in contemporarily acceptable terms, for example religious terms popular during the Victorian era. In “‘Only a Woman Like Yourself’ — Rebecca Alice Baldy: Dutiful Daughter, Stalwart Sister, and Lesbian Lover of Nineteenth-Century Georgia,” author and archivist Elizabeth W. Knowlton describes the life of Alice Baldy (b. 1835) and her love life as expressed in love letters that Knowlton stumbled upon in the Georgia Department of Archives and History.<sup>21</sup> Like many women who desired a primary same-sex relationship, Alice did not have access to financial independence to set up household with her lover. In more urban areas, women could work and establish modest homes for themselves, a phenomenon called “Boston marriages” in queer historiography, so named for the sheer frequency of such occurrences in the Massachusetts city. Still, the Victorian era could be wildly romantic even as it was moralistic and demanding of much gender segregation. Same-sex expressions of love

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<sup>21</sup> John Howard, ed., *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York and London, New York University Press, 1997), 36.

would often have been viewed as wholesome, literary, religious, even outright romantic, and some institutions, such as same-sex boarding schools, actually warned of the, at times, problematic nature of these common occurrences, warning youth and parents alike not to allow such relationships to gain primacy over normal marriages.

Knowlton points out that same-sex relationships need not have proven genital contact to be considered what we call “gay,” though contemporaries would likely have balked from such labels even as some same-sex-loving individuals do today. She asserts that it is fair to label such women as lesbian or something similar, nonetheless, and she bases her assertion on Blanche Wiesen Cook’s definition of lesbian—a woman who wishes “to nurture and support” her female beloved “and create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently.” For those who found same-sex love relationships for themselves or were otherwise simply “eccentric,” communities and families in the South could offer social leeway, a fact often overlooked. It is tempting to suppose that the Hyde family accommodations might be the rare exception to the rule, but stories I have gleaned from many individuals from all parts of the South begin to tell a common tale of an on-the-ground local history and culture. For example, the Very Reverend Elizabeth Claiborne Jones of Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in Atlanta discussed a similar case:

One of our parishioners grew up in a very small town in South Carolina, and he’s always been very tolerant of gays and lesbians, and I asked him about it one time, because he grew up in a tiny, tiny town in South Carolina. And he said to me, he talked about the florist that was in his small town, and how he used to dress in drag and do the best entertainment in the community variety show every year, and how he walked his poodles around town. And he said, “We all knew he was queer, but he was *our* queer.” So, it’s kind of like what we say about southerners and crazy family members--we just put them on the front porch and let them rock. We don’t try to hide them. (laughter)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Very Reverend Elizabeth Claiborne Jones, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, 27 September 2005.



Other narrators shared similar stories. Bob Beard added to his comment about Southerners' hating groups but loving individuals:

Oh, yes! (laughs heartily) A friend of mine tells me, she says the difference in the North and South—if I can repeat this—is that in the North it is OK to dislike individuals, in the South it's OK to dislike *groups* of people. You can dislike all those queers, but if it's a member of *my* family or somebody *I* grew up with, we'll overlook that, you know, because he or she is our friend or our family member...And I have a friend of my mom's who made it very clear in very subtle ways, and this lady has just turned 90, and...she was visiting here with my mom and she made it very clear that it wasn't a problem, you know, being gay. Her nephew was, too. And she didn't come out and *say* he was, but she insinuated about his friend who lived with him and things like that. And I told Mom later, I said that she made it very clear to me, without saying it, of course, but that I don't really care *what* you are as long as, you know, we are friends, (laughs) it's OK. So. And that seems to be the way, you know, in most cases.<sup>23</sup>

This encounter is quintessentially Southern. A person can say things “without saying it,” can accept the differences or eccentricities of others “as long as we are friends.” The key again is a kind of Southern social harmony, respect for others and for propriety. And communication can be round-about, masked, or kept privately between individuals as gossip, but such social imperatives do not change the fact that there existed in the South possibilities and even particular strategies for accommodation and acceptance of gay individuals. Because the strategies involved discretion in one form or another, it is not surprising that this socio-cultural history has remained largely off the record, kept alive only in the personal, private memories and discussions of families and local communities. No wonder, too, that the South would have seemed a “dark” “desert” to non-Southerners who could not have been privy to these on-the-ground goings on. Rev. Elder Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Churches, concurs:

In small towns sometimes—and this is true in Georgia too—you may be a fag, but you're *their* fag. And sometimes that makes all the difference in the world. And it's really true. And that's what *I've* seen in the South....That's what the members of my church told me there, who were Georgians. They said, “Well, you know, neighbors may think you're a fag, but they're *their* fag. And they wouldn't want someone coming in from *another* community and trying to do something to the gay people who live in their towns.” And so it's very interesting, it's a mixed bag.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Robert Beard, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 1 November 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Rev. Elder Troy D. Perry, interview with author, West Hollywood, California, 19 May 2005.

Mixed bag is an apt description, since the above examples should be qualified. Surely some gays in the South might never have found a life companion, might have suffered from persecutions by homophobic individuals (for whatever reason), or otherwise might have made public and hence confrontational some degree of difference or eccentricity that would have been viewed as threatening (as the women of First Church pointed out—“be gay, but don’t *look* gay,” essentially) at least in certain places or situations.

Importantly, and to the point, Rev. Perry’s story also reflects the inherent, deeply entrenched Southern sense of insider status. Insiders are granted more personal leeway than “outsiders” in the South, who historically were Yankees bringing major social change or otherwise upsetting Southern social standards. Rev. Kathy Morris of Trinity UMC, a six-generation Atlanta native, noted this phenomenon as being both bad and good, like the idea of tradition in general—good for preserving certain cherished social norms, values, and culture but also “bad” for preserving those that are unjust and require change.<sup>25</sup> Such is the “mixed bag” of the South. Bishop Hyde noted:

There’s a cultural thing [in the South] that impacts on everyone, the gays and non-gays. They are less likely to exhibit themselves than are the people up in New Jersey, New York, Boston area—the Yankees. (smiles)...Take Atlanta, take Macon, Georgia—being gay in Macon is an entirely different life from being gay in Atlanta. And we had an early, early church in Macon, incidentally. And Griffin, Georgia, which is down below Atlanta. Griffin wasn’t more than 20,000 people then...But it had its own personality separate, apart from what we had in Atlanta. [For example] in Griffin a gay person could walk down the street in rather outlandish attire, a scarf slung over here (imitates draping scarf), bracelets, and they would not pay any attention. But in Atlanta, if you see a man wearing bracelets up to here (indicates several inches on his arm), (then imitating in a deep, gruff, muffled southern voice) “Oh, he’s one of *them*.” I think it’s a small town thing—you’re closer to your fellow citizen in a small town. You’re less likely to criticize....He’s accepted up to a point, you know. So I think it was the small town fraternity. Like I said, “our queer, but he’s my neighbor.” And (in joking manner) “and nobody has prettier flower arrangements than *he* does,” (spoken with joking flip of the wrist). He’s a waiter at the local restaurant—(also with a joking flip of the wrist) “gives the *best* service, he’s better than *all* those other waiters.” You know. So he’s found acceptance. “Don’t want him to come home for Sunday dinner, but (nods) still.” (waves arm) “Let him live his life, while I lead mine.”

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<sup>25</sup> Rev. Kathy Morris, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 20 September 2004.

What mattered was social harmony and respect. Even a flamboyant effeminate queer could be accepted and even admired in the non-metro South, whether for his acting talent, flower arrangements, or charming service. He was an insider (or could be one as long as he chose to be, as long as he was willing, able, and satisfied to perform according to Southern custom)<sup>26</sup>, a part of the community who knew local social etiquette and cared for local people as “one of their own.” Vague groups of outsiders could be hated, but not local individuals who constitute a part of the local harmony and flavor, as long as they do not cause upset and trouble, which would be true for anyone gay or straight.

Mab Segrest addresses the matter in *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture*, and her passage about the “eccentric being in one's family, the *freak* in someone else's” also demonstrates the phenomenon of insider status.<sup>27</sup> Naturally some families could choose to oust eccentrics, so I do not want to give the impression that every gay person was accepted; for, like anywhere, the South could become hostile territory to troublemakers or those who disturb the status quo. Still, there emerges from narrators' recollections and stories—often told very matter-of-factly, as though the matter was not the least bit surprising or unfamiliar, though perhaps amusing—evidence that Southern societies offered individual gays some social space and conscious if circumscribed acceptance, which belies Kameny's and others' assertion of a social “desert.” Narrators (largely seasoned clergy and long time congregation faithful of nearly every denomination) also mentioned that “there had always been gay people in church,” but they just could not “come out” in the way gays can today. Anecdotally, I

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<sup>26</sup> Some native Southerners, gay or straight, might choose to reject their Southern roots and leave the South for alternative lives elsewhere, especially if an individual's ambitions or eccentricities simply could not be contained or realized in a local Southern area; though, again, this would be true for any region.

<sup>27</sup> Segrest, 25.

heard narrators either seriously or humorously make note that gays had a reputation for adding greatly to church choirs and worship teams. Regardless of the degree to which that particular observation is true or just a popular stereotype, gay Southerners could make lives for themselves that respected local values and culture and could even add charm and flavor to make the culture even better, so long as they did not disrupt others' lives.

In the 1940s, however, upsetting people and the status quo is *just* what Bishop Hyde did, and he would suffer recriminations for it, though he would also find support.

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“And it did not go over well when people found out what was going on,” the Bishop said of the founding of the Bible study group that would launch a new church in 1946. About twenty-eight individuals would attend on average, some gay, a few non-gay couples, parents too. The group congealed around a gay rights issue of sorts vis-à-vis religion—the right to be recognized in and served by a church body and institution, the right to receive communion, the right to be recognized as “children of God,” nurtured spiritually by a religious faith. But the gay members did not establish the Bible study and later church group as gay-only, in other words they did not “other” themselves. Non-gay members felt an affinity with the group since they, too, experienced, or might experience, similar rejection and condemnation. Parents and friends of gays at the time, too, appreciated the spiritual nourishment Hyde and the group offered to those who could not receive it at Sacred Heart or elsewhere, exercising their religious/spiritual agency in a less confrontational way (but not much less, considering the times and context).

I asked the Bishop what drew heterosexual individuals and couples to this outcast, gay-based group. “The injustice of the church,” he replied. This is still true today, I found, as I questioned gay clergy about straight attendance at worship services and congregational activities. Rabbi Josh Lesser of Congregation Bet Haverim explained it this way: “So many of our members had been looking for a Jewish home, and they did not feel welcomed elsewhere, and so what better place than a group of Jews who felt *they* were not welcomed to create a place that then is committed to being a welcoming place.”<sup>28</sup>

With the help and guidance of Greek Orthodox bishop John Kazantkis, who had been deposed in Greece for being homosexual, Hyde and his group founded an all-inclusive congregation that met officially for the first time on July 1, 1946 in a meeting room in the famous Winecoff Hotel, which sadly burned down that December. The funding for the meeting space was provided by the owners of a gay bar, also located in the Winecoff, called the Cotton Blossom Room, though the church had no affiliation with the establishment. By 1947 the original group of eighty-five grew to about 200 and had moved just prior to the hotel fire to a rented house located downtown on Baker Street off Peachtree Street. Mothers and fathers of gay children started to attend in numbers, grateful that there existed a religious/spiritual home for their kids. The group welcomed known prostitutes and other outcasts, and always black and white sat together in equality. Bishop Kazantkis, who had been teaching Greek in the local school system, took a branch of the flock and set up ministry in Savannah, and the over time the missionary work

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<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Joshua Lesser, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 21 July 2004.

would plant congregations all over the South, up to New York and surrounding states, and finally even Canada and Puerto Rico.

Soon after the original congregation was founded, Bishop Hyde would face personal trials that would culminate in open political activity. The congregation was discrete but not closeted. It was no secret that the congregation ministered to gays, though the word “gay” was hardly used, to the Bishop’s memory.

The kindest terminology I ever heard used around Atlanta was “festive.” “Gay” wasn’t used. When other people spoke it was “queers” and “faggots.” Which is horrible.... And we had our experience with the KKK, because of our black membership. Had windows broken, tires slashed. Which is mild compared to things that happened even later. But, you know, dumb me, I didn’t (hesitates), I didn’t fight *back*, because, eh, that’s the way people *are*. I knew what *we* were trying to do. I was really not concerned with the sexuality of these people, I was concerned with the spirituality. You get *that* settled, the other will take care of itself.... In the 40s and 50s, being gay in Atlanta was a real touchy, delicate thing. Very seldom would you hear of someone openly saying, “I’m gay.”...And we did not *want* to be identified as a gay church, because (rapping table for emphasis) a gay church is just as wrong as an exclusively heterosexual church.... You *cannot* discriminate anyway whatsoever. So we made a big effort to be free of that sort of thing. And it worked. We always had a mixed congregation of races and everything else. And as I told you, we got punished for it. We got visited by the KKK upon occasion, and some strange rednecks, because “them queers (pronounced like kwahrs) and them niggers,” as they say, and, uh, (pause) (rubs face with both index fingers) Where’s my scar?... I got hit by a rock when we came out of church on Christmas eve....So that’s my medal. [JT: Wow, that’s a substantial scar.] Yeah. Oh, it festered up, and finally had to have surgery on it. But I’ve got the rock, incidentally... ‘Cause it hit me, and Jack, one of the boys at the church, bent down to pick it up, was going to throw it back. And I said, “No, you know. Don’t.” And I took it from him. So we still have it. It’s an artifact. But that’s the sort of thing in Atlanta in the 40s. We had this bunch of rednecks who stood outside the church and jeered at us as we left church, and called us certain names. And they did not know this from any publicity in the paper, but just word of mouth. “Them queers, they started their own church!” That’s what they’d say.

When most people hear about this early gay-affirming congregation, their reaction is surprise at the very least and occasionally even disbelief. From the queer American history literature it is commonly known that during this time in American history—post-WWII—gays and lesbians in urban settings were building subcultural communities in the form of clubs and bars, house parties, and eventually Homophile organizations by the 1950s. Considering the number of drinking establishments alone formed around the nation to cater to gay clientele, it would actually seem as though *more* Bible study and

church groups by and for metropolitan gays would have formed at the time, upon reflection. In “the big city” of Atlanta, where small town familiarity/tolerance evaporated somewhat and where most people were strangers to one another (if friendly strangers), it was common in those days for gay bars or gatherings to be raided by police, attendees arrested, and their names and addresses published in local newspapers. Such exposure often caused them subsequently to lose their jobs, their homes (if renters), and even friends and family. Obviously, this was an urban issue, as smaller towns outside of Atlanta would not likely have the population to sustain gay bars. Further, police crackdowns coincided with other morality campaigns, often having to do with the problems of modernity (e.g. cars in which teenagers could escape parental surveillance to indulge their sexual appetites), rather than any kind of specific persecution of homosexuals. For example, in the early 1950s Atlanta police deployed extra beat cops to monitor Piedmont Park and other partly public, partly private areas where gay men could find one another or escape for trysts.<sup>29</sup> However, the bigger picture social concern was about sexuality in general, healthful morality and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>30</sup> Gay male interactions constituted a small minority of the monitored goings on, while the most rampant “problem” was essentially semi-public sexual behavior. Gay men caught in the illicit acts would be viewed as an outsider group of strangers or “others,” not as individuals belonging to particular communities and hence warranting protection. Also, the kind of activities gay men sought in semi-public spaces (such as public toilets, libraries, and parks) were fleeting physical indulgences, usually with strangers, which

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<sup>29</sup> John Howard, “The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post-WWII Atlanta” in *Carryin’ On in the Gay and Lesbian South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997)

<sup>30</sup> Venereal disease broke out in Atlanta when soldiers returned from WWII duty, and this very practical problem drove much of the morality campaigning.

contemporary society could not openly brook. Further, these strangers, sneaking around committing “social sins,” seemed part of the greater threat of “the big bad city,” which non-metro people in Georgia and the South still feel very strongly and widely.

Hyde’s group, too, was touched by the policing. Soon after the congregation formed a group of gay men, including church members, were arrested at a private party for alleged “disorderly conduct,” and the ordeal left many homeless and jobless. Hyde and the church were there to help. Some men lived in the church-house until they could get back on their feet again, and straight allies in the community came also to their aid. “Lucy Wood owned a cafeteria in Atlanta,” the Bishop said. “She called, says, ‘If you need any help, send ‘em to me. Need jobs? There’s a job waiting for them here.’” Another man who owned a funeral home and movie theater made the same offer. He was grateful to Hyde and the church, which helped get his gay son out of a life of “cruising” on the streets and into a full spiritual life in a church. No doubt it was heartbreaking for a former professional to accept a lower-paying, unskilled or semi-skilled job, but it is revealing that there were locals who came forward specifically to support the gay men whatever the threat to their own businesses or reputations.

At this time one other non-gay clergyman came forward with a similar offer for support—Father Roy Pettway from the Episcopal Church of Our Savior in Atlanta’s Virginia-Highland neighborhood. Father Pettway lined up extra jobs through a friend who managed the Briarcliff Hotel. In addition he offered Hyde and the group the church’s smaller chapel space for special occasions, like Christmas and Easter, in order to accommodate the larger crowds that would attend Hyde’s services. (Later, in the 1970s when the Bishop was hospitalized with cancer, Father Pettway was the only clergyperson



in Atlanta who would visit Hyde in public, and Pettway would also be the first of his denomination to open services to persons of color in the 1950s. He is generally remembered as being very open and progressive on such issues.)

As Hyde and helpers worked to restore the lives of the men who had been arrested, the group decided more direct action needed to be taken. Before the civil rights movement really got underway, Hyde and the group decided to stage a picket of no less than Mayor William Hartsfield's home in Grant Park around 1947, as the Bishop remembers. About twelve men ventured to Hartsfield's neighborhood with a single picket sign on which was posted the offending newspaper "outing" and the words "Why, Mayor, why?"

Not everyone agreed that we should do it. [JT: I bet.] Because, "Well, you know, you're inviting problems; we're drawing attention to ourselves. We don't want to do *that*...." And we just- (imitates holding sign with both hands and shaking it). And we didn't cause any disturbance. It just wasn't our thing to do that. We just wanted to get a message across.

The men walked their picket for only about ten minutes, as the Bishop recalls, before the mayor made his appearance. He stood on his front steps and talked with the men for about half an hour, and was "very nice," "cordial," "very cooperative," said Hyde. The Bishop and the group made their argument that the gay men who were arrested were unfairly persecuted when their names and private information were published in the newspaper, especially since their crime had merely been alleged "disorderly conduct." Heterosexuals were arrested all the time for the same cause, they argued, without having *their* names published for public scrutiny.

We didn't argue, we did not-, (shrugs) threaten anything. We just said we don't understand why. "When other people have been arrested for disorderly conduct, have they released this information to the newspaper?" He said, "Not that I know of." "Then you admit, then, this is special circumstances, and there's a reason why they're doing it. Because of-." He said, "It would seem so. It won't happen again." So, that was a victory.

This political interaction was thoroughly Southern. Without creating a tremendous disruption to harmony, without yelling or arguing, by showing restraint and respect the

men were met with reciprocal respect and civility and, ultimately, made their point and achieved their aims. Incidentally, Mayor Hartsfield would usher in the Atlanta-boosting program of the 50s and 60s that publicized the Atlanta motto “the city too busy to hate.” Indeed Atlanta would have a much easier time with the process of desegregation than many areas of the South.

While discussing gay culture and the South, the Bishop described public reactions he witnessed to two different Gay Pride events in Florida, where he now resides, which further exemplifies the intersection of Southern culture and gay community:

You know, when did dignity become wrong? (shrugs) You know. I think you conduct yourself with some dignity, and you can get what you want. *We* did. We never made fools out of ourselves. We never (thinks)—well, these Pride Day parades...like over in Tampa. City council and county council all up against the gays, because [people paraded all but naked and in outlandish attire] (shakes head) They have no respect for the-, they cannot respect gays who do that. It's so foreign to what they understand, so let's don't alienate people deliberately...In St. Petersburg it was just different. They kept their mouths shut. They said, “No nudity in gay pride”....The community at large is *touchy* about these things. Let's not rub their noses in the thing. So, St. Petersburg's gay community gets *much* support. 'Cause they acted-, (thinks) what the non-gay community considered to be-, they acted in a decent way.... [B]y behaving you are not being an enemy to yourself.... I don't like for some of these Gay Pride day episodes to be linked to the so-called gay community. It's not a community, because we're not unified.

Again, this commentary reflects Southern values and ways of doing things. He emphasizes community. Anticipated and rewarded public behavior in the South reflects some degree of insider status as demonstrated by an individual's sensitivity to local culture. This aspect of Southern society (and of other societies that have similar sentiments outside of the South) can be very frustrating to those who either do not agree with this kind of social reality or who are actual outsiders who happen not to have much appreciation for Southern ways and culture. When openly gay groups respected common community values (norms that had nothing to do with sexual orientation per se, such as public nudity) and considered the feelings and sensibilities of the greater community, then the greater community in turn respected and accepted “their queers.” When gay

groups flouted established expectations of public decency, the larger community reacted negatively. The Bishop's emphasis, like most Southerners, is on the importance of this broader social harmony. He also echoes the regret felt by many gays I interviewed at the fact that various non-conformist and sexually promiscuous displays and lifestyles get projected publicly as representative of homosexuality in general, as though gay rights activism or Gay Pride *must* be conflated with anything from sadomasochism to particular political stances to public drag performances, and this last irked the Bishop the most, interestingly. Most gay Southerners live *as* Southerners first and foremost, neither choosing nor desiring to choose an "alternative lifestyle." Many gay Southerners thus never stop embracing their religious traditions and beliefs despite religious persecution that would come to befall so many as the decades passed and fundamentalism arrived on the cultural scene.

## Conclusion

Mab Segrest describes the well-known book *Rubyfruit Jungle*, "a much-loved lesbian novel of the early 1970s" as "the *archetypal* journey from the deep South to New York" (my emphasis).<sup>31</sup> Popular gay literature does make this journey archetypal, but in truth Southern gay experiences involved much more. After all, individuals of all sorts, gay and straight alike, might find reasons to leave the rural South for a big city like Atlanta or leave the South altogether for a major metropolis in another region of the nation for any number of reasons. John Howard first proved that gay Southerners could enjoy queer lives at home in the South, though he focuses upon rural sexual liaisons specifically.

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<sup>31</sup> Segrest, 121.

Further, many Southern gays would find that their identities as members of particular faiths, churches, or denominations as well as their general Southern identity trumped any particular need to be part of an “othered” “gay” “community,” which Hyde correctly points out is not and, in fact, never has been, unified.

From impressions offered by the project narrators, Southerners seem to value unified communities that respect collective friendliness, privacy, and insider status (among other qualities), and it is not surprising therefore that queer scholars unfamiliar with the South or otherwise hostile to or disinterested in the region would not know about or appreciate unique Southern culture and the way local gays have negotiated social niches for themselves. Historically, Southern society has made space not only for surreptitious same-sex sexual trysts but also for full-fledged gay relationships and “festive” “eccentric” gay individuals. Far from being a gay “desert” prior to the 1970s, gay Southerners even rose up and made demands for themselves earlier in the twentieth century than is generally recognized in the current literature. Most fascinating, though not surprising, the culturally fertile grounds of the South (specifically Atlanta and Georgia) would prove ideal to become the cradle of gay and gay-affirming religion for the nation and world, as we will see in greater detail in the next chapter.

## **The Watershed Decade: Civil Rights, Stonewall, and a New Denomination**

*"...Some of us, queer ones often enough, moved to the city to escape the trees and the shadows of trees, to escape our families, but we come here to this city only to learn that the country, the Southern landscape, our own past, has etched its imprint on us in ways that will never change...Even when we are happy living here in Atlanta, there sometimes comes on us the feeling that there was a better place for us once, outside the city."*

*--Jim Grimsley ("Myth and Reality: The Story of Gay People in the South")<sup>1</sup>*

*"Our cultural geography includes...Jesus Saves signs; and Southern Baptist fortresses guarding against the isms: multiculturalism, ecumenicalism, communism, secular humanism..."*

*--James T. Sears (Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968)<sup>2</sup>*

Father David Edwards converted to Orthodox-Catholic Christianity in 1961 some twenty years into Hyde's own journey in the faith. After completing clerical training at the House of Studies of the OCCA Society of Domestic Missionaries in Washington DC, he became an ordained priest of the Orthodox Catholic Church of America in 1966 under Bishop Hyde's tutelage. The Bishop remembers David with some reluctance, since the story is ultimately a tragedy:

David was a good man. I remember the day he was baptized...he said, "I feel like I just crossed over the Jordan." (smiles) Which I thought was a nice comment. And he was just a good evangelist, a good preacher, a good man.... He was a member of the Two Seed in the Spirit Fire-Baptized Church of Jesus Christ on the Solid Rock of Faith—my favorite church (he says with humor). They were snake-handlers. And [David] said, "Something's wrong at my church,"...He came and talked to me. So finally, we sent him to Washington for some training, and he was ordained, and he came back to Hartwell [Georgia], and worked out of Hartwell...He was a circuit rider....David would leave Clayton about 7 o'clock at night driving down toward Gainesville, and then from Gainesville up to Hartwell. And he'd pull into a rest area, going down that mountain, eat a sandwich, drink a cup of coffee. And one night he had (pauses to imitate scowling man holding a gun) had a gun put to his head. Couple of locals from Clayton knew who he was, they had followed him. "He's that queer preacher." And, "Boy! You get outta here and don't come back!" That sort of thing.

...Another time it happened. He was held by gun, they took all of his church materials out of the car and urinated on everything, threw it on the ground. And he described the people and described the car, and the sheriff's department finally got them. They were KKK. Then the last time...I begged him, "Please don't go up there in those mountains during the winter," because they get ice on the roads. "You'll kill yourself." "Nope. Gotta go, gotta go."

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Lest Law, eds., *Out in the South* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001), 230.

<sup>2</sup> James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Westview Press, 1997), 5.

So, he was stopped, from drinking his coffee and having his sandwich before he was going on down to Gainesville. These three men came. One of them had a gun, a rifle. (imitates holding up rifle and in a harsh voice quotes) “Get outta that car, boy!” And they did things that they shouldn’t do...it was sleeting...they tied him to a fence post. There’s a barbed wire fence, a limb off a tree was the post. They tied him to that, hands behind him, and beat the bloody daylights out of him. And, don’t know how long he was there, but subsequently someone was on the road. And they came down, and as they came around the curb the headlights hit him. They stopped, took him to the hospital in Gainesville. And he was in and out of consciousness, but enough to tell them a few things, and got in touch with me. So I went down to Gainesville....

But they, uh, they, um—I don’t like to tell it, but (stammer) it’s a thing that happened. You know, it’s 9 o’clock at night, you’re having a sandwich and a cup of coffee, then this double-barrel shotgun is put here (points to his temple). “Get outta that car, boy!” And called him derogatory names. And slap him back and forth. And then they undressed him, and raped him, all three of them, and he was-, except for having a shirt on he was naked when he was tied to the fence. And he was picked up about midnight...the time the man came along and picked him up, took him to the hospital.... He got to the hospital about 1 o’clock in the morning, still able to talk a little bit, gave them some information. And I got there about 4 o’clock, I guess.

And I guess he lost consciousness finally about 6 o’clock in the morning, and we were chatting just a little bit. And I knew, uh, a little verse that he was fond of-, he said that he had learned from his mother when he was little kid. And it was “if any-,” let me see if I got it. (closes eyes and thinks) “If any little word of mine can make one heart the lighter, if any little song of mine can make one life the brighter, God help me speak that little word and take my bit of singing, and drop it in some lonely vale to set the echoes ringing.” So, I was sitting in the hospital and talking to him, and he reached over and said, “Thank you for the echoes,” and then he died. Which put me in a state of depression for six months! That he would say that. That I might have done something-, that he thought I had done something good for him. For my echoes, you know.... And, nothing ever happened [to the men who killed him]. Except David brought a lot of people to God. That happened.

Father David Edwards died in 1972, and he was declared a saint of his church thirty years later, with a feast day on May 19th.

During the 1960s, well before gay liberation politics and activism, during a time when African-Americans in the South still struggled to gain and own the personal and political rights they had been fighting so strenuously to attain, Atlanta’s gay scene looked like that in any other major city at the time. Locals could find numerous gay and gay-welcoming bars offering space for gay social life, buy books and periodicals of gay interest in various locations, the Homophile movement had been well underway, and, of course, Hyde’s churches offered spiritual succor to many, and this in addition to accommodation that might be found in small town and rural areas. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported the following in 1966:

Atlanta's homosexuals are content to remain quiet [and] not militant about change...They want society's acceptance, they want change. They want to hold jobs without fear, but they usually don't carry signs or wave banners about it.<sup>3</sup>

Just because Southerners wanted acceptance did not make them somehow less than gays who wanted something different from simple acceptance. And, after all, they only did not *usually* carry signs! Even before Stonewall, Southern gays did carry signs. Again, this is not exactly a “dark” “desert.” Further, Saint David took a post that served the rural South, and he succeeded in his missionary work for years. Not until 1972 (*after* the so-called Stonewall riots and well *after* the civil rights movement got underway) was David martyred, and by men of the KKK specifically. Why? This was not simple homophobia, and the matter was certainly not about religion. The answer to this query might help answer another important and more sweeping question as well: why had the South, like much of the country—but the South in particular—become so bitterly divided over the issue of homosexuality and religion/values? While it is tempting to assume that “this is how it has *always* been,” as does Kameny, in truth the development is remarkably recent and decidedly unSouthern.

### **A Lost Prophet and Forgotten Dreams**

More evidence of the South's early capacity to accommodate gays comes from the very heart of civil rights movement history in Atlanta, Georgia, from the work of the Rev. Dr. King, himself. And from this history, too, we learn how segregationists would use homosexuality as political propaganda to achieve their aims prior to the 1970s, in the

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Fleischman and Jason Hardman, “Hitting Below the Bible Belt: The Development of the Gay Rights Movement in Atlanta,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2004): 413.

process completely changing the course of gay and Southern religious history as it had been charted.

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Bayard Rustin was born in 1912, not in the South, but in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where he seemed to excel at everything. His early influences prepared him for his life's work in political activism, from the family faiths (Quakerism and the AME Church), family affiliation with the NAACP, influential visitors to the family home, including W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. Rustin attended college during the height of the Great Depression, but after four years of education he sidestepped his final exams in 1936 to immediately answer his personal and professional calling. By the time Bishop Hyde had established his first church in Atlanta, Rustin had filled his radical resume with an impressive list of accomplishments and experiences, including Quaker peace activism and work with A. Philip Randolph, leadership positions with FOR and CORE, organizer of the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation (the first Freedom Ride), and much more. He met with leaders of Ghana and Nigeria, protested British colonial rule abroad, studied Gandhi's nonviolent resistance tactics in India, and worked to end apartheid and racial inequity in South Africa.

Though he did not exactly hide his homosexual orientation (interesting that he did not feel compelled to do so), he lost any hope of keeping his identity private and away from public scrutiny in 1953 when he was arrested and jailed in Pasadena, California for the crime of "sex perversion," as his consensual tryst was labeled by state law. Consequently he lost his job with FOR, but took up a new position with the War Resisters League, and in 1956 became advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and primary organizer of the



Montgomery Bus Boycotts. His resume of activist achievements continued on impressively until his death in 1987, but perhaps his most famous and crowning achievement involved his work during the 1950s and 60s for the civil rights movement. After directing the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom and other marches and protests, Rustin acted as director and organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, DC, where Dr. King delivered the great “I Have A Dream” speech.

The King family knew about Rustin’s sexual orientation, but, true to Southern style, the matter was handled discreetly and the man was never rejected or condemned. Even though Dr. King was also *Reverend* King, he did not use religion against Rustin, as many Americans might assume the pastor would. But those were different days. Rustin was the man behind the king, as it were, remaining a behind-the-scenes figure, as his California arrest, open homosexuality, and even prior communist affiliation might have compromised the overall image of the movement. John D’Emilio calls him the “lost prophet,” since Rustin is often overlooked in history as the one who brought the philosophy and tactics of nonviolent resistance from India to Dr. King and the civil rights movement.<sup>4</sup> Dr. King was not a pacifist before meeting Rustin, and, in fact, the Reverend kept firearms in his home and hired armed guards before he changed his mind and tactics. Rustin and King together formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and they worked tirelessly to bring justice to the South and to the world. Over time Rustin became a trusted friend and confidante to the King family, who loved and appreciated him—he was queer, but he was *their* queer. One of Mrs. Coretta Scott King’s most oft-cited quotes demonstrates the family’s commitment:

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<sup>4</sup> John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

I still hear people say that I should not be talking about the rights of lesbian and gay people and I should stick to the issue of racial justice. But I hasten to remind them that Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream to make room at the table of brother- and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people.

Congressman John Lewis (D-Atlanta), an early civil rights activist who worked with Dr. King, carries on the King legacy in Atlanta and makes clear his support for gay civil rights. In 2005 he spoke to the Atlanta Executive Network, a gay Atlanta business association, and had this to say to encourage the men and women in attendance:

If Dr. King could speak to us tonight, he would say that discrimination is wrong—dead wrong--based on race, color, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. He fought to take discrimination out of the Constitution, and he would be standing up today fighting to keep discrimination out of the Constitution, state or federal. (pause) Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in the goodness of human kind. He wanted to redeem the very soul of America. So when you heard him speak at a mass meeting, at a rally, whether in Atlanta, in Georgia, or in Mississippi, in Alabama, you were inspired to act. To move. To do something. And tonight if he could speak to each one of us, he would say we must never, ever give up. Or give in. That we must keep the faith, and keep our eyes on the prize....Some of you have heard me say over and over again, and I truly believe this, that we’re going to create an American community where discrimination based on race and color, based on sexual orientation, will be in the dark past. A few short years ago, in this part of our country, in some other state constitution, blacks and whites couldn’t marry. For the most part, in most of the states, it’s out of the constitution, and we look back on it, and we sorta laugh about it; say, that was so silly. The day will come in America--and I think it will come in our lifetime--when we will look back on this whole discussion about same-sex marriage, and laugh. And say, “Wasn’t that a silly argument?” (thunderous applause)

During the civil rights fight of the 50s and 60s civil rights opponents attacked King, Rustin, Lewis, and other activists in any way they could in order to forestall racial justice, and Rustin became an easy target. Southern politicians like Senator Strom Thurmond railed against Rustin for all the reasons the movement feared, and the Senator even brandished pictures of King and Rustin to suggest that perhaps King, too, was queer—a troubling, perverted, outsider type of queer, of course, who threatened “good” Southern society. Of course, Dr. King was certainly not alone in receiving such character assaults. Those, like Thurmond, who tried to preserve segregation and Jim Crow laws, would come to deploy anti-gay and anti-communist discourse during the years of the civil rights struggle in order to achieve their desired political aims, and while they ultimately

lost that culture war, this particular battle tactic would greatly influence the region, and also the nation.

In *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* John Howard notes that “in a hysteria fueled by a crumbling archaic racial order...queer no longer denoted a nebulous eccentricity but was used as an epithet of sexual, gender, and racial nonnormativity... [which] foreclosed the quiet accommodation of difference” that characterized earlier times.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, outright queer baiting became a favorite tactic of Southern racist conservatives, especially when other more familiar ploys started to fail. “Following the Civil War,” Howard writes, “a panicky white rhetoric fabricated a hypersexualized black male rapist, whose retrogressive bestiality threatened a mythical southern white womanhood,” and when that aged scare tactic and all other sexual threats had been discursively exhausted, Southern segregationists tried labeling activists as “queer” or “perverts,” and thus possibly tainting the entire movement and its goals as dangerously “pink” and “perverse.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Rustin gave them the idea to use the new sexual threat and slur as propaganda, perhaps not. As it so happened, Rustin had briefly joined the Communist Party as a college youth before becoming disillusioned, so he was, thus, a doubly marked man. Regardless, activists became “queered” and “othered” in a new, alarming way. From then on the historical record indicates, with thanks to Howard’s research, that gay Southerners (and gay Americans in general) became the focus of particular loathing and fear and, of course, bashing and abuse. Overall, one could say that the civil rights movement brought about the “queering” of American activists and radicals as well as the activism and “radicalization” of American queers. The latter

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<sup>5</sup> John Howard, *Men Like That*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, 143.

development congealed nationally with the Stonewall riots. The former development spawned a new wave of religious fundamentalism in tandem with a new political Right, which marked the South as the *new* Bible Belt.

### **The Stonewall Watershed**

Gay American history is generally divided into pre- and post-Stonewall eras. The Stonewall riots did not take place in the South, but gays all over the world—the South included—would eventually respond to “the hairpin drop heard round the world.” On June 28, 1969 police raided the Stonewall Inn—a gay bar in Manhattan on Christopher Street—officially charging the establishment with serving liquor without a license, though unofficially it is claimed they were cracking down on the bar for having mafia ties and a less-than-seemly (i.e. transgendered and/or colored) clientele. Such raids were not unfamiliar, but they had become much less frequent, almost unheard of at that time. Change came about after a more militant leader of the local Mattachine Society (a homophile/gay rights group), Dick Leitsch, battled the liberal, reform-minded mayor, John Lindsay, over the practice of police entrapment of gays. As a result the city abandoned the practice, and raids on gay bars and establishments almost disappeared. When the Stonewall Inn raid happened, it took place later at night than expected, and owners were not tipped off in advance as usual, so patrons felt more shocked than they might otherwise have. Stories differ about exactly how and why the riots started. Some argue that it was instigated by a beer bottle flung by a Hispanic drag queen named Sylvia Rivera. Another account says that a lesbian resisting arrest and struggling with a police officer gets the (in)famous credit. Perhaps the melee was unleashed, as some have

argued, in part as a form of grief over the death of gay cultural icon Judy Garland, who had overdosed during the week before the weekend riot. Regardless, hundreds, and reports say even thousands, of angry queers raged against the authorities, hurling anything they could get their hands on, injuring police officers, setting fires, and nearly destroying the Stonewall Inn. Rioting continued the next night, and then tension hung in the air. Battle resumed yet again the following Wednesday, and queer<sup>7</sup> rebels shouted “gay power” while police fought to restore order, using tactics they had learned to control Vietnam anti-war protestors.

This last point is key. Queer rioters borrowed phrasing and ideology from extant rights movements, and police reacted as they did to other protest and counterculture political incidents. This Rebellion, and the Gay Liberation or Gay Rights Movement that immediately followed, conformed to the tactics and ideology already present in the culture and already incurring backlash all over the country, but most particularly in the South. The Stonewall incident was reported in the media all over the country, and the riot was commemorated in New York on the same date the next year with a sidewalk march. Soon, gay rights activists held their own commemorative marches, parades, and festivities in cities all over the nation, including Atlanta, and it became the yearly Gay Pride celebration that is today—a huge, international phenomenon. The African-American civil rights movement was disturbing enough to many in the segregated South, and this new and very public “gay power” movement must have seemed alarming indeed.

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<sup>7</sup> I use the word queer here since Stonewall is especially remembered for the transsexual/drag queen rioters, and queer works better in this case to capture the diversity of this particular bar crowd.

The Stonewall rebellion would have surely felt cathartic and empowering in the moment for those who waged the urban battle, but this was no ordinary riot. It galvanized gay Americans to stand up for themselves as they had seen other persecuted or marginalized groups do. Gays around the world would also “own” Stonewall for themselves, celebrating international Gay Pride month in June in their own ways (except places like Russia or the Middle East where homosexuality is still too controversial). As celebrated and famous as the rioters of Stonewall have become, imagine the courage it took Father David Edwards to take his stand all alone at a time prior to Stonewall *and* in the rural South. His call to action meant remaining an openly gay minister, proselytizing in Georgia and South Carolina day after day and year after year despite very personal death threats and abuse. It is important to remember that considerable gay activism and community pre-dated June 1969, and this history deserves its place in the larger narrative, lest Stonewall and the traditional queer metanarrative inadvertently obscure history and stories/people it might otherwise *connect*. As *The Advocate* writer Robert Amsel averred in a 1987 article called “A Walk on the Wild Side of Stonewall”: THE MYTH THAT THE STONEWALL RIOTS GAVE BIRTH TO THE GAY MOVEMENT IS AN INSULT AND A DISCREDIT TO ALL THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO FOUGHT FOR OUT RIGHTS AT A TIME WHEN IT WAS NOT FASHIONABLE – AND WAS EVEN DANGEROUS – TO DO SO. (The all-capitals emphasis was in original.)

What makes Hyde’s churches so fascinating is that they predated not only Stonewall but also much of the modern civil rights movement, long before Kameny’s idea of “light” came to the dark “desert” of the South. Truly, what Stonewall launched was a very specific *brand* of gay identity/culture/community, spread grassroots style, mass marketed,

and undergirded with the fervor that marked the contemporary political and culture milieu. Southern gay studies returns significant pre-Stonewall history and much religion to the broader narrative, revealing alternative routes of activism and gay/queer self-realization. By the time Father David came to Bishop Hyde's church, the gay-welcoming Orthodox congregations were far flung around the South and beyond. Father David's local "circuit" took him through the north Georgia mountains to South Carolina and back. Hyde's churches were established as far north as Canada. In 1957, for example, Hyde and other clerical leadership set up a church outpost called Saints Peter and Paul in Harlem, New York, which became the mother church for the others that were later founded in Manhattan, Brooklyn, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and "here and yonder," as the Bishop said. I asked him how he got this early pre-Stonewall Harlem church going, and I received basically the same answer as to why he became motivated to do all sorts of other work in his life: "Me stickin' my nose where it didn't belong," he said with an air of humor, humility, and also pride.

I had heard about a section of the community in Harlem, kids played on the streets,...They had playgrounds, but they were fenced in and locked up. The city said, "We don't have the money to hire supervisors." I said that's ridiculous! So we found a big ole brownstone up in West Harlem and rented it, right across the street from a playground that had an eight-foot chain-link fence around it with locks on the gates. And we said to the city, "Unlock it. *We* will supervise." And we did. And that's the way we got started. We got parents in the church to volunteer to supervise, and the kids had a place to play, and right across the street from the church. And so "before you go home, come to church and let's have afternoon prayer." (smiles) So we got 'em coming and going.

A few members of the approximately 100-member congregation were gay, Hyde recalls, and two of the pastors were gay. "That was incidental to the whole thing," the Bishop added. True to Southern style, the matter was *community*. While Hyde did not discriminate racially, unlike many Southerners, he knew that what mattered most, besides living a sincerely moral Christian life, was sensitivity to the greater good of a community.

This community in West Harlem lacked play space for children in a crowded urban environment, space that actually was readily available if someone only took an interest. The church strengthened family life and enriched social interaction in the area, and in this way introduced religion secondarily. Needless to say, interracial interaction did not matter in New York, but this is *precisely* what mattered in Atlanta. Hyde's congregation was not attacked for accepting openly gay members, but it was violently attacked by the Ku Klux Klan for mixing races on the basis of equality. The fact that many church members were queer only gave the attackers more reason to be disgruntled and served to channel their verbal taunts.

Bishop Hyde was an uncommon "rabble-rouser" in the South, to be sure, though he also deeply appreciated dignity, decency, and community, to use his own words. His spirituality has always been passionate and his values morally conservative, though his social ideals also reflected his own sense of New Testament progressivism as reflected in his equal acceptance of *all* people in church and before God. His congregations spread from the South, though in Atlanta and other places in the South his congregants were eventually able to rejoin the larger Orthodox churches that would come to accept them and that could offer them more services than could a small congregation. Perhaps this has something to do with a Southern tendency to create community, though it impossible to know definitively.

The Bishop only just retired from clerical work in 2006, and since he has spent a lifetime working in religious ministry among/for gay communities, I asked him if Stonewall made an impression on him:

(shakes head) Not for me. Not for us. No, because I think it was-, they were the bar group. The bar flies, so to speak. And we did not live in bar-, did not patronize the-, well, many of our members did go to the bars and drink beer or whatever, but it was not to sit there Saturday night



all night long, waiting to pick up somebody. Because the Bishop would give ‘em hell Columbia if they did. And they knew it. So, Stonewall didn’t make any difference to us. Had no impact. I guess I’ll say I was supportive of what they were trying to do. I think they went about it the wrong way sometimes, but we all do that. And I was never into the political thing. Or [gay] civil rights. Live decently, live correctly, you’ll get your rights sooner or later. And you don’t have to fight with the city. We never did.

“So Stonewall just-, it didn’t really matter that it happened, really,” I inquired. “No,” he said, “I heard about it, but that’s all.” Gay Southerners lived in a region steeped in religious tradition, though these traditions were often not necessarily as rigid and fundamentalist as commonly believed, and therefore they would share religious activism and breakthroughs with the nation. So important has religion been to regional gays that John Howard even rediscovered that, in Mississippi, “Christian spirituality” became “a *necessary* component of queer institution building” post-Stonewall (my emphasis).

Howard states:

Protestant Christianity became the center around which lesbian and gay life and politics turned...These queer Christians, black and white, rarely responded to a narrow gay movement driven by identity politics. Instead, they joined only when a more expansive definition of gayness was fashioned. Leadership came to recognize this phenomenon and eventually encouraged MCC’s entry into the local arena...With the successful establishment of the Metropolitan Community Church in Jackson, a new era dawned on lesbian and gay organizing and institution building in Mississippi.<sup>8</sup>

### **Origins of the Unlikely Southern Bible Belt**

Religious attacks upon homosexuality in the United States have been so pointed in the past several decades that it has been tempting to presume that not only was this always the state of things (as in the “dark” “desert” imagining), but that the South in particular had always been the primary wellspring of both homophobia and religious fundamentalism. Nothing could be further from historical reality. Religious fundamentalism has really been a product of recent history and reactions to cultural

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<sup>8</sup> Howard, 231.

developments in the United States, such as Stonewall and the resultant Pride festivities and gay civil rights activism, beginning in the 1960s and 70s.

Historically, from earliest colonial days until only the past few decades, the South has been anything but fundamentalist and certainly not a “Bible Belt,” again a fact often lost to popular historical amnesia and media stereotypes. From the earliest colonial days Mid-Atlantic and Southern colonists did not come to the New World with the same religious dream of the “city on the hill” that northern colonists did, but arrived more often with the dream of a chance to make fortunes or own a piece of land. These early Southern pioneers also did not arrive in family units with all the positive considerations and temperance the family and female influences could have. Southern colonists were by and large male, especially in the earliest days, and early southern colonies were rough, rowdy masculine places indeed. Very simply, the original Bible Belt existed along a parallel quite further north of “the South.”

For those who chose to be religious, the Anglican Southern churches offered colonists a very accommodating religion, especially for elites. Pew seating reflected social hierarchy and sermons emphasized Biblical endorsements of inequality and the importance of obedience to figures of authority. There existed no dividing line between church and state, and therefore the local elites controlled the hiring and firing of untenured clergy, who were given contracts on a year to year basis and made to abide by local social norms at peril of unemployment. Colonial clergy not only endorsed slavery in the colony but they often owned slaves themselves. Further, Anglican priests did not occupy themselves with the salvation of African-Americans, who were actually forbidden from attending church altogether, with rare exceptions. (On occasion a slave, usually a

mulatto with paternal support, might win the right to baptism and communion after a long period of study, and this *only* after obtaining the master's permission. The "privilege" might have been granted as a favor to an illegitimate child of mixed race.)<sup>9</sup>

While the Anglican church served the social and cultural needs and desires of the local elites, undergirding the status quo, poor Protestants (often Scots-Irish and Presbyterian) scratched out a living in the Appalachian Mountains and frontier areas. However, at the time *most* Southerners would have belonged to neither of these confessions, but would have been considered "worldlings," unchurched men and women who, like their Anglican co-regionalists, loved to participate in the contemporary good social times to be had, including drinking, dancing, singing, gambling, racing, and fighting.<sup>10</sup> This is hardly the Bible Belt South we think of today.

In *Southern Cross: The Beginning of the Bible Belt*, Christine Leigh Heyrman argues that the successful evangelizing of the South was nothing short of a "remarkable transformation" involving an "exotic import" from the North.<sup>11</sup> Sam Hill goes even further in an article entitled "Fundamentalism in Recent Southern Culture: Has it Done What the Civil Rights Movement Couldn't Do?" asserting that fundamentalism "brought with it significant disruptions to the traditional religious order, and has challenged the established Southern culture as no other social movement this century."<sup>12</sup> In part, fundamentalism and evangelicalism ran (and has run) counter to cherished Southern values and sense of community.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). This paragraph is entirely a credit to this work.

<sup>10</sup> Christine L. Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York, Knopf, 1997), 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Sam Hill, "Fundamentalism in Recent Southern Culture: Has It Done What the Civil Rights Movement Couldn't Do?" *The Journal of Southern Religion*, 1998.

Fundamentalist or “radical” evangelism began in the northern colonies with the Great Awakening of the 1740s, a religious reaction to the progress of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason; and slowly over the decades, ministers of the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches sought to win converts in the Anglican and unchurched South. They made very few gains until the Declaration of Independence and formation of the United States tainted the Anglican Church’s reputation as un-American. Evangelicals brought faith practices that seemed strange, bewildering, and even threatening to many Southerners at the time, who found the Baptist ritual of full-immersion, adult baptism strangest of all.<sup>13</sup> They also puzzled at religious rituals involving sharing of conversion experiences, visions and prophecies, emotional and exuberant sermons and worship services, and a peculiarly evangelical tendency to encourage non-sexual but familiar physical contact (hugs, handshakes, kisses) among the faithful, even between members of the opposite sex. These obstacles to evangelical missionary success in the South might not seem terribly difficult to overcome, but three other aspects/effects of evangelical preaching and conversions during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries pushed the envelope too far for most in the South.

First, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian ministers expected converts to live relatively ascetic lives, free from dancing, drinking, and other pleasurable pastimes—social life that not only made life fun for partakers but also drew the community closer together. Local elites, especially, derided the withdrawal from such community activities, because these pastimes created spaces where they displayed their high position in society and helped maintain the status quo. Not surprisingly, evangelicals won few

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<sup>13</sup> Heyrman, 20.

converts among the wealthy. Second, evangelicals condemned the festive activities as being egregiously sinful, so ministers and new converts would frequently upbraid friends and family members with sanctimonious personal judgment. Further, these earlier forms of evangelical tradition could be described as dark, self-abasing, and fear-inducing, for believers entertained feelings of self-loathing and guilt for their sins and a strong fear of a literal, even visible, “devil” that plagued human souls and communities. Demons and hell were very real and very close in converts’ lives, but so too were ecstatic experiences of the divine and supernatural “gifts” of the spirit. Third, the religions taught proselytes to value God and faith over and above all else, including family and community. This kind of religious practice could thus render asunder marriages, families, and entire communities. Finally, the early evangelicals preached vehemently against the peculiar sin of slavery, while treating both black and white, male and female parishioners with the kind of equality not theretofore seen in the region since the very early seventeenth century.

Altogether, evangelical religions completely upset Southern life in nearly every way possible wherever they managed to take root, and most Southerners rejected evangelicals, sometimes violently. Especially aggrieved were white Southern men, who resented the religious attacks on the institution of slavery and their traditional authority.<sup>14</sup> Even poor whites, who could never hope to own slaves themselves, believed in a certain deference to local authority/elites, who in turn were sometimes business associates, employers, or simply admired community leaders. The evangelicals, even family members, would attack men for participating in favored social activities of old. Converts’ withdrawal

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<sup>14</sup> (Heyrman and also) Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

from and then harsh criticism of these community-fostering activities seemed to take aim at the very stability and harmony of society itself, and nothing could be more un-Southern, as it were. Converted women, children, free blacks, and slaves became confident and outspoken, even outgoing preachers, and would find personal joy and social agency in their new-found faiths. Not only did men face criticism and condemnation as well as direct challenges to their traditional authority, but contemporary Southern men also frequently felt that the new traditions were disturbingly “unmanly,” since evangelicalism demanded humility, self-abasement, the rejection of worldly authority, the support of female religious leadership, the value of emotion over reason and reserve, and affectionate touching and greeting, among other seemingly effeminate features.<sup>15</sup> For all of these reasons, many Southern men resisted the radical evangelical faiths, even physically.

As 1800 came and passed Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians made some progress, though evangelicals were still largely a scorned minority everywhere in the South. Finally, evangelical leaders came to value *numbers* of converts over doctrinal purity and social ideals, and thus the radical Protestant faiths came to adapt to the status quo in order to win adherents (especially among elites who could fund and legitimize the churches) rather than trying to change society overall, a process that has been called “southernization.”<sup>16</sup> At first the doctrinal changes were slight; for example, the “devil” become an unseen force rather than a visible being. Eventually, Southern evangelicals gave up preaching against slavery altogether and apparently adopted the attitude that it

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<sup>15</sup> Heyrman, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher H. Owen, *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth Century Georgia* (Athens and London, The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 59.

would be better to establish religious places of leadership within a slave-based society, where some good might be accomplished, than to try to overcome slavery itself, which evangelicals could never hope to do. By the time of the Civil War, southernized evangelical traditions finally claimed the allegiance of a majority of Southerners and had become completely part and parcel of conservative, status quo cultural norms.

The Civil War devastated the South, and from Reconstruction through the Victorian era to WWI, Southern evangelical faithfuls often chose to turn inward, focusing upon the cultivation of personal morality and salvation rather than social justice.<sup>17</sup> Nineteenth century Baptists continued to endorse cultural norms and only harangued periodically about very specific and contemporarily popular issues, like drinking and gambling. White men absorbed themselves with the rebuilding of their region and also with the violent return of as much of the past as they could. Members of the newly founded KKK and other conservatives drew upon both allegedly Christian ideals and the “purity” of Southern womanhood in order to attack freed African-Americans and beat back their progress as citizens. Some historians argue that the sense of the Confederate “Lost Cause” came itself to be more than a tradition, but a religion of sorts, a “Confederate religion.”<sup>18</sup> Overall, many in the South spent this era fighting against various aspects of “modernity,” favoring instead racial segregation, agrarianism, and Biblical literalism. For this reason, elements of Southern society would fight back against, for example, the teaching of evolution in school (Scopes Trial, 1925) and urbanism in the 1920s or the influx of immigrants. Southerners would struggle in the process, wanting to adapt to new

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<sup>17</sup> Rufus Spain, *At Home In Zion: A Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900* (Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 213.

<sup>18</sup> W. Scott Poole, *Never Surrender: Confederate Memory and Conservatism in the South Carolina Upcountry* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2004), 125.

industries and a new modern world (especially in places like the New South Atlanta) while other more rural areas remained stubbornly isolationist. Fundamentalists thus struggled with the “paradox” of wanting to preach anti-modernism while using modern tools and machinery (like radio or television) to do so.<sup>19</sup> All in all, one cannot over-generalize about the personality or personhood of Southerners, since individuals in the South would feel differently about “progress” versus “tradition” and about many other issues as well.

Ultimately, while Southern culture perpetuated certain negative elements, like racism and Jim Crow, it also maintained other traditions, such as the tolerance of community eccentrics. Non-southernized evangelical fundamentalists still constituted a minority in the twentieth century, and religious fundamentalism only began to take hold in the South slowly during the 1960s, more so in the 1970s, and definitively by the early 80s. These new wave fundamentalists taught, once again, rigid Biblical literalism, a sense of absolute right/wrong and truth/non-truth in an insider-outsider manner, the primacy of personal salvation, and a particular brand of morality that reflected contemporary political issues, such as pro-life ideals and sexual purity. Moreover, these new fundamentalists (often a new wave of Pentecostals) became thoroughly politically active, evolving with a contemporary rise of the conservative Republican Party. Hitherto, fundamentalists and evangelicals avoided politics and promoted the separation of church and state. Politics would have been seen only as the domain of “liberal” preachers, like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. To be a fundamentalist had meant shunning the “lost” world altogether and secluding oneself, to greater or lesser extents, from the evils of “the

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalism and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2001), xi.



world.” Late twentieth century fundamentalism sought a Messianic takeover of both American religion<sup>20</sup> and politics in a fiercely anti-progressivist, anti-secular reaction to historical developments, including the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, the anti-war movement, the counterculture, “free love” principles, and all that encouraged sexuality with abandon—contraception, abortion, divorce, rebellion against traditional authority and values. These were frightening developments to those who did not understand or support them. Importantly, fundamentalism of this new variety did not unite the South in common cause and culture; in fact it tore Southerners apart as earlier evangelicalism did, even sundered the established denominations in the South, particularly Southern Baptists and Presbyterians. As Sam Hill describes it:

What can be said for certain is that Fundamentalism’s great achievement thus far has been to make Southern religion less Southern, that is, less culturally influenced or even less culturally captive...the supplanting of being true to the South. Now being the right sort of church person and citizen comes first. The old tribalism of Southern life, a product of its history and its heritage, has been dissipated by the recent developments in these central and stalwart denominational organizations...Briefly stated, the old base on which unity and identity rested that was social-cultural-historical has given way to a new base that is ideological, theological, and ethical.<sup>21</sup>

And this new fundamentalist identity, supplanting traditional Southern identity, is polarizing not only the South but also the whole nation, causing fervent “culture wars” over hot button issues like abortion and homosexuality. Meanwhile, however, gay Christians were finding ways to be “the right sort of *gay* church person,” one might say, and owning their own faith traditions in new ways in the late 60s and early 70s.

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<sup>20</sup> Sam Hill, “Fundamentalism in Recent Southern Culture: Has it Done What the Civil Rights Movement Couldn’t Do?” *The Journal of Southern Religion*, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## The MCC Revolution

The best-known gay minister, Troy Perry, would come to found what is popularly known as “the gay church,” the Metropolitan Community Church. He did so not only pre-Stonewall but also as a Southerner, further establishing the Southern, and specifically Georgian, origins of gay and gay-friendly religion. He shared what he said to gay Atlantans when the first city MCC opened in 1971:

I preached and really encouraged them, and with my Southern accent, this really encouraged the saints, because I said “to know us is to love us.” I had to preach and say to them, we don’t have to fear death. What’s the worst thing that anybody could ever do to us as gays or lesbians? I always had to tell them the worst anybody can do to us is to murder us, so don’t be frightened by that. (smiling) I said because we’re Christians. We believe to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord. So I quoted them scripture. Then...I said to them *no job is worth having* that you have to be worried all the time somebody is going to find out, what you do for a living and you’re going to be fired from your job. I know that’s hard! But I said remember that. I know some of you can’t come out of the closet yet, the church doesn’t require that, but our church *has* to be out of the closet. We want you to hear this; this is the way we’re gonna grow and how we’re gonna work here. And there’ll be a time when we’re gonna have to stand up and we’re gonna have to demonstrate, and, we’re gonna do that.<sup>22</sup>

Perry was born in 1940 to an old Southern lineage also going back to both European immigrants and Cherokee Indians, and his family clan was scattered around north Florida and south Georgia. “I don’t think I could get into a fight anyplace in northern Florida or southern Georgia,” he notes, “without hitting a relative.”<sup>23</sup> At the age of thirteen young Troy left his parents, after his mother remarried, and fled an unhappy home in Florida to stay with relatives in Tifton/Adel, Georgia. His Aunt Lizzy Smithy, really a “shirttail relative” as he describes, was a Pentecostal snake-handling preacher, who bid the boy take up snakes himself as a trial and exercise of faith; but, religious though he was, young Troy was not about to touch a snake. Aunt Lizzy had had a unique evangelical,

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. Troy Perry, *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I’m Gay* (Los Angeles, Universal Fellowship Press, 1972 and 1997), 13.

somewhat fundamentalist, decidedly Charismatic salvation. Perry remembers her in one of his autobiographies, *The Lord Is My Shepherd, And He Knows I'm Gay*:

She was the model of the zealot. She had been saved! And I mean she was really saved! But with a vengeance. She had been that traditional lady of pleasure that every small town in the South has. Yes, she was the town whore. She told it all, just like it was, once she'd been saved. Everybody in town knew that she was "the real round-heeled broad—the easiest lay in town." All the men...knew that. And so did their wives, daughters, and everyone else—except her husband. He just looked the other way. He never heard anything that was said about her. ...Well, she had a Pentecostal conversion...in the fall of 1939.... It was a real old-fashioned Southern Bible Belt revival...[She] went forward to the altar and prayed and pleaded. As she was seized with the Holy Ghost, she began to speak and plead in other tongues as the spirit gave her direction. Her whole body shook as she received this anointment. Well, after that she was a changed woman.

Aunt Lizzy felt directed by God to go on a fast, and fast she did for weeks, even after her concerned family admitted her a mental hospital in middle Georgia. While admitted, Perry recalls, she preached to the others there and "lay on hands" and healed them. Finally she was released and became a very popular preacher, calling people to salvation, prophesying, and performing miraculous healings. (The South had long preserved its ministerial space and appreciation for the gifts of women.)

One day during Sunday services Aunt Lizzy was praying in tongues and bid Troy to stand before her for a special prayer. She laid hands upon him and said that God told her that he was called to be a preacher. Troy did love religion and preaching, taking to schoolyard sermons, standing on the playground steps so all could see and hear. Aunt Lizzy was so certain of Troy's calling that she told him to lead church services the very next Wednesday. Young Troy practiced his sermon before a field of corn stalk parishioners for days, and he was so nervous during the following service, that he does not even fully remember the incident. "Up in Georgia my life had sharply changed," Perry recalls. "All that I had been through drew me closer to God. I had been preaching. I loved it. I felt it. But I wasn't sure about it being my calling.... Not until I was really

dug in up there in Georgia.”<sup>24</sup> He had indeed found his calling, and at age fifteen he secured his preaching license from the Southern Baptist Church, and by age eighteen he returned to the Pentecostal church and married his pastor’s daughter in Alabama. He struggled with his attraction to men, but the church, and all that problematically went with it socially, was first in his life as long as he could humanly stand it.

Even as a boy Reverend Perry remembered his queer feelings. At the time, the issue did not seem so great a problem, and indeed it was not. “Now of course *then* I was still wrestling with my sexuality,” he says, “even though I was only having sex with my peers as a teenager, as a young boy in Georgia and in north Florida—it was very, very interesting that still at that point-, it was still (making quotes gesture) ‘kids in the South *did* things.’ And that’s sorta how the parents looked at it. The churches then didn’t preach like they do today. There were no sermons on homosexuality *ever*; I never heard one as a young boy.”<sup>25</sup>

Howard confirms this phenomenon among boys in the South before the 1960s. Children commonly engaged in sex play, he writes, especially the boys amongst themselves, which they did for both the sheer fun/pleasure and also as a kind of practice for later. Boys were expected, and expected of themselves, to grow up and out of the childhood play into normal heterosexual desire, but there would always be the few boys that would not simply “grow out of it.” This social-sexual dynamic was not peculiar to the South and has been commonly reported in many cultures all over the world, though fundamentalism would make homosexuality a prime political target in the South and the nation after the 1960s. The rise in reactionary fundamentalism and its subsequent attacks

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<sup>24</sup> Perry, p.41.

<sup>25</sup> Perry, interview with author.

meant that gay Americans had to be ever more on the defensive. Rev. Perry thus encouraged gay Atlanta Christians in 1971, and prepared them for eventual “demonstrations,” as he said.<sup>26</sup> But Perry had been demonstrating since before the original founding of the MCC in Los Angeles in 1968.

Before then, he had tried to live the heterosexual life prescribed for him, had two children with his wife, enrolled in seminary in Chicago (though was kicked out for homosexual liaisons), accepted a job offer with a plastics firm, and moved to southern California once he felt assured that he could find an appropriate church in which to minister. The bishop of the Church of God of Prophecy, a Pentecostal denomination that branched off from the Church of God in the 1920s, found him a congregation in Santa Ana. But after two years he could repress his true self no longer. He came out, his church dismissed him, he divorced his wife and lost any child custody rights, and fell into a deep depression. As is not uncommon among gay Christians, or just gay individuals, Perry hit such a low that he attempted suicide and very nearly succeeded. With much soul searching thereafter, he finally had a breakthrough in his identity and relationship with God, and came to embrace both his Christian faith and his true identity as a gay man.

As was quoted earlier, “You’re Southern if your parents are Southern no matter where you live,” and such was true for Perry.<sup>27</sup> He was first and foremost a Southern evangelical preacher. In 1968 (pre-Stonewall) Perry had an experience that amounted to his first activist demonstration and the impetus to found his first church. It started with a date and a plainclothes officer in Los Angeles. A friend in Perry’s group had told a joke and one

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<sup>26</sup> Perry, interview with author.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Fraysse, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 4 April 2005.

of the men “slapped the other one on the rump,” and the men were arrested for “lewd and lascivious conduct.” Perry, friends, and the owner of the bar they were in went down to the jailhouse to rescue their friend.

The owner of the bar said, it was just hysterical, “We’re going to go down and we’re going to bail out our sisters!” This was his language. Well, we all got in cars, my first demonstration. It was an eye-opener for me. We walked into the police station, he marched right up to the counter and said, “We’re here,” he said, “to get our sisters out of jail!” (chuckle) The police officer behind the counter said, “What’s your sister’s name?” (chuckle) And he said, “Bill Hastings and Tony Valdez!” And you know what? It scared the *cop*.<sup>28</sup>

When it was all over, Valdez was very discouraged and Perry tried to cheer him up, telling him not to succumb to self-pity. No one cared about him, the self-pitying man insisted. Perry had overcome his own temporary flight from religion and made his peace with both his orientation and his faith, and he told Valdez, “Tony, even if people don’t care, God cares.” “And he laughed in my face,” Perry remembers, “‘No, Troy, God doesn’t love me.’” The Southern man of God dropped his friend off at home that night and then prayed to God, “God, I’ve found my niche in the ministry again...so, if you want to see a church started as an outreach into the gay and lesbian community, just let me know when.” And the “still, small voice” of God said but one word to him, Perry recalls—“now.”

After placing an ad in the local gay periodical, *The Advocate*, Perry welcomed his first dozen congregants on October 6, 1968. Just over year later he would lead over a thousand. But his work was not only religious in nature. “I demonstrated right through that time. We held demonstrations—it’s all documented.” Notably, the year after Stonewall, Perry organized the commemorative event in Los Angeles and as a result he orchestrated the first closing of a street for a Pride event/parade. The city tried to upset

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<sup>28</sup> Perry, interview with author.

his plans by forcing paraders to put up bonds to cover any possible damage, such as broken windows from rocks that bystanders might throw.

Thank God we had a good judge who said, “Well, that’s what the Nazis did to the Jews if they ducked a rock and it broke a window”—in 1930, before 1938, *they* had to pay for the window. So, you know, he ruled that we didn’t have to do that, and we won the lawsuit, and we held our parade, and we held the parade in the streets. Marched off with cops protecting us, and 50,000 people showed up and not a rock was thrown. People scattered applause, others out of pure curiosity, and we had something for everybody. We told people, because we didn’t think we’d win, we won on Friday and the thing was going to be on Sunday, and my God, we won! (clasps hand to heart) We’re shocked! We won so quickly, and we immediately told everybody get floats built, whatever you do, do something, we have a parade! And it was hysterical. We had floats, but we also had everything from-, we told people to bring your pets, we’ll have a pet group that marches together. And that was led by a guy walking an Alaskan Husky with a sign on the side that says, “We don’t all walk poodles.” (smiles) And everybody brought their pets. We had a group from Orange County, California, big sign “Homosexuals for Ronald Reagan.” And I heard a woman saying, “Forgive ‘em for being gay but I can never forgive them for being for Ronald Reagan.” And so it was *that* kind of a thing.<sup>29</sup>

Perry had been arrested after the first demonstration for sitting on a sidewalk after insisting on speaking to someone from the city government about gay issues. Next he went to the Federal Building on Wilshire Boulevard where the LAPD could not harass him, again insisting that someone speak to him. Like his Aunt Lizzy Smithy, he started a water-only fast until he reached his goal. Sixteen long days later city councilman Bob Stevenson and his wife took the meeting. There was much to discuss, including civil rights for gay and lesbian couples. All this was but the beginning, as he would continue with political activism all his life.

Of his many religious/political activities Perry performed the first MCC holy union for two gay women in January 1970, and he told his ministers thereafter to continue to marry gay couples. “I knew I was gonna have to handle marriage early on in MCC,” he says. He tried unsuccessfully to find someone to marry him and his partner, so he simply took out an ad in *The Los Angeles Free Press* announcing their union, and “it was the talk of the town” in Los Angeles—no one could believe they had the courage (or gumption

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<sup>29</sup> Perry, interview with author.

perhaps) to do that. Immediately after the union ceremony in 1970 Perry and the female couple sued the state of California for official recognition of their marriages. “We were laughed out of the courts, (shakes head) I mean *laughed*...and the judge dismissed it out of hand,” he remembers. After many years of fighting, however, gay unions and marriage were finally accepted in various US states and nations, including Canada.

And that’s when I said to my partner, “We’re gonna go up there and we’re gonna get married.”...My partner, he and I were together at that point for over 18 years, and I said, “I love you and I want to marry you. It’s so important to me. I said I have fought for this all my life.” (gets choked up) This still continues (pause, choked up) to be a very emotional issue for me. All I want is to be treated like everybody else. I don’t ask for special rights. I ask for human rights. Every human being should be handled just the same. And I cannot explain it, but when my partner and I flew into Toronto a member of the press there asked me a question, and I couldn’t help it I just broke down. (pause, tearful) Friends of mine say, oh, that’ll be on the top of the news—they love crying men in Canada, (laughing) so, you’re going to be at the top of the news. (pause, still tearful) But I-(ahem) the female reporter there said (ahem), “Reverend Perry, how does it feel being married in a church that’s part of a denomination you founded?” (thoroughly choked up, tearful, continues...) It’s very difficult for me sometimes to explain to heterosexuals, why it’s so important, but it *is*. I want all the rights and responsibilities that our culture says we should have. We want to be moral people. I’m a member of the church of Jesus Christ. My church taught me when I was a child (still very tearful) I should marry the one that that I loved. Not just live with them, but that I loved. And that’s all I’m asking for. Nothing more than everybody else gets, but I’ll never refuse for anything less (wipes tears from eyes/face). And, yes, I *do* thank God for Canada.

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The MCC would fulfill a role in the South and other parts of the United States that its founder did not expect—it would provide long-term support and sanctuary for gay Christian populations who would come under increasingly cruel political and personal attack and who would not so quickly win acceptance in many churches, as Rev. Perry had hoped. Father David still looked after his flocks in the Appalachian foothills when the earliest MCC congregations were formed. His death was tragic, but not inevitable. We can only wonder to what extent his murder was prompted by recent historical developments, by religious fundamentalism, or just by simple opportunistic bullying.

Civil rights opponents by then had linked homosexuals discursively to bestiality, a similar kind of sex-perversion propaganda first leveled against the black Southern male.



The discourse would make an impression on a generation raised hearing it, like Anita Bryant, who would compare homosexuality to prostitution and bestiality during her anti-gay activism in the 70s. Ironically, while consensual sodomy between any two persons, gay or straight, was outlawed in Georgia and many other states, bestiality was *not*—one of many legal realities in the South that deferred to rural community priorities. We also hear Bryant herself and others refer to gays simply and specifically as “radical” since the propaganda so effectively equated queers in some people’s minds with leftist, even communist, political leanings as well as socially “threatening” activism (threatening to *certain* elite groups, that is). Hence, cruel contemporary slurs, such as “commie pinko faggot,” make sense given these developments in American, and particularly Southern, culture.<sup>30</sup>

From the late 60s to 1972 Saint David ministered as a community outsider who caused some community converts to reject their family churches, and he did so as an open homosexual, who openly brought cultural change, spiritual though his mission was. The local KKK backlash would not be surprising therefore, especially since homosexuality had by that time come to be tightly associated with the civil rights movement and cultural upheaval. Had the issue of desegregation and black voting rights not become such a violent and divisive issue in the South, perhaps homosexuality to this day might not have become the targeted issue in the South (or elsewhere) that it has been. Perhaps if political

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<sup>30</sup> Ironically, the Soviet Union utterly rejected homosexuality, at first by simply denying its existence among Soviet citizenry in 1930 (except insofar as it occurred in rare individuals who suffered from a “bourgeois aberration”) and then banning any form of study about homosexuality. In one study of popular Soviet opinion about homosexuality in 1989, a full third of participants responded that they felt homosexuals should be killed outright! Another third said gays should be institutionalized, and most of the rest said queers should be given help or just ignored. Even in 2006 Moscow forbid any Gay Pride activities. In a strange twist of fate, many in the South (and the United States) would come to adopt attitudes about gays that ultimately were approaching those of the USSR rather than Rev. Dr. King.

gay baiting had not tainted the American consciousness, gays might have simply slowly found greater and greater acceptance, just as racial mixing became more and more common and accepted in the South. Today, gays battle for the right to marry; once interracial marriage too was banned. And though it seems laughable now, the interracial marriage ban was defended using biblical scripture. We can never know what might have been, but at least there is evidence that there was *hope* that things might have turned out differently, that the bitter and often religious homophobia and related culture war was not inevitable.

Rev. Perry had hoped sincerely that American churches would simply come around to gay-affirming in time, in short time at that, but it did not happen. Instead, the issue of homosexuality had been irrevocably thrown into the public spotlight, and this forced individuals to take public stands, which meant society would come to feel deeply and passionately divided on the issue; and, as with African-American civil rights fight, once the culture war started, it could not stop until resolved. Gay rights activists, flushed with hope and anger, and urged on by the anti-war and counterculture movements, came out with a political gusto at around the same time that the more conservative elements of Southern society were being politically baptized in fiery homophobia. The story of gay-affirming religion and anti-gay backlash continues through the 1970s, and continues in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

Several major points come out of this chapter. First, significant non-bar/club related gay community building and rights activities took place before the Stonewall Rebellion, and,

importantly, took place in the South (and also outside of the South *by Southerners*). Even though some of this activity was essentially religious, still religious gay Americans coupled faith with social/political action from the start. In fact, the gay rights movement suffered somewhat in the South for lack of engagement with religion and for its inherent radicalism early on, which stood to disrupt communal norms too highly valued in the South to reject in the name of controversial identity politics. Early evangelicals ran into the same trouble in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when they tried to convert Southerners to a foreign brand of religious fundamentalism and radicalism, and they remained a disreputable minority group until Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians relinquished their religious hardlines to a “southernizing” process of adaptation to and upholding of dominant socio-culture and economic norms.

Here lay another major point about the South: it was not necessarily a place favorable to religious fundamentalism, though it was a place of tradition (both good and bad), including social accommodation and religious tolerance. A religious fundamentalist attack on gays would not heat up until the civil rights movement and other modern, progressive, and radical socio-political developments sufficiently frightened many Americans (not just Southern, but all those who did not appreciate the movements for one reason or another) into “traditions”-defending action. Collective fear and defensiveness gave fundamentalism room to take root and spread among communities who never would have appreciated it before. As Joel W. Martin well summarizes in his response to Sam Hill’s article in *The Journal of Southern Religion*:

Shared culture, language, and memory tied “sinner” and “saint” together into one big white Southern gemeinschaft. Indeed, in the old order, it was probably worse to show signs of being a traitor to Dixie and its dominant values, especially those regarding race, than to skip church or indulge agnosticism....Even non-Protestants, provided they showed enough loyalty to the white South, were tolerated...Tolerance also characterized intramural relations among faithful

Christians...Differences became sources of humor, not mandates for condemnation. Again, this easy-goingness resulted from the sense of belonging to a cherished nationality, the white South....Out of the mainstream were Southern fundamentalists, who did not seem to get it. Though white and Protestant, they insisted too much on doctrinal purity, held a too gloomy view of social life and the prospects for progress, and generally rubbed middle class folks the wrong way.<sup>31</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the South, especially the New South progressive Atlanta and Georgia, would become the birthplace of gay-affirming religion. From the first openly gay-affirming congregation in 1946 to Reverend Troy Perry and the founding of the MCC to a remarkable number of gay-affirming religious “firsts” to follow, the South has been a bigger part of gay history and a smaller part of divisive fundamentalism than the popular imagination and current historiography would lead one to believe.

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<sup>31</sup> Joel W. Martin, “All That is Solid (and Southern) Melts Into Air: A Response to Sam Hill’s Fundamental Argument Regarding Fundamentalism, *The Journal of Southern Religion*, 1998.

## **The Foundational 70s: Gay-Affirming Religion Spreads Its Roots**

*Back in the 70s after Stonewall, there began to be this social consciousness, this sense of community coming up and gay bars were increasing in number and becoming very open, and Atlanta was the place....But I remember a gentleman in a bar once who was on vacation from San Francisco. And he said-, because he had been to Atlanta before, and he knew about it, he would often have to try to convince people and they just wouldn't believe it. "The other place to go when you leave San Francisco in the United States—Atlanta, Georgia." Now, this was back 1979 that I was talking to this gentleman....There's a lot of holes there I'm not able to fill in as to why. But it just is. (laughs) And it's a great place.*

*--Joel Evans, founder of Evangelical Outreach Ministries<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction to a City**

The city of Atlanta is a patchwork quilt of neighborhoods of all kinds, stitched together like an urban quilt, encircled within an interstate bypass highway, I-285, fondly called “the Perimeter” by locals. The urban sprawl has overcome the encompassing highway and has crept outward as steadily as kudzu vines in all directions, from “the big chicken” in Marietta to “Spaghetti Junction” on the way to Gwinnett, from the hilly reaches of northbound “tornado alley” highway 400, out past the ballpark, airport, and African-American universities south. From downtown, the counties that comprise the metropolis are criss-crossed with highways I-75, I-85, and the southern east-west I-20, passing railroad tracks, rivers and streams, stands of green trees, and the familiar skyscrapers at the city’s downtown heart. Drive around awhile on the bafflingly curvy streets (that were once cow paths), and notice brick buildings, tailored parks, the many landmarks and historical markers, and “peach” everything.

Even for an American city, Atlanta is a very new metropolis. It was originally conceived as a whistle stop called Terminus, where newly constructed railroads would meet, connecting the old market centers of Savannah, Augusta, and Macon with points in

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Evans, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 3 November 2005.

Tennessee. Nearby antebellum towns Decatur and Marietta rejected the opportunity to host the railroad nexus, so instead a surveyor's stake was driven into the earth in 1837 where the heart of downtown now lay—in the foothills of Appalachia, about 1000 feet above sea level on a continental divide that sends rain water down to the Gulf on one side of the city and down to the Atlantic on the other. Before the railroads sought the land, the area was named as an Indian territory and later military fort for an alleged peach tree that stood alone and prominently, though it may be that the native Cherokee actually said “pitch” tree for a local pine. To this day, Atlanta is known for its many, many streets named Peachtree—in fact over forty.

Atlanta was about as old as the young soldiers who fought the Civil War in the 1860s, and it became an important target for Union armies and was burned to the ground on Sherman's famous “march to the sea.” The city rose like a phoenix from its ashes, as determined to succeed as Scarlet O'Hara herself. Over time Atlanta became known as the informal “capital of the South,” the quintessential New South city, boasting for and bustling with business. While it suffered race riots and discrimination and even hosted the rebirth of the KKK in 1915, it also accommodated desegregation more peacefully than other places in the South, became the home of a thriving and successful African-American community complete with renowned universities, the home of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., and has even been boosted as the city “too busy to hate.” The local history is thus checkered with greatness and tragedy, with a dark past that lives on in ghostly quietude and also with tremendous potential as an international city of possibilities. Since Atlanta hosted the 1996 Olympics, it has grown tremendously in population (to about 4.7 million), and the growth has many natives speaking of the

change in the city's population and character, as well as its consistent nature as a distinctly Southern space.

Atlanta is an **optimistic** and **hopeful** city.... [T]here's a sense of potential about the spirit of Atlanta...Some people have said the word "**civil**" defines Atlanta—it has a history in the Civil War and the civil rights movement, and it tries to be civil (chuckle) I think in dealing with many of the discrepancies and, let's say, arguments of society. (The Very Rev. Dean Candler, Episcopal, Atlanta native)

It's a city that is so **vibrant** with so much diversity... a tapestry of diversity--that really describes this city. (Rev. Paul Graetz, MCC)

Vibrantly **beautiful**, but I often describe it as having ancient beautiful **trees**.... But it's very Southern in many ways, and I think the neighborhood-ness feels very Southern to me, and very casual kind of encounters with people and a friendliness and an interaction that doesn't happen in my experience in some of the big, big cities. (Linda Bryant, in Atlanta since 1970)

I adore Atlanta...just *amazed* at the topography, the **beauty**, the **hills**, just lovely.... It is the South, but I see it as the **New York of the South**... (Rev. Carole O'Connell, Unity, Unitarian)

I think of Atlanta as a huge **commercial** center or kind of organism that grows without control. It has gotten much more diverse over the last thirty years... (The Very Rev. E. Claiborne Jones, Episcopalian)

An **eastern San Francisco**, a very open city. (Archpriest Joseph Cirou, Orthodox)

Atlanta is maybe **not typical South**, and it's certainly not typical "deep South" as far as people of color are concerned. (Rev. DaVita CarterMcCallister, UCC)

*Most* of the city I'd describe as **enlightened** Southerners, (pause) open-minded Southerners, I think. (Rev. Susanna Davis, Methodist, native)

Atlanta is a more enlightened part of the South, more **modern** and more urban and more diverse perhaps. (Susan Fraysse, Presbyterian)

I would describe it as a **spiritual** city...a friendly city, sort of the city that refuses to grow up in a way, you know. It's always going to be the big metropolitan place that never quite happens, and I think that's a good thing.... It's **segregated** by race and class, and I think that's very sad.... Atlanta is sort of the **Mecca** for activism and culture, and I don't want to say enlightenment, because that's elitist in a way, but I think progressive... (Amy Ray, Indigo Girls, multi-generational native)

I think the city of Atlanta is **one huge dichotomy**. There's a very staid and traditional Atlanta, and in contrast to that there is an Atlanta that is trying to redefine herself.... And sometimes in that dichotomy there is conflict. (Rev. Paris Eley, Baptist)

Atlanta for me is **two cities**...interesting, eclectic, diverse.... As you move further away from downtown Atlanta is an increasingly conservative city, so that Atlanta to me is a duality living here, but a vibrant duality... (Rev. Daniel Matthews, Episcopalian)

Well, the city is largely a **jellyfish**, and this is with no apparent central nervous system.... Most of population doesn't have any relationship with the downtown community, and so politically it's unwieldy. (Rev. Canon Gray Temple, Charismatic Episcopalian)

The legislation and the work that we do down here [at the Capitol] isn't so much Republican versus Democrat so much as it is **urban versus rural**. Right now the state is still run by rural interests...Now I, of course, being an urban legislator feel that Atlanta is the economic engine of the state. But if you talk to someone, say, from Tifton...they are going to say that *agriculture* is the economic engine of the state. (Rep. Jill Chambers, Republican)

And people from other parts of Georgia, especially the little town I'm from (Tifton) hate Atlanta, and, you know, any time I go back there they say things to me like, "How do you stand it up there?" and "How do you drive?" and "Do you go out at night?!" So there's this perception that it's "the big city," where *bad* things happen. (Dr. Saralyn Chesnut, Emory, in Atlanta since 1973)

Well, I loved Atlanta. I knew every cobblestone, practically, in downtown Atlanta. It was a very nice, uptight Southern community of basically good people, who did not *know* how bad they *were* .... And the last time I was there, I did not like it. It was too metropolitan, **too New Yorkish**. (Archbishop George Hyde, multi-generational native)

Coming from New York, my first knee-jerk reaction [is to say] a small country town attempting to be New York, but, of course, I've since changed my viewpoint on that. I would describe Atlanta as a **progressive city** here in the southeast that's really trying to really wrap its arms around many issues, around economics, around diversity, around inclusion, with a lot of pain. A lot of pain because it's still the South... (Rev. Antonio Jones, Unity African-American church)

**Dallas is southwest and Atlanta is South.** (chuckle) It's the old South. And it's a completely different configuration around issues like religion or race, for example, and I also think around the kinds of queer identities that are performed here. I used to talk about older gay men in Dallas resembling my Aunt Betty, having very large, well-lacquered hair and getting together on Sundays to trade Jell-O recipes. But that was really a kind of caricature in Dallas, whereas in Atlanta you *do* meet, I think, some older lesbians and gays who are performing these sort of vintage Southern identities that are in many ways indistinguishable from, you know, the pillars of the church, something like that. (Dr. Mark Jordan, Emory University)

Amongst American cities, Atlanta is *heavily* **churched**, with almost every conceivable denomination present. (Rev. Dr. Don Saliers, Emory, Methodist)

It's a **small town that's trying to be a city**. (Rev. Kathi Martin, MCC)

...Uniquely Southern...influx recently, I guess, of more liberal northern influence. So it has a **unique blend of old and new**. (Rev. Kathy Morris, Methodist, multi-generational native)

Atlanta is being challenged I think in *this* moment to move from just being kind of a Southern city but really to kind of integrate itself to be **an international nexus with Southern flair**.... (Rabbi Josh Lesser, native)

Atlanta is the South.... And I think some folks don't sort of see that if they're raised here and have never left here. But if you've left here and you come back, it's easily recognizable that it's still **the South**...and even though you've got this great diversity, a lot of **segregation** is still lived out in the South. (Rev. Mac Thigpen, Episcopalian)

Narrators used the same kind of words over and over to describe Atlanta. The most popular words were variations of the following: diverse (by far the most popular answer), growing/growth, Southern, liberal, progressive, eclectic, friendly/hospitable,



welcoming/open, beautiful, new/young, changed, religious, opportunity, enlightened, cultured, international, and, almost oxymoronic, a “small town New York.” While most glowed and gushed about Atlanta, a few held back their complete endorsements, and most seemed to confirm a curious dual nature of the city. Two comments in particular spoke to this perception directly, using the words “one huge dichotomy” and “Atlanta for me is two cities...a duality.” Others simply shared impressions that acknowledged the duality without speaking of it as such, like the comment “a unique blend of old and new,” or “nice” people who are also “hypocritical.” Also, some narrators would almost contradict each other in their perceptions, reflecting the dual nature of individual experiences; for example, one narrator might praise Atlanta for certain reasons while another seems not to like the city for opposite reasons.

Atlanta’s apparent duality is quite broad and multifaceted. Some narrators noted the *de facto* segregation that still exists in Atlanta while others simply noted that the city boasts a separate and distinguished African-American community at large, with its own prominent colleges, businesses, and churches. A few even bemoaned the fact that Atlanta, like the United States in general, has class division and hence a duality consisting of rich and poor, which leaves homeless men and women to live under freeway overpasses. Other narrators took time to connect Atlanta to its antebellum history, discussing how the Civil War still lives on in the South and explaining, often with emotion, that Atlanta is haunted by a darker past *and yet* is always striving toward a better, brighter future—always has and seemingly always will. A few noted that Atlanta dealt with desegregation much more peacefully than other places in the South, and in

other ways Atlanta stands out from the American southeast for being “enlightened,” “too busy to hate,” “a Mecca,” and “open and accepting.”

Socially and politically narrators noted their sense that Atlanta is a “progressive” place, “liberal” and “metro,” “a blue city in a red state,” and hence an “island of sanity” to those who desire that kind of city/space. Yet, on the other hand, many narrators simply call Atlanta a “small town,” even though small towns in the South do not tend to espouse the aforementioned socio-political qualities. Therefore, narrators could not agree as to whether Atlanta might actually be considered “a New York of the South.” Some asserted this perception very matter-of-factly and definitively while others almost laughed at the idea. One narrator, in fact, had fled New York in order to live in a very *different* place, while another narrator did not like Atlanta as much because it was, in fact, “too New Yorkish.”

Certainly narrators seem to agree that Atlanta is a “distinctly Southern city,” which distinguishes it *from* New York immediately, and yet quite a few noted that so many northerners and other immigrants have come to Georgia that Atlanta is losing its Southern nature and becoming more and more cosmopolitan and “international.” In addition, a few comments reflected a more general Southern social insider-outsider reality, and those who felt they were on the outside did not always have the most flattering things to say about the city; and at least one narrator spoke of still being considered a “damn Yankee” even after having lived in Atlanta for twenty-five years. However, most places in this country demand a certain level of social conformity and protocol, treating unfamiliar outsiders with some distance, disdain, or just humor; so, it might simply be argued that Atlanta has social insider demands that are peculiar to the

South (such as ordering “sweet tea” or not honking in traffic or living a slower life pace) and this reflects “small town” lifestyles in a metropolis—a distinct “dual” metro nature.

Generally speaking, narrators agree that Atlanta is a very religious/spiritual or “heavily churchied” city yet also a traditionally desirable place for gay and lesbian Southerners and others to move if for no other reasons than the anonymity the city affords and sub-cultural life available in any metropolis. If Southerners generally treated gays and eccentrics with familial and/or local acceptance yet also public denial, over time the sheer *open visibility* of gay citizens *forced* Atlantans and Georgians to react, and they did so either positively or negatively, while some chose instead to sit on the proverbial fence trying to decide. The outing influence of the post-Stonewall gay rights movement in the 1970s arose in tandem with the rise of fundamentalism and the new political Right in Atlanta as elsewhere, and this duality has won converts on either side of the so-called “culture war.” Some religious congregations have refused to tolerate homosexuals, have even sought to “cure” them, and/or have taken strong political stances against gay citizens. On the other hand, many other congregations and individuals have come to different conclusions regarding religion and homosexuality. This chapter looks at these latter Atlantans/Georgians and further demonstrates how this oft-overlooked region gave rise to national religious acceptance of gays and to congregations and organizations both local and international.

### **The First MCC Launches a Decade**

Father David Edwards had been ministering to his north Georgia and South Carolina flocks for years when the First MCC set up church in Atlanta in January 1972, months before Saint David’s martyrdom. The fledgling MCC was the first openly gay-affirming

church in Atlanta since Archbishop Hyde started his work and congregations in 1946 through the 1970s. In fact, the Atlanta First MCC connected intimately with a Hyde church in New York City. Rev. Elder Troy Perry remembers:

Our church in Atlanta was one of our earliest [MCC] churches, and it started through a young pastor from the Presbyterian church. He had graduated from Princeton.... He was a youth minister of a 3000-member mega-church in the Presbyterian church. He went to a conference on religion and the homosexual in New York City, and when he got there he discovered he was a homosexual. I mean, as he sat there and listened “all these feelings I had, that’s what I am!” And so he came out at that meeting. Then went back to his church, came out to the board of the church, thinking they would be just thrilled. They *weren’t*. They asked for his resignation immediately. He ended up going to New York City, and there was a little independent gay and lesbian church that no longer exists there that was called Church of the Beloved Disciple.<sup>2</sup>

This little church was one of Bishop Hyde’s own, though his churches included more than just the one in the New York City vicinity. He recalls:

We had two gay pastors there at Saints Peter and Paul [in Harlem], but that didn’t matter. That was incidental to the whole thing. And we had a very active parish council of lay people.... And it worked out real well. The one down in Lower Manhattan, Saint George, eventually closed up. And then in the 70s we opened up the Church of the Beloved Disciple in New York, which ended up with a congregation of about 500 people, 499 of them gay, probably. (smiles) But, we bought a three-story commercial building in the lower Village, remodeled it, made a church out of the first floor. And *very* nice churchy place. And we ran that for X number of years until one of the pastors got sick, had to retire, and then the city started, um, what do you call it when they come in and take a property for urban renewal? They picked our block for urban renewal. And we had to sell whether we wanted to or not. ‘Cause they could-, there is some law that they could condemn it and take over the property, and pay us what *they* think it’s worth. [JT: Oh, eminent domain.] Yeah. So, we said, “Well, we can’t fight it, it’s going to happen, let’s get out while we can get out.” So we closed down and sold it for a little extra money.<sup>3</sup>

Rev. Elder Perry continues:

And Bishop Clement, the Bishop in that church, called me and said, “When you get here,”—I was going to New York City to preach—“there’s a young Presbyterian minister I’d like for you to meet. I told him he needs to be at MCC, not in our group, because he was very Protestant.” So John Gill and I showed up at this meeting, and we started talking, and I said, “Well, John,” I said, “we need churches in a lot of places. Why don’t you start the church here in New York City?” He said, “Reverend Perry, I’ve really been in prayer,” and he said, “and God’s told me to go to a city I’ve never been to in my life.” And I said, “Where is that at?” And he said, “Atlanta, Georgia.” And I said, “Let me tell you something,” I said, “four members of our mother church in L.A. have *just* moved to Atlanta. I’ve got you four people already to help you there to start a church. And in 1971 John Gill went to Atlanta, Georgia, and he started our church there. They met at the Pocket Theater.... We started growing there, and John Gill started the church there. I immediately flew there after John, two months, my first visit to Atlanta to visit our church there. It was in 1971. I flew there and about 80 people—at that time that was a monster crowd, we were just shocked that we had 80-whatever for that first service.

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<sup>2</sup> Perry, interview with author.

<sup>3</sup> Hyde, interview with author.

The church moved from one movie theater to another, the second on N. Highland Avenue in 1974. Even today, the First MCC is located off North Druid Hills in a *converted* movie theater, as one can tell from the incline in the sanctuary floor, though this church home is a beautiful multi-million dollar modern church. Theaters, bars, and homes have often been the launching places for gay-affirming ministries and churches, perhaps seeming less threatening and more welcoming to religion-wary gays, and also constituting a liminal space between the worlds of gay social community and religious worship. Until just recently, a drag ensemble called The Gospel Girls performed in local Atlanta gay clubs on Sundays, lip-synching to favorite classic gospel tunes, partly as entertainment but also partly in sincerity, offering an unorthodox place and time of semi-worship for onlookers, who could appreciate the recognition and celebration of their more traditional culture. Each audience member could choose in his or her own heart whether to simply be entertained or whether to raise thoughts or voice to the level of actual inward religious action, and none ever had to leave the safety and security of the gay bar stool. Some early MCC attendees either lament or laud the early theatrical locations, since they encouraged a fun social environment that could include an actual in-house bar, parties, and dating, so hybrid was the space culturally and so youthfully charged were general urban atmospheres in the 1970s.

As a result of growing “out” gay culture at this time, as well as on-going political and medical discourses about homosexuality, American society came to offer gays significant open recognitions and acceptance in the early 1970s, and these events, in turn, led to a two-pronged socio-cultural reaction by gays. On the one hand, gay communities grew steadily *even more* in the light of affirmation; and, on the other hand, the growing and

often hedonistic 1970s urban gay cultures, coupled with growing social acceptance, led other gays to break away from the bar scenes and even from the early MCC congregations to found more conservative congregations and/or to lead gay groups and ministries within traditional denominations.

There were many key events in American queer history that took place in the 70s that explain these goings-on. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association officially dropped homosexuality from the ranks of mental illness. In 1975, the American Psychological Association did the same. However, some anti-gay religious activists would reject scientific opinion and still consider homosexuality a “sin” and a “lifestyle choice” as well as a problem that could be somehow miraculously cured by a willing God and a praying gay convert. Such preaching would lead many religious gays to live lives of indescribable loneliness, self-hatred, isolation, depression, and, in the worst cases, suicide. Meanwhile, other voices of authority were speaking out in favor of gay Americans. One such individual, following an Atlanta history that linked him to Mayor Hartsfield, Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, and Bayard Rustin, was Atlanta’s first African-American mayor, Maynard Holbrook Jackson, Jr., (elected 1973) who had declared himself the pioneering Southern elected official on gay and lesbian rights and champion of inclusion for all people. He issued the city’s first Gay Pride proclamation during the yearly festivities in 1976, and once told Atlanta’s gay periodical, *Southern Voice*, “Any right given to any other citizen should be enjoyed by gays and lesbians with no distinction. If they want to do that [adoption and marriage], it is their business, just like it is between heterosexual couples.” Interestingly, it was the threat of a sit-in protest by Reverend Jim Snow of the First MCC (true to Troy Perry’s style and

vision) that actually goaded the Mayor into taking the very first meeting with gay leaders in 1974.<sup>4</sup>

Yet another political first continues to place Georgia at the center of gay history in the United States. Deeply religious Georgia governor and president Jimmy Carter, issued the first federal executive orders affirming gays and lesbians, and he was also the first president to open the White House for a formal meeting with gay activists. At the Carter Library, archivists were quick to tell me that the gay issue was certainly “not Carter’s favorite,” but this does not change the fact that he, like Jackson, took positive action on behalf of gay Americans and did not allow religion, either his own or pressure from outraged anti-gay pulpits, to dissuade him. Carter’s story exemplifies the political and religious battles of the decade, a decade that would witness both the rise of gay rights as well as the fundamentalist “religious right.” The history thus demonstrates evolving attitudes in the nation and keeps Georgia and the South in the spotlight.

### **Carter’s Queer Concessions**

The early post-Stonewall days of the liberated 1970s, under Republican Presidents Nixon and Ford, marked a time of gay consciousness raising, early radical organizing, the growth of the lesbian-feminist movement, and the first intrepid steps toward effective national gay lobbying. However, gay activists would claim their first federal victories under a most unlikely champion of their freedoms, Jimmy Carter, the mild-mannered, deeply religious, diplomatic gentleman president from rural Georgia. While Carter did not truly endorse gay lifestyles at the time, he did believe in personal freedoms and the

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<sup>4</sup> Fleischman and Hardman, “Hitting Below The Bible Belt,” 415. The authors noted that gay activists had clamored to meet with Mayor Sam Massell in 1971 to protest police harassment of gays, and met with success, as the mayor vowed to help “in any way he could,” and activists learned that the city would not discriminate against gays in hiring practices.

basic right to avoid harassment and discrimination. As the 70s came to a close twelve successive years of Republican control of the Executive office followed, and activists would face new political challenges not only from a conservative government but also from the disastrous fallout of HIV/AIDS. So, in retrospect, the Carter-era 70s was a fortunate and progressive era for gay rights activism.

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1976. Two weeks after the New Year, Rochester, New York's Vice-Mayor, Margaret "Midge" Costanza picked up the daily paper (*The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*) and read an interesting article entitled "Don't Condemn Homosexuals, Vatican Says."

The Vatican reasserted today the Roman Catholic Church's condemnation of sex outside marriage but said homosexuals who are "incurable" should be treated with understanding and judged with prudence....On homosexuality the declaration was more explicit and understanding than any previous public Vatican document. Without discounting what the Church considers the gravity of all homosexual acts, it drew a distinction between homosexuals "whose tendency comes from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example or from other similar causes" and a second group "who are definitely such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable."<sup>5</sup>

Gay rights met Christian dogma in many ways and in many forums at that time, resulting in wildly differing opinions on the issue. Government representatives found themselves caught between angry activist citizens, both gay and straight, clamoring for recognition, freedoms, and for simply what they thought "right" for America. Often, this battle pitted leftist, post-hippie youth against fundamentalist, evangelical Christians not nearly as compromising as the Pope. This was the world in which Midge Costanza worked. The Vice-Mayor had to deal with gay rights and harassment in Rochester, and soon she would find herself going to bat for gay citizens as President Carter's Public Liaison Assistant. Before taking this office, however, she would head the Platform Drafting Committee for

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<sup>5</sup> Newspaper clipping, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 1/15/77, "(Gay Rights: Memos, Correspondence, Clippings) 5/76-8/78 [O/A 5771]" folder, Box 4, Margaret Costanza Files, Jimmy Carter Library.



the Democratic National Committee, faithful and active Democrat that she was, where she would fight parliamentary procedure and outright opposition for a gay rights plank.

Meanwhile, gay activists were gearing up for the upcoming election with every intention of taking their Stonewall passion to Washington. In 1973 prominent gay organizers founded the National Gay Task Force as a nucleus and vanguard organization for the nation's other 1,100 gay groups. With 2,500 members nationwide the leaders boasted that the National Gay Task Force constituted "the largest gay civil rights organization in United States history."<sup>6</sup> It was small compared to gay organizations today, but it was determined. Further, organizers made sure to keep the organization gender-blind and led by both gay men and women equally, a somewhat unique accomplishment in the queer-gender-bifurcated America of the 70s. By 1976 the organization had accomplished quite a few goals, including gay rights legislation successes, the official rejection of homosexuality as a mental illness, job protection policies at major American corporations, national protests, drives for positive portrayals of gays in the media, court cases challenging state "sodomy" laws, the founding and support of both local and international gay rights organizations, and other efforts to gain support for gay families and immigrants.<sup>7</sup>

The National Gay Task Force (which later added "and Lesbian" to their name) had much reason for both hope and worry during the election year. On the positive side, Carter made political gestures that gays would take to heart and constantly remind him about over the years of his presidency. On March 19 Tom Snyder interviewed then

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<sup>6</sup> Newsletter of the National Gay Task Force, "It's Time," early 1976, "(Gay Rights: Publications) 3/75-1/78 [O/A 5771]" folder, Box 4, Margaret Costanza files, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Governor Carter for “The Tomorrow Show” (NBC), and Carter stated, in reply to a question about gays discharged from the military, “I favor the end of harassment or abuse or discrimination against homosexuals.”<sup>8</sup> Still, he also expressed ongoing concern about homosexuals in positions of intelligence, vulnerable as they naturally were to blackmail, as he saw it. This issue and others would dog the President during his Administration, but on the whole Carter believed that his position vis-à-vis gay Americans was “fairly advanced,”<sup>9</sup> and he even stated that, should Bella Abzug’s amendment to the Civil Rights Act pass, he would sign it.<sup>10</sup> This act would simply add gays to the list of those people who could not be discriminated against in such areas as housing, education, employment, military activity, or in other activities or arenas affected by the Federal government.

Finally, a press release announced the following:

When Governor Carter was asked how he could reconcile his religious faith with his support for Gay people’s rights, he replied, “I don’t consider myself one iota better than anyone else because I happen to be a Christian, and I have never done anything other than keep strictly separated my political life from my religious life. There would be no conflict in my life as President having my own personal, deeply felt beliefs.” Gov. Carter has also gone on record as supporting the National Womens’ Agency Pro-Gay platform.<sup>11</sup>

Carter thus had the unenviable job of balancing religion and party politics with Constitutional law and personal scruples with regard to gay rights, a job requiring him to please everyone in the short-term of his office yet satisfying no one in the end. Having to work with Americans at this time meant dealing with typically uncompromising, radically polarized, and perennially dissatisfied people. Rev. Perry remembers these days:

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<sup>8</sup> Transcript, *The Tomorrow Show* (NBC), 3/19/76, “Gays, Jimmy Carter on 3/76-3/77 (O/A 4499)” folder, Box 22, Seymour Wishman Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Carter-Mondale Campaign Press Release, 5/23/76, “Gay Rights: Correspondence 5/76-78 (O/A 5771)” folder, Box 4, Margaret Costanza Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

I met Governor Carter when he was running for the presidency, when they didn't think he could win. He was just out of the box, and he came to Los Angeles, and a friend of mine...said, "I'd like for you to come and meet the Governor." And I showed up, and only eighty people showed up to have breakfast with Jimmy Carter. And when he spoke, we all politely applauded, and then he asked for questions. And I held up my hand, and I was about the third one he called on, and I said, "Yes, I have a question for you, Governor Carter. If you become President of the United States, I have to tell you, I'm a gay man," and I said, "as a member of the gay community I'm going to say to you there are four things I'd like to ask you about." I said, "Number one, I'd like to see you issue an executive order on the military, housing, jobs," I just had my little list, you know, of the things that I wanted to see him as President [do]. I said, "I want to know how you feel about these." And also security clearances, that was the fourth one that I'd asked for. I wanted to make sure that I covered everything that affected me and the military, because I'm a Vietnam era veteran, I had a top secret NATO crypto clearance, I served in the military with no problems...

"Yes," he said, "I'll answer that, but could you tell me the four things again? You talk sort of fast." (smiling) And it was so funny, I thought we're both from the *same* part of the country. And I just laughed, because I thought my accent-, maybe not *quite* as deep as his, but certainly I had a Southern accent. The crowd was [in] dead silence until he said "you talk fast," and then *nervous* laughter, then I did them again, and he said, "Yes, I can answer that." He says, "I've said I will answer any question that a person asks. Yes, I have only problems with one of those." And I thought it was going to be the military. (pause) And he said, "I would only have problems with people with security clearances who are not *open* about their homosexuality." Well, I was shocked by *that*. But that said to me, then he had to make sure that it wasn't illegal to be a homosexual in America. But he answered the question, and he's the first person who did that.

I came out for Carter for President. Organized a group called Gays and Lesbians for Carter. And it was very interesting, another fundraiser was held, he came back through town, his wife did, you know, Rosalyn Carter, when she arrived here someone had stolen her luggage. In those days they didn't have the secret service around them the way they do today. ...So someone had stolen her luggage, she said. And she was standing there cold, and I took off my coat and put it on her. Someone took a picture of her and the aide to one of our city council members, who was in the photograph.... And it's the three of us standing there with Gays and Lesbians for Carter.

The Democratic Convention held in New York came and went without a gay rights plank added to the party platform. Try as she might, Midge Costanza could not get the issue officially recognized by the Democrats as a party whole, and disappointed gay activists held a march/parade and rallies around town in protest. Things would start looking up for gay activists after Carter won the election that year, though, and even before Carter took office, the National Gay Task Force newsletter was able to alert its members to promising developments:

The National Carter-Mondale Campaign in Atlanta, Georgia has announced the addition of Josephine Daly, Staffperson of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, Representative Elaine Nobel of Boston, Massachusetts, and Jean O'Leary, Co-Director of the National Gay Task Force, to the 51.3% National Advisory Committee.

The 51.3% Committee is charged with advising Governor Carter on the appointment of women to Federal position. “As President,” Governor Carter said, “I intend to make the fullest possible use of the women of America in helping carry out my program for America. As a candidate for President I am fully committed to equality between men and women in every area of government and in every aspect of life.”

*The appointment of Daly, Nobel and O’Leary marks the first time that known gay people have been appointed to an important national advisory committee [my emphasis].*<sup>12</sup>

1977. No sooner had Carter assumed office than the gay rights controversy had heated up to a near political conflagration. On December 7 of the previous year the Miami Metro Commission had passed an anti-discrimination ordinance protecting their gay community, the third largest in the nation. By that time some thirty-six cities had passed similar ordinances and eighteen states repealed antiquated sex laws. But to local Florida Christian groups the ordinance amounted to the condoning of Sodom and Gomorrah. In response, 60s pop singer and resident church-lady, Anita Bryant—famous at the time for her Florida orange juice commercials—shepherded the Miami faithful in a crusade against the ordinance, shooting off this salvo in the January 18 edition of the *Miami Herald* in an article entitled “Gay Anti-Bias Bill Criticized”:

I have never condoned nor teach my children discrimination against anyone because of their race or religion, but if this ordinance amendment is allowed to become law, you will in fact be infringing upon my rights as a citizen and a mother to teach my children and set examples and to point to others as examples of God’s moral code as stated in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>13</sup>

Miami Christians, therefore, took the idea of “civil rights” and gave it a new and unique twist: they had to redefine the terms in order to play the political game in the milieu of the times. The socio-political battle would explode in emotion, name-calling, and mail and advertising campaigns, with Bryant’s organization, Save Our Children, doing everything they could to depict gays as child predators, while gay groups lamented such

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<sup>12</sup> Carter-Mondale Campaign (Northern California Headquarters) Press Release, 10/14/76, “Gays, Jimmy Carter on 3/76-3/77 (O/A 4499)” folder, Seymore Wishman Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>13</sup> Newspaper clipping, *The Miami Herald*, Adon Taft and Susan Burnside, 1/17/77, “Gay Rights: Miami and Anita Bryant 11/76-12/77 (O/A 4499)” folder, Seymore Wishman Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

unenlightened views, sometimes comparing Bryantites to racists and Nazis. Gay activists looked to the White House for progress, however, from the midst of localized battles. As early as February the National Gay Task Force had a happy announcement to make in its newsletter:

For the first time in the history of the United States, a top-level official at the White House has met with representatives of this nation's second-largest minority, the estimated 20,000,000 lesbians and gay men. At a two-hour meeting on February 8, Margaret Costanza, Presidential Assistant for Public Liaison, met with Jean O'Leary and Bruce Voeller, Co-Executive Directors of the National Gay Task Force, to discuss issues involving immigration and naturalization, treatment of Federal prisoners, and IRS tax-deductible status.<sup>14</sup>

The "big meeting" was still to come. On March 26 Costanza and associates met with activist leaders from the National Gay Task Force to make serious headway politically and legislatively for gay rights. Task Force representatives worked hard and with excitement to have the meeting go smoothly and effectively. They urged their participants to fill up printed packets with plenty of "good material" on their areas of expertise and to urge the White House for follow up meetings with particular agencies relevant to their individual causes and issues, which included IRS tax discrimination, civil rights, military discharges, fair housing (HUD), gay churches and religion, parents of gay children, gay prisoners' treatment, social services, immigration rights, and intelligence security clearances.<sup>15</sup> The meeting was hailed as a "happy milestone" by Jean O'Leary, Co-Director of National Gay Task Force.<sup>16</sup> Perry remembers:

Bruce Voeller and...[Jean O'Leary], she started working with Midge Castanza, who was the assistant to the President, to get the meeting. And then when they got the meeting, I was one of the fourteen people invited to come into the room. It was thirteen gays and lesbians and one heterosexual from PFLAG, and we sat there and we went around the room, and...when they got

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<sup>14</sup> National Gay Task Force Newsletter, March 1977, "National Gay Task Force Flyers and Publications 12/76-3/77 (O/A 4609)" folder, Box 27, Seymore Wishman Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>15</sup> Letter, National Gay Task Force to 3/26/77 White House meeting participants, 3/15/77, "(Gay) Civil Rights 10/76-2/78 (O/A 4609)" folder, Semour Wishman Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>16</sup> Newspaper clipping, *The Blade*, Lou Romano, "Gays Meet With Carter Aids," 4/77, "(National) Gay Task Force Correspondence 9/76-2/78 (O/A 4499)" folder, Box 27, Seymour Wishman Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

to me, I said, “You can read my report later, let me tell you, I’m going to be a little emotional here.” And I went on to tell her about our churches--we had had about fifteen churches, ended up being twenty-one churches, that had been burned down to the ground. I was able to sit and talk about the people who had been murdered, what had happened as a result of them being openly gay, and why it was the government *had* to come to terms with this, that they had to see that people-, that we were treated like everybody else.

And she broke down (gestures), shed tears. And everybody was moved in the room, I mean, as I talked about people dying, and I said, “you know, you can read my report later, but *this* is why we have to have those laws changed.” And it was amazing, and when we left the White House, I said to Bruce and Jean O’Leary, I said to them, “Do you realize where we’ve just been to? In 1977, do you realize?” It was amazing because Anita Bryant had started *her* fight, and Jimmy Carter had not invited *them* to the White House. No one in his government.

The remainder of 1977 amounted to a mixed bag of blessings and setbacks for the gay communities of America. The March meeting at the White House raised hopes and secured, as hoped, a series of follow up meeting that took place through the rest of the year into 1978. On the other hand, Anita Bryant won repeal of the Dade ordinance amendment on June 7 and set off similar battles in other states and cities. This defeat presented a disheartening short-term set back for gay activists; yet, while losing the battle, organizers prepared to win the war. Bryant had managed to inflame the anger and outrage not only of gay Americans but also of many average straight citizens, and an unexpected outcome was the vast political mobilization of queer USA. Gay liberation passion would match right-wing religious fervor, battle by battle, causing more Americans to come out of the closet fighting rather than hiding or biding their time.

1978/1979. The following two years saw the initial exuberance and hope of the gay activists, as well as the outrage and horror of the Bryantites, settle into a day-by-day, season-by-season parade of meetings, alerts, newsletters, media ploys, pleas for rights and pleas for righteousness. Both sides were making headway, and both sides were getting nowhere fast—a win here, a loss there. Finally, though, activists in the gay community became dissatisfied and disgruntled with the Carter Administration. Their

main concerns had to do with immigration (gay tourists were often arrested and detained when trying to visit or immigrate to the United States) and security clearances for gays in intelligence, though other issues remained hot topics, too. In fact, by late 1979 gay leaders decided to orchestrate the first march on Washington for gay rights. Obviously to them, the meetings did not yield enough, fast enough. One gay man put the issue as follows in a personal letter to Stuart Eisenstat (Carter's Domestic Policy Advisor and a native Atlantan), quoting Carter Administration political phrases:

1969: Stonewall Riots in NYC

1979: Stonewalling at "the highest levels":

"It is a question that needs to be addressed..."

The President will "continue to explore..."

"No decision has been made..."

He "supports many of the concepts..."

The gay community today is too sophisticated to be placated by these empty generalities.<sup>17</sup>

By 1980 another election approached, and the National Gay Task Force sent a questionnaire to all candidates, asking for their positions on gay rights issues. The Administration had to make the case to the gay community that Carter had achieved much on their behalf, more than any predecessor and more than any political opponent would consider, and in its own defense the Carter Administration responded on March 3 to the November 1979 inquiry. "For too long, the doors of the federal government were closed to too many Americans. Jimmy Carter has opened those doors and he intends to see that they remain open. In a similar vein, the President is committed to continuing his policy of appointing qualified individuals without discrimination based on race, color,

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<sup>17</sup> Letter, Steven Brannan to Stuart Eisenstat, (n.d., early 1980 indicated), "Gay Views 1/2/80 – n.d." folder, Box 8, Robert Malson's Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

sex, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation.”<sup>18</sup> The letter also makes note of accomplishments the Administration achieved:

1. Carter was the first Presidential candidate to even discuss gay issues.
2. He openly opposed discrimination against gays in the Federal government.
3. His advisors met with gay leaders in the White House only three months into his Presidency, followed by many more meetings.
4. He signed the Civil Service Reform Act in 1978, which outlawed job discrimination against gays in the Federal government (intelligence personnel notwithstanding).
5. He secured tax exempt and tax deductible status for qualifying gay organizations.
6. The Bureau of Prisons would allow non-pornographic gay literature for prisoners.

By late May the Administration added the following accomplishments in a list of talking points on the issue of gay rights. “The FCC approved regulations that require stations to include the gay community when they determine community broadcast needs;” “The Office of Families has urged state officials to make use of gay youth peer counseling when dealing with runaways, pointing to the success of a pilot program in Georgia;” and “The CETA program has provided funds for workers in numerous gay organizations, with the full backing of the Labor Department.”<sup>19</sup>

The outstanding issue of gay immigration remained a sore spot for gay activists. Still, by June the Administration openly urged the repeal of laws that required the detainment of homosexual visitors and immigrants. By September a new “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” kind of policy finally went into effect, which would protect suspected homosexual visitors from arrest and only permitted detainment of those individuals who, without solicitation, openly announced their orientation. Perhaps this was too little, too late; gay activists continued grumbling against the Administration throughout the election year and threatened to vote for other candidates. As early as February an organization called Gay

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<sup>18</sup> Letter, Robert Strauss to National Gay Task Force, 3/3/80, “(Gay) Homosexuals 7/20/79-5/31/80” folder, Box 7, Robert Malson’s Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>19</sup> Memo, Robert Malson to Administrative Staff, 5/20/80, “Gay Issues” folder, Box 68, Dennis Tapsak File, Jimmy Carter Library.



Vote 1980 suggested that the Carter-Mondale campaign was “writing off” the gay vote, unlike the Reaganites, who were beginning to actively court gay voters.<sup>20</sup> Around the time of the Convention, Gay Vote 1980 cried, “Support for President Carter within the gay community has eroded disastrously.”<sup>21</sup> Their alert further stated that organizers believed Carter had failed to do enough for gay Americans “because the President himself finds the issue of gay rights distasteful.” On the other hand they applauded Reagan’s stance against the discriminatory California Briggs proposition in 1978 (which would have prevented gays and lesbians from teaching in California public schools), stating that they felt that they would receive equally positive treatment from a Reagan Administration based on his assured compromises with Republican libertarian types (the counterpart to Carter’s Democratic liberal types). The threat here was hardly veiled—Carter had better shape up or prepare to be shipped out of office, perhaps even with the ousting assistance of the gay voting block itself!

Gay lobbyists and politicians had much to fight for, but they could hardly have imagined what actually awaited them in the 80s. While President Carter did not always satisfy the political demands of post-Stonewall gay activists, he offered an open White House door to gay leaders and made significant strides for gay rights, often underplayed or overlooked by historians and the gay community today. At the time, early post-Stonewall gay and lesbian Americans were riding a tide of successful civil rights activism and sexual liberation, and they wanted nothing less than what they perceived to be their full political due, no holds barred. Had not Republicans attained the presidency for the

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<sup>20</sup> Letter, Mary Spottswood Pou and Tom Bastow (GayVote1980) to Malcolm Dade (Deputy Manager of Carter-Mondale Campaign), 2/21/80, “Gay Views 1/2/80-n.d.” folder, Box 8, Robert Malson’s Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>21</sup> Memo, Gay Vote 1980, (n.d., summer 1980 indicated), “(Gay) Homosexuals 7/20/79-5/31/80” folder, Box 7, Robert Malson’s Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

next twelve years and/or had AIDS not complicated political issues, perhaps activists could have gained greater gay civil rights quicker. Says Rev. Elder Perry:

So that was then. And then I was invited to the White House by another Southerner, [which] is why I love Bill Clinton from Arkansas. He had invited me to the White House conference on hate crimes, White House conference on AIDS, and I was honored with a hundred other clergy with breakfast with the president and the vice-president for our work in the American society. And the president and vice-president stayed with us for two hours and twenty-four minutes. Of course, Carter was the president with the heart in the right place, even though he made mistakes. I've always believed that Carter certainly, uh, his heart was in the right place. And Jimmy Carter doesn't believe in hating people, even gays and lesbians. Whether he, you know, didn't do a *whole* lot while he was there or not, he was a one-term president, maybe in a second-term he would have done more. I think some historians say he would have, but at least that was our first meeting, and I was thrilled to death it was a *Southern* person *from Georgia* where I used to go and where I had all my relatives who lived in that part of the South, who made an early difference for us just by meeting with us.

In 2006 when Carter was interviewed by *Southern Voice*, journalist Sean Kennedy asked the former President, "You're a Christian, but you don't have a problem with gays and lesbians as many other Christians do. Why?" Carter responded:

I'm a worshipper of Jesus Christ, who never mentioned homosexuals in any way—certainly not in a deleterious fashion. And when it has been mentioned in the New Testament, it's been combined with things like selfishness or something like that. So I've never looked upon it as any sort of reason to condemn a person. I think it's an inherent characteristic just like other things that we do with our lives.... I know that people have different opinions about [gay marriage and civil unions], but...if an individual church or synagogue doesn't want to have marriage vows expressed by gay people, I think that ought to be a religious decision. But under no circumstances do I think a gay couple ought to be deprived of their rights as citizens.

### **The Gay Conservative Response to the 1970s**

Much to the chagrin of religious fundamentalists, America seemed to be getting more and more liberal in the 1970s: the ERA passed Congress in 1972; the Supreme Court case, *Roe vs. Wade*, legalized abortions in 1973; "no fault" divorces, begun in California in 1969, started to spread all over the nation; and, finally, a religiously Southern Baptist president took socially liberal stands, even condoning homosexuality. Anita Bryant epitomized the alarmed Christian activist at the time. However, some gay Americans themselves also rejected elements of liberalism and perceived 70s hedonism, adopting

conservative religious stances much like Archbishop Hyde's. For them, the First MCC could not really fulfill religious needs.

Joel Evans was raised in a Southern Baptist home in Hartwell, Georgia, where church meant a great deal to him. "I can remember all the way back to the last year of the nursery department, when I was three years old," he recalls. "I grew up in church. My training as a musician began there."<sup>22</sup> He later attended the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky to study liturgical music, but he always knew deep down that he was gay. An enduring sense of God's grace attended his spiritual walk, and he knew his loving God desired both his Christian discipleship but also his personal wholeness, meaning an acceptance of his (homo)sexuality. All the same, he could not consider becoming a part of an unfamiliar "gay" community, since it did not make sense to him to identify with a group of people based on this one particular quality. Many gays would feel just the same, avoiding the urban gay subcultures just as any straight American might. Not until he read Troy Perry's book, *The Lord is my Shepherd, And He Knows I'm Gay*, did Evans have the courage to move to Atlanta and seek out the MCC there. "They were meeting in what was formerly a movie theater out in the city of Decatur," he notes, "[and] it became a very close-knit group." Evans felt the group had much in common with the early Christian church, which had a sincere desire for church community and worship and yet suffered attack, persecution, and an urge to remain "under wraps." He describes the services:

It naturally fell into being a community church, a non-denomination church, which will incorporate different denominational backgrounds that people come from as they congregate together. And one of the things that happened, and particularly people who are from the high church backgrounds, liturgical backgrounds, the Roman Catholic churches, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church, that have a high view and a

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<sup>22</sup> Joel Evans, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 3 November 2005.

central place for the holy communion, it was so meaningful for gay people and especially gay couples to be able to come to the altar of Christ and receive communion, because in so many instances they had been turned away from that very experience, and because it was so meaningful the MCC leadership said we will have communion offered every Sunday at every Sunday service, and that became standard practice for MCC.

The current head of the MCC, Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson, who recently took the place of a retired Rev. Troy Perry, remembers the freedom in the early MCC churches, “the freedom to invent church,” the “ownership of freedom in the Bible,” and “intoxicating freedom” that perhaps only a Pentecostal could have launched, she said. Still, the early MCC leaders were counseled by other clergy to avoid “speaking in tongues” and other Pentecostal traditions and instead to remain “generic and accessible” to as many different people as possible. As a result the MCC clergy chose to don clerical robes, create mixed tradition services, and to always keep the community a central feature of worship.

The MCC was a religious lifesaver to many in the 1970s, but over time gay members wanted to experience their own church traditions; and so, new gay-affirming churches grew up from the fertile soils of First while still other congregants returned to home parishes to come out and try for acceptance. Indeed the MCC congregations were founded to encourage mainline churches to rethink their positions, and they did have that effect. Joel Evans and a friend from First MCC, David Chewning, valued the evangelical tradition of Christianity and sought to establish some way to realize this brand of faith service as gay men. They had attended a national gathering of gay evangelicals in New York with Dr. Ralph Blair (a psychotherapist who founded Evangelicals Concerned), and they sensed they could take the mission to Atlanta.

In 1977 they formed the Evangelical Outreach Ministry with three goals in mind. First, they sought to dialogue with churches and offer religious outreach in the form of workshops with authors, flyer mailings, and newsletters. Second, they offered their own

worship services every other week, helping Christian gays struggle through their faith and orientation. Third, they undertook community evangelism, reaching out to those in the community seeking spirituality and support, and also participating in Pride festivities, political activism, and community service. It was a complete circle of Christian purpose, he thought, and in a more evangelical tradition than MCC adopted.<sup>23</sup>

In the November 1978 EOM newsletter, the editor wrote of EOM's mission and gay religious life at the time, stating that gay Christians had three life choices: 1) accept being gay while giving up their "spiritual heritage," 2) remain Christian while giving up their "natural sexual direction," or 3) try "a desperate game" of playing straight on Sunday while coming out on Saturday.<sup>24</sup>

All around us we see the unhappy results of course one in a radically secularized gay subculture. Often we hear of the shallow and empty meaninglessness of gay lives denied a living faith. Course two offers little hope. Who could not fail to note the terrible consequences of constant struggles for deliverance, the loneliness that follows, and a cancerous growth of guilt and self-deception. Course three seems to be the one most preferred by evangelical gays but often this choice carries the saddest results.... E.O.M. is founded on the strong conviction that such denials of the wholeness of our being—mental, physical and spiritual is both unbiblical and unnecessary. The truth is that gay people may joyously reconcile a committed Christian experience with full and responsible gay lifestyles.... Together let's confront the old ignorance of faith vs. orientation, spiritual vs. physical with the new realization of the wholeness of the total person.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, the author and the organization showed an interest in the idea of "life", which could not be "whole" unless a person had both spirituality (rather than "meaninglessness") and also full acceptance of one's sexual orientation, without which a person would wither away without "hope" and from "cancerous" self-destruction. The organization represented rather traditionally Christian values of both evangelicalism as well as moral lifestyles that are "committed" and "responsible." The end result would be

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<sup>23</sup> "Why You Need E.O.M.," *The News From Evangelical Outreach Ministries* 1, no. 4, (November 1978), Pitts Theology Library, Emory University.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

“wholeness,” the overarching goal for so many religious gays and lesbians then and today—the desire to follow the *natural* call of orientation and also the *spiritual* call of faith traditions without rejecting one or the other.

This very motivation and goal moved Dr. Louie Crew to skirt the MCC for his traditional Episcopal Church, founding the denomination’s gay-affirming group Integrity in the Atlanta diocese in 1974. The story actually begins when Crew met Ernest Clay, the man who would become his husband.

Well, I cannot tell the story of Integrity without telling the story of Louie and Ernest, because they are so integral historically, the one leading into the other. I had accepted myself as a homosexual person, but I wasn’t terribly happy about it, and had pretty much given up on God, but I was already an Episcopalian, and I just sort of prayed that this stuff would go away. And at a certain point in your life—when I was 28—finally decided this was not going to be a passing phase, and for several years had lived an openly gay life. But not happy about it. And to live an openly gay life in that period of my life and in the period of the culture at large, largely meant a sexual identity, not an integral part of the whole person. My sexuality was mainly with strangers--that was safer. And then on Labor Day weekend in 1973 I just moved to Fort Valley a month or so earlier to begin my job at Fort Valley State College, and I had spent the Labor Day weekend, probably Thursday, Friday, Saturday with my parents, and on Sunday I stopped over at the Atlanta YMCA to cruise around in the Atlanta “Y,” the old one on Luckie Street, and about 1 a.m. on the morning of Monday morning, Labor Day, this man, African-American, got off the elevator. I had just stepped out of the restroom, and it was sort of love at first sight. And he invited me to his room—627, I think it was—and I said I would come, and he said give me ten minutes, and I figured, aw, he’s gonna get all the detection devices, he’s a vice squad cop, but you take some risks. So I went to his room, and I’ve never left. And that was a long time ago, Labor Day weekend of 1973. We courted for five months, and on February 2<sup>nd</sup> he moved to Fort Valley, and I picked him up and carried him across the threshold, and we went back outside and...he picked me up and carried me across the threshold, and we went in and had the Book of Common Prayer open, the old one—the new one had not even been created yet—and we said the wedding vows to one another. Some friends knew that we had planned to do this: we didn’t invite them. They probably would have come, but it was a very private-, and the Holy Spirit came, and that’s all you need, really.<sup>26</sup>

Thus another gay Christian narrator from 1970s Georgia, who did not know Joel Evans, expresses the same kind of values and concerns, namely dissatisfaction with an un-spiritual, physically-based lifestyle, a way of being gay which did not satisfy him. Finding love in a monogamous coupling and a unique marriage—personally recognized

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<sup>26</sup> Dr. Louie Crew, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 9 August 2005.

if not legally—allowed Crew to feel complete, authentic, and whole. He speaks of the very same wholeness as did Evans' group:

Well, the strangest thing began to happen, besides all the wonderful things of first love. My spirituality came flooding back. I had never been whole before. I've used this language of wholeness earlier, but it came as this huge epiphany--that being physical and sexual was not at odds with being spiritual. That, all that language of having minored in Greek, and New Testament Greek, and having minored in religion and having taught the Bible for three years in Georgia and three years in a prep school in Delaware and another year in a school in London, and, and, all of that Biblical stuff started making sense. It was not just something for the heterosexual football player who had physical courage, it wasn't even about that at all, it was about disciples of Jesus. And a kind of fearlessness came over me, because I was so aware that I was inordinately loved. Not just by Ernest—I love him dearly and he's great but (chuckle) he's not God! I felt fully embraced by God (pause) in this relationship, and there were long struggles with my parents about that, but they even acknowledge that there was this huge change in me. My father said at one occasion, "I've never met Ernest, I've asked you not to bring him here"—and of course I'd been insisting that he come and Ernest insisted, "No, they don't want me to come. If you don't go, something in you will die." My father said, "I just don't understand this. There has always been something about you that was incomplete. And since you've met this man, it's not there any more. And while I'm not yet ready to meet him, would you tell him I have to love him, because he gave me my son back to me whole."

Around this time Crew completed a post-doctoral grant from UC Berkeley from the National Endowment for the Humanities and was co-editing *College English Special Issue*—the first by and about gay subject matter, a landmark issue. In San Francisco he visited the Grace Cathedral and its controversial bishop, where he assumed all gay issues had surely been worked out in the very home city of hippies and flower children. He called the church and stated that he was a gay Episcopalian there with his "black husband," and they wanted to attend and meet some other gay Episcopalians. In response he heard snickering on the other end of the line and responses that revealed only surprise and possibly titillation. Crew was simply devastated. Pouring out the tale and his woes to friends he received a common answer from them and from his sense of the spirit of God—"Well, what are you going to do about it?" He decided to form an organization.

It was no accident he decided to call this first Episcopal gay organization Integrity, "because that's what has been violated," he says. Any conversation with Dr. Crew,

English Professor Emeritus from Rutgers that he is, will yield lengthy explanations and origins of English words, and he explained his understanding of “whole.” Integrity, he said, is not a word that should describe the false claims of a used car salesman, but refers to *wholeness*. He looked up the word “whole” in a dictionary at the time, and in old English it is written h-a-l and pronounced like a descendant word, hale, meaning healthy. Three modern words have come to us from his original hal, he said — whole, hale, and holy. “The experience of the holy is the experience of being whole,” he explained.

When he returned home to Georgia from Berkeley, he immediately took out ads in the only national gay publication at the time, *The Advocate*, as well as the fairly conservative Episcopal magazine, *The Living Church*, announcing that he was starting a newsletter to which anyone could subscribe for five dollars. The first check arrived in October and the first issue of the newsletter came out in November of 1974. Crew knew he would not find enough gay Episcopalians in Fort Valley alone, and he got an idea. He had visited nearby Atlanta, where Ernest Clay worked at Rich’s department store and attended church at the First MCC. Crew attended services with him and met a Jesuit scholar, John McNeil, who was a founder of the new organization called Dignity, established in Los Angeles, California in 1970 to serve gay Catholics. What Crew needed were chapters of Integrity, too. He soon received a letter from Rev. Troy Perry encouraging him to do so, even though he knew MCC would lose some congregants to Integrity. Crew was almost surprised and certainly delighted that Rev. Perry did not choose to be “territorial.” The undertaking turned out to be a tremendous blessing for both organizational affiliates as well as Crew himself.

I was very aware that I was caught up in something much bigger than Louie Crew, and I think a great part of that gift goes back to my upbringing and my parents teaching me to expect being used [by God]... I was very public, my degrees, I jeopardized my career, there were very few



jobs in the South that I could even get an interview for, and sometimes I'd get an interview because some department head wanted to cruise me but never had hired me...including a member of the Georgia State faculty (laughs). But, uh, I was just aware also that my own career was out of my hands. I would do the best I could to be the best teacher I could be, and an indefatigable writer, but God would have to deploy me, and God sent me all over the world. (chuckle) I mean, it has just been wonderful! I can't believe-, the life I've had has been *so* wonderful compared to the life I would have had if I had gone-, as I thought I was going to be at Baylor and I'd become a Baptist preacher, teaching everybody to have that narrow, formulaic understanding of themselves. I wouldn't have understood myself, I wouldn't have understood others.

Crew was quick to state that he did not mean to denigrate anything Baptist but simply wanted to express his personal joy at the developments in his life and walk with his God. He is certainly not alone in such sentiments, as other gay faithful and clergy members expressed such notions, including Father Bradley Schmeling of Saint John Lutheran Church in the Druid Hills area of Atlanta. He is a gay pastor at Atlanta's oldest Lutheran congregation, founded in 1872, which is currently housed in a converted manse made of Stone Mountain granite, once the abode of the man who revived the KKK in the city, ironically. He explains how being gay made a positive difference in his ministry and personal walk with God:

I grew up in a family that was open, that was tolerant, so I have had the seeds in my background to be able to come to the place of accepting that being gay wasn't sin, you know. And it's not even that God loves me *anyway*, that God loves me *despite* my homosexuality, [but that] God loves me *because* of it, you know. I wouldn't be myself *without* it. God forbid what I'd be *like* if I wasn't gay! I hate to think about that! You know? (laughter) And I always felt like being gay *saved* me in some ways because-, I didn't come out until I was 27, so it took me a while to kinda come to terms with that. And when I was in seminary, people would say things to me like, "Oh, Brad, you're gonna be a bishop someday," or "You're gonna be the pastor of a large church," and, so I would've had access to *all* the positions of authority and power that the church offers to straight, white men. And so what happened for me when I came out, and came out publicly in the church, was I lost that access to power and to privilege. And while on one hand that brings a kind of source of pain with it, it also *saves* me from *seeking* it, from the temptation to go after that. I think for white men, the temptation to have privilege and to be at the center is very great, and being *de-centered* is one of the great gifts that God has given me...it puts me in solidarity with many *others* who have to live on the margins of the church, of society, or any other kind of institution. And in the end, the church really is alive the most at the margins. I mean, that's where Jesus walked, that's how Jesus' ministry *began*, and at the very heart of Christianity is good news for the poor. And so, poverty of spirit (chuckles) is a gift that comes from being gay.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bradley Schmeling, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 12 August 2004.

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Born in New England and raised in Iowa and Missouri, Bennett Sims had fought the Japanese in WWII, attended graduate school in the eastern US, and was teaching at an Episcopal seminary in Washington DC when, to his surprise, he was elected bishop of Atlanta in 1971. Bishop Sims had only been head of the Atlanta area Episcopal diocese for a few years when Louie Crew charged upon him with the Integrity campaign. He recalls:

In 1974 a name appeared on my calendar for an interview with a man whose name I did not know who was a professor of English at a little college, a black college in central Georgia in Peach County in the little city of Fort Valley. His name Louie Crew, Ph.D. Very, very gifted man. He wanted to tell me about his resolve to found and direct an advocacy and support group for gays and lesbians called Integrity. And the word Integrity was very important because, he said, it meant being who we are as gays and lesbians and out and willing to stand on the legitimacy of that orientation as being not a birth defect but a birth reality. Or not a chosen behavior but rather one that's dictated by ontology.... And I hadn't thought anything about that issue. I remembered an event in high school probably, in a parking lot; I was approached by somebody who fondled my hands or something, and I was revolted by this, but that's the only experience I had had of this reality until Louie showed up in my office. And he said, "Bishop, I've just decided to start this advocacy and support group called Integrity, and I'm a full-fledged communicant of St. Luke's church in Fort Valley, Georgia in your diocese and what are you going to do about it?" Well, (laughs) I hadn't given it a moment's thought until challenged very (laugh) forthrightly by this brilliant man. And he kept coming after me in an aggressive way, wondering what I was going to do about this, and I hadn't ever given much thought to it, so I thought, well, I'd better do some thinking and some reading...<sup>28</sup>

"I love being asked questions about Bennett Sims," Crew says. "Bennett and Louie struggled together quite a lot. Bennett had a tough job on his hands for any bishop." But Louie had a tough job on his own hands as well. Not only was he an openly gay "upstart" in the Episcopal Church, but he was "married" to an African-American "husband" in 1970s Georgia. The Bishop received outraged comments from associates and parishioners, asking him "Who is this queer person in your parish who is starting this queer group?" Sims was "uncomfortable" with this in the beginning as well as with Crew's friendship with his wife. The Bishop encouraged the vestry in Fort Valley to ask

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<sup>28</sup> Bishop Emeritus Bennett Sims, interview with author, North Carolina, 30 June 2005.

Crew to leave the church and “this was the most awful letter I think I’ve ever received.... I mean that’s like throw you out of church!” Crew remembers. The letter was signed by six members of the vestry, with three women refusing to sign. “Isn’t *that* interesting?” said Crew, smiling. “Women. Two of the people who signed it were gay themselves, a woman and a man. Talk about oppression, self-oppression.”

The controversy managed to make the front page of the *Macon Herald* in which Anglican Orthodox Bishop James Dees (“who had left the Episcopal Church because it had started accepting black people,” says Crew) accused the professor and his husband of causing a local tornado in Fort Valley.<sup>29</sup> “Would one *expect* God to be silent” in the midst of the controversial religious goings-on, the article accused. “In fact, the *Atlanta Constitution* called me and asked me what I thought about that headline,” Crew remembers, “and I said, and it’s one of my favorite lines of all time, I got to say to the *Constitution*, ‘That’s queer power.’ (laughs heartily) ‘But we took good aim too—we took the steeple off a white Baptist Church and not the black.’ (laughs heartily)”

The Bishop dedicated a summer to studying the issue and to writing a pastoral about eighteen pages long, describing homosexuality as a behavior rather than an identity. He concluded that gays and lesbians deserved the church’s compassion and love as fellow human beings and also deserved full church membership and privileges but asserted that their “behavior” was not permitted by the standards of Christian ethics and morality. He had only meant for this letter to reach the Atlanta diocese but it spread around the Episcopal Church in the US and even as far away as Sweden, where it became the official policy of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. Expecting to get “raked over the coals” by the

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<sup>29</sup> Dr. Louie Crew, interview.

gay community, instead the Bishop received only one single letter taking issue with this stance and inviting him to visit the Integrity community based in All Saints Episcopal Church downtown, a favorite parish of his. With some reluctance and anxiety he went to All Saints and found there some of his clergy and several highly placed lay people as well.

And I was received cordially, and respectfully, and so I came often and we worshipped together, and as a consequence of that *personal* experience of relational dynamic I was changed. Not by reading or research but by the power of the care and compassion and respect and all those good things that we are encouraged by Christian behavior to cultivate (chuckle) and practice. And so I said to myself, “well, I’ve got to rethink all this,” and particularly because the next General Convention would involve this same issue at a national level—what are we going to do about gays and lesbians? And I had changed my position, and I was afraid a lot of people in the church, knowing my position and knowing the literature that I had developed, would use my former position to bolster their own. So I knew I had to rewrite something, because I didn’t want to be hidden from what I had become. So I wrote another pastoral (chuckle), and intended it only for the diocese of Atlanta, but as before it got widely distributed, and what it said simply was that I had changed my mind, and that there was something ontological about this and therefore un-chosen as an identity and therefore a gift, and that it deserved all the respect that we’re admonished to provide others by the Golden Rule, (chuckle) which is a distillation of the ethics of most of the religions of the world, the Golden Rule. And that needed to dictate the quality and character of our behavior rather than what was conventional. (chuckle) Well, that got me into some hot water, but it was more warm than hot. It was very friendly. (chuckle) And I’ve been glad ever since that I made that change. And it has fed right into other changes that I’ve been led to make in my own thinking as a theologian and an historian. (smiles)

Bishop Sims wrote his second pastoral though, as Crew notes, “It took him a long time. But that’s alright. It takes me a long time to change too. Didn’t seem alright then. (chuckle) He says I was very patient with him. Actually I don’t know how he put up with me, because I was not patient at all,” chuckles Crew. “[The pastoral] had to percolate for a while,” Sims remembers. “I think the second one came out in about 1983, almost ten years later. So it took me a long time to-, a respectfully long time to (chuckle) to make that change, because that is a profound change from one that’s just *ingrained* in your innereds and into your value system.” “But what Bennett would say,” continued Crew, “and what I’ve heard him say many times about all this is that he was acting in ignorance.... He remembers that what I actually said to him was ‘God loves me just as

much as God loves you.’ I don’t think I said that. I’m a Southerner; you don’t talk to a bishop like that. But I think that’s what he heard.”

The Bishop struggled for a number of years. Meanwhile the most affirming statement the Episcopal Church had ever made, Crew recalls, he himself helped to write at the General Convention of 1976, two years after the founding of Integrity. Resolutions A-69 and A-71 passed, stating respectively: “It is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church,” and also, “This General Convention expresses its conviction that homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality.” The 1979 General Convention was “a real step backward,” Crew believes, because it overruled Sims’ first pastoral and decreed that church leaders could only be individuals whose sexuality involved heterosexual marriage, and absolutely nothing else would be tolerated.

By 1988 the sixty-ninth Convention decried violence toward homosexuals and rejected assertions that AIDS might be a judgment or punishment by God against gays. The very next year Bishop John S. Spong ordained the first practicing gay man, who had been living with his partner for five years in New Jersey. Yet another gay man in a committed relationship was ordained in 1991, and the controversy continued to simmer in the Episcopal Church. Meantime in Atlanta, the struggle between Integrity and the Bishop struck local Episcopalian priests, including Rev. Canon Gray Temple of the charismatic Episcopal Church, Saint Patrick’s, in the well-to-do north Atlanta neighborhood of Dunwoody:

[Sims wrote] a very eloquent paper that he saw as this deeply pastoral, explainin' why gay people weren't quite as good as the rest of us. That's a caricature of what he wrote, but this really got under the skin of a gay college professor who had a black life partner, who taught down in Fort Valley, Georgia and went to a little black Episcopal church down there with his partner, to the *great* distress of that congregation. Because to have an interracial couple that was gay, the conservative black congregation was really pretty rough. And the bishop kept getting called down there to try to straighten out that mess and couldn't. And he and...Louie Crew fell out publicly. They never met each other, but they kept writing back and forth. One day, Louie wrote a letter criticizing Bishop Sims and calling his personal motives into question, which he sent to all the clergy of the diocese, and I got a copy. Now, at the time, as a good charismatic, I agreed with the bishop, and read that letter and got mad. I liked Bennett, in fact I love him—he's an old mentor of mine. So, I wrote to Louie and I said, "I don't know you, but I want to call your attention to the fact that this kind of letter is scurrilous, and you don't do this in public debate." To my surprise he wrote me back this *lovely* letter, and he said, "Thank you for calling my attention to it. I'm sorry, and I'm printing a retraction, and I'm sending it around." And I thought, "That's remarkable." I mean, considerable humility. So, we got on the phone together and decided to get together for lunch next time he was in town. It was a wonderful lunch when it happened, and during the course of it he reflected on his pain at having the bishop of the diocese opposed to him, and I said, "Well, you know, Bennett is a wonderfully approachable man. Why don't you and he have the kind of lunch you and I had?" And, Louie, in fact, did invite Bennett to lunch--of course, went. The two of them became friends.<sup>30</sup>

Temple had not changed his opinions about homosexuals, though. When Sims changed his mind on the "gay issue" and wrote his second pastoral, Temple was none too happy. "I remember getting Bennett's letter, when he said I've changed my mind about all this, and putting the thing down and just cussing. Because I realized that if Bennett had seen fit to change his mind—he's a lot brighter than I am—eventually I'm probably gonna reach the same conclusion, and I already had a sense of what it would cost me in the circles in which I ran," said Temple. It took nothing less than the personal interjection of the Holy Spirit for this charismatic Christian to actually change his mind.

I knew well how many religious individuals, but especially charismatics or Pentacostals, feared to change their hearts about gays. I even asked Temple about certain Christians' belief in the existence of evil spirits and demons and believing them to be intimately associated with homosexuals, and I wondered how they could overcome such an intense fear of hell and demons. He replied with some humor:

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<sup>30</sup> Rev. Canon Gray Temple, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 9 June 2004.

Well, it's fairly easy! If you are somebody who believes in demons, and you believe in it according to the New Testament, what you do is you say, "In the name of Jesus, get!" And if it's really a demon, it gets. Now, how many gay people do you have to do that over and have nothing happen before you conclude that this may not be demonic? (laughter) I mean, I've got a lot of scalps on my belt—(laughter)—from trying that. But, none of them got any better from having me do that.

Before he was able to look back and laugh, though, he struggled intensely with the issue, especially as "there kept bein' gay guys, mostly from the Cathedral, who would come up to talk to me and say, 'We just want you to get to know us.'" He came to know them and even to trust them, that they were sincere in their faith and sincere with him. Then two "mystical" things happened, which brought on the real crisis for Temple. He was preparing for a Sunday school class lecture on the Episcopal view of proper sexuality, planning to say that, since gay people cannot get properly married, they could not, therefore, express themselves sexually. In the midst of praying about the presentation, "God interrupted, and interrupted with a question," he recalls.

And the question, of course, occurred in a split second [snaps]. Because I unpacked it—I've tried to remember what it felt like--the words came out like, "Are you aware that my gay children," that's the way God phrased it, "my gay children are lacerating themselves by the repeated impermanence of a lot of their relationships?" And I said, "Yes, everybody knows that, and it's what we think the problem is with that bunch." And God said, "If I wanted to introduce the grace of relational stability into that community, and I wanted to use the sacrament of holy matrimony to do it, is there a church in America that could hear me make that request?" And the implicit answer was "no". Liberal churches wouldn't hear God make that request, 'cause liberal churches don't pray about it. We would do it as a matter of justice, but not devotion. Conservative churches would think it was the devil, 'cause they already know what God thinks about it, 'cause it's in their Bible. And, that very split second [snaps] encounter just left me stunned, and a new possibility opened up—that God might, in fact, *not* be on my side in this thing. *Literally*, it had not occurred to me before that moment.

Second weird thing that happened was at the Integrity chapter that Louie had started several years ago. It was meeting downtown in Atlanta, and they dared me to come celebrate communion at their monthly meeting and to have a discussion with them afterwards. And they *dared* me, because they knew I was opposed to them. And, they said, "We want you to come anyway." I'm a North Carolinian, so I took the dare. And, I was celebrating communion in front of this room full of people, and I felt Jesus get my attention in the middle of it, and He said, "How do your cheeks feel?" And I realized that they were cramped with this phony rector's grin of how comfortable I *wasn't*. And Jesus said, "Cut that out. You don't have to do that." And He said, "Look around you. You are in My Kingdom." And I looked around at the people in front of me, and I realized, uh, yeah, I know what those people are doing, because they're doing what my congregation does every week. And, it was really a numinous moment.

During the early 90s Rev. Temple took his stance and risked his church, deciding to have the congregation accept gay members as “fully sacramentally equal to every other member, meaning not only communion, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and laying on of hands for healing, but also ordination and holy matrimony.” Sure enough, about 500 congregants left in outrage, and “they did not go quietly, incidentally,” he added. New members would join, but even as late as 2005 the church had not made up the numbers. Meanwhile, other churches were changing from the inside out as well. For David Chewning, EOM was not enough to satisfy his religious needs, and he decided to join a mainstream Baptist congregation as an openly gay member.

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Oakhurst Baptist, located in the Oakhurst/Decatur area of Atlanta, had been an unusually progressive church historically even before Chewning arrived. Founded in 1913, it was one of three original churches (one Baptist, one Methodist, one Presbyterian-in true Georgia form) that arose from the efforts of a Methodist circuit rider and several active women in the area, and in particular a single tent in the backyard of resident Georgia Johnson.<sup>31</sup> The churches were welcome additions, since Decatur at the time was still a small town on the outskirts of Atlanta, and the poor dirt roads made Sunday morning horse and buggy rides an unwelcome task indeed. Oakhurst Baptist struggled and slowly grew, until it was “bursting at the seams” with 1700 members after WWII when the neighborhood burgeoned with homes and families.<sup>32</sup>

The church’s first trial came in the early 60s, when the construction of the Atlanta-Fulton County stadium, completed in 1965, displaced many African-American families in

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<sup>31</sup> Rev. Lanny Peters, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 16 September 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



the area of highway I-20. These families moved north into historically white neighborhoods, causing “white flight” even further north, and churches all over these central Atlanta areas started to hemorrhage members, and Oakhurst Baptist was no exception. The pastor left his post for another parish in South Carolina, and the church had a very hard time replacing him. Finally, a Canadian pastor, John Nickel, who had only known the northern areas of the United States, agreed to take up the “challenge” at Oakhurst and “it became pretty clear early on,” says current pastor Lanny Peters, “that his goal was to stay in the community and open the church to everybody, including the African-Americans.” The church had lost at least 1000 people, Rev. Peters continues, but things starting looking up:

People either caught that vision and were literally converted—some of our people who are now in their 80s and 90s will talk about being converted around race...John’s prophetic preaching literally converted, and those who weren’t left.... [And] it was not the *number* of African-Americans in the 60s, it was *any* African-American in the segregated South. So anyway, what happened then, I think was it radicalized this church around the race issue. It was, if not *the* first, *among* the first Baptist churches to race integrate. Interestingly enough, there was a motion that didn’t go forward to have the church *excluded* from the Baptist Association, because of its stance on race!...That was how radical it was, and now, again, for people who didn’t grow up in the South or experience that it seem preposterous to think that you would be under fire for opening your doors to African-Americans, but that was certainly the mood...*Because* of that, I think because of the learning there, when other issues came up the church was much more open. Like the church became one of the first Baptist Churches in the state to ordain women as ministers.... It was kind of a classic story around here where a deacon came to John and said, “Well, I can see that one of your goals is to race integrate this church, and you need to know that I’m going to vote against that.” And John said, “Well, you’ll never have the opportunity to do that, because to vote on whether somebody is welcome in the church of Jesus Christ is to vote on whether or not it’s the church. And we *are* the church, and *that’s* not up for vote.”

Oakhurst Baptist had at least one known gay member in the 60s, an individual who remained largely closeted and quiet, and a few others joined in the same quiet yet known way typical of the South in general. David Chewning changed all that, as he joined with a personal mission in about 1979. Rev. Peters said that the church called Chewning “the bulldog for Christ,” because he would “get hold of your leg and wouldn’t let go.” Evans remembered that Chewning saw himself in the light of a different metaphor. At a church

retreat in the north Georgia mountains attendees had to introduce themselves in such a way that everybody could remember names, many using animals as mnemonic devices. David identified himself instead with a part of the body, as from the scripture in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, and David said, “I am the adrenal gland.” He had a gift for initiation, leadership, follow through, commitment, and even a “consternation” that occasionally “easily offended people.” So determined was he to help found EOM that he simply stated outright to Evans, “If nobody else, it’s going to be and a post office box.” But Chewning also felt called to join a mainstream congregation in order to come out there and make a difference, and he chose Oakhurst Baptist “because of Oakhurst’s unique history”:

It was the first church in Atlanta to integrate racially. [Author’s note--except for Hyde’s church and First Congregational] So that congregation was not the usual Baptist congregation. A lot of forward thinking, progressive people gravitated toward that church, and there was a wonderful book called *Struggle for Integrity* written by a leader in Oakhurst Baptist church that talked about being the first church to integrate in the city. And David began to talk to people to make connections and make friends with some of the people there, and he saw that as the opportunity that was needed, the kind of congregation that would be open to new and innovative things. And gradually he began to attend, and then he joined the church. And that was such a groundbreaking experience as far as, you know, the regular church life in Atlanta, had a new horizon opening up to it.

In fact, Oakhurst Baptist had written a church covenant in about 1974 that afforded a sense of church identity, recalls Rev. Peters. The covenant stated: “We are together *only* to be the church of God in Christ. We’re not here by chance, but God through grace is making of us a fellowship to embody and to express the Spirit of Christ. In this fellowship there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus [from Galatians 3:28]. Therefore we reject *any* status in this fellowship in terms of church office, possessions,

education, race, age, and gender.”<sup>33</sup> David wanted to expand the Oakhurst vision even more. Rev. Peters reflects:

It was before John Nickel left, a young man named David Chewning, who showed up and sort of said, “Hey everybody, I’m a gay man, and I’ve come to participate in this church in every way I can.” And David kind of made a point to go to every Sunday school class, even attended the older women’s Sunday school class just to sort of almost-, David was kind of into almost more of a confrontational I’m-gay-deal-with-it kind of thing. And *most* people just sort of, you know, I think tolerated, even though he was a likable kind of guy. What was funny about it is he was much more conservative theologically than most of the church; he was very evangelistic and more traditional. Other than being gay, he was a more traditional Christian than a lot of people here were.

When Rev. Nickel left Oakhurst, he was replaced by Rev. Mel Williams, who was “hit pretty early on with David.” The matter reached a crisis when Chewning asked to teach Sunday school in about 1982. The congregation felt very uncomfortable with the idea of a gay man teaching children, and so the education committee denied the request. The pastor, however, took a courageous stand. In a Sunday sermon he spoke out in opposition to the decision, arguing that David should be judged on whether or not he had the “gifts” to teach and not on his orientation. All the same, Oakhurst Baptist did not bless an official public policy of gay-affirmation, even if in practice the church did so.

David Chewning had set out to find his “wholeness” at Oakhurst, his open and active identity as a gay yet conservative Christian man. Once he had broken the proverbial ice at the congregation, other gay and lesbian members felt able to come out and remain open as well. In 1989 the church had a new pastor in Rev. Lanny Peters, and during his tenure gay members wanted more than the tolerance they received—wanting, for example, to be included in the church covenant statement. The request prompted a great deal of study on the issue—theological, psychological, sociological—and much debate. After a long process the church decided to add to the covenant statement, stating that the church

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<sup>33</sup> Rev. Peters interview, reading the covenant aloud.

rejects any status, now including “sexual orientation, mental ability, physical ability, or other distinctions.” Partly the decision had to do with the copious study undertaken, but in a more real way, it was the openly gay parishioners who changed others’ hearts on the matter, just as was the case with Rev. Temple. Rev. Peters relates another of many favorite stories at Oakhurst:

I remember that there was one woman who had been pretty adamantly opposed to changing the covenant. And there was a gay man that started attending the church, and he wanted kind of traditional Bible study, and there was a lot of kinds of innovative Sunday school classes, but the only one that was doing traditional Bible study was our older women’s class. So he [said], “I’m a middle aged gay man and there’s all these women over sixty and seventy, but they’re kind of doing [what I want to do]—so he went to the class, and he liked it, and they liked *him*, so he attended this class. And at some point, there was this woman in the class who’d been teaching it, who was going to be ordained, and the class one day was having a discussion about-, they wanted to host a reception. And, Bill—the guy’s name—his partner was a caterer. And at one point he told them, said, “well, why don’t my partner and I just cater this thing so y’all can just enjoy, not have to be downstairs and miss the ceremony and stuff.” And so one of the women who had been most adamant to me about her feelings about homosexuality and questioning whether or not that was morally and Biblically right, had come up to me one day and said, “Lanny, I’ve got the most exciting news. Bill’s partner is going to cater the dinner, and we’re just *so* excited about that.” And what it struck me as is, it’s all about relationships. Because she said “Bill’s partner” as if that was this natural language for her, and I thought, you know, five years ago she could not have just said-. And, it was Bill’s partner, he was doing this nice thing and she *saw* what a loving, wonderful thing it was.

Once again a gay man wanted to be a church member, a “whole” member. He was viewed as and *was* more traditional and conservative than other members, desiring an old fashioned type of Bible study that only senior women in the church enjoyed.

Over time Oakhurst became one of the most progressive of all churches in Atlanta, welcoming everyone and going out of their way to accommodate people of all types, all abilities, reaching out to the homeless, preaching about the environment, making community alliances with local Jewish and Muslim congregations, and winning both loving members and garnering scorn from less progressive Baptists. The church’s position on homosexuals was finally too much for the Georgia Baptist Convention, which attempted to “reason” with Oakhurst, and, not succeeding, unceremoniously dis-

fellowshipped the parish in 1999 and also coerced the Atlanta Baptist Association to kick the church out as well. Oakhurst has remained an independent Baptist church ever since, not even choosing to ally with the United Church of Christ (UCC) as most other disfellowshipped Baptist churches often do. And for all its progressiveness and faithfulness to Christian teaching, Oakhurst remains particularly loved by many, even those who are not members. Reflects Emily Saliers of Atlanta's Indigo Girls, herself the daughter of a Methodist minister/religion professor at Candler School of Theology:

*It's tough*, you know; being gay and trying to find a place within the church is very, very, very difficult—you know, I haven't found it. But, I have found *people*, like [Rev.] Susan Henry-Crowe... and my father, and my mother, who live and work within the context of the church but who allow me my struggles, and the people at Oakhurst Baptist—just *tremendous* models of what it means to be involved in church life. But, that's the side of the church that most people don't ever get to see... The South takes a lot of flak, for being so backward... But then we have congregations like Oakhurst Baptist in Atlanta that stands up, gets kicked out of the Baptist Union for their stance on gays, amongst other things I guess. That church is *so* vibrant, *so* mixed, you know, such a tradition, such a history of community work, saving people's lives, outreach to those who are suffering in the community—to me, everything that the church *should* be. I mean, it's what the sacred scripts tell us the church should be. And they're doing it, and they get the boot. But they *stand up*, in the face of all that, and that's in Georgia! I mean, I hold them up as a pinnacle, against *any* other church in the *whole* country! Oakhurst Baptist church.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Miracle on Peachtree Street**

As the decades passed, more churches came to affirm gay members and clergy all over the city and state. Denominations made national strides, predominantly gay churches continued to spread, and all while the Religious Right continued to try to beat back the progress, especially with regard to gay civil unions and marriage. The religious/cultural battles and change in Atlanta, Georgia, and even the nation at large is well encapsulated and epitomized by a famous local story.

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<sup>34</sup> Emily Saliers, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 7 December 2004.

I was in the public gallery of the Georgia state legislature when I first heard the story told. Together we were a large group of gay and lesbian Atlantans and activists who had waited in long lines at the Gold Dome that day to hear the vote on SR 595, the 2004 bill that would ban gay marriage and civil unions in the state, pending a statewide popular approval vote. The debate and campaign had been especially hard on Georgia's only openly gay legislator, Rep. Dr. Karla Drenner (D-Avondale Estates). The Baptist-raised West Virginian native sat across from me after church services one Sunday and talked about her experiences at the Capitol in her distinctive gentle, charming drawl:

It really *was* a horrific experience. I was not prepared for people to be as mean-spirited as what they were. And so it surprised me greatly—people not riding in elevators with me, people objecting to the fact that I was in prayer caucus, and they wanted to know *why* I was there. They definitely had an impression of who I was *long* before I even took office...and they'd already formed opinions and built barriers that has taken me years to break through. And, it hasn't been easy, because sometimes, *nice* people do *mean* things.... We had three People of Faith rallies, and the Christian Coalition had one rally, and they brought in Congresswoman Musgrave from Colorado.... And she was there on the Capitol steps along with the buses they had brought in. And we were on the opposite side of the street...I had heard the helicopters and stuff from inside the office building, and we were in adjournment for lunchtime, and...as I was crossing the street I thought I should just go out front to *see*, and just *feel* exactly what this is all about. And I walked out all by myself, which was a bad mistake on my part, because I wasn't expecting any altercation of any kind. I don't know why; I still naively thought that people were, I don't know, could contain themselves and act like adults. But that wasn't the case. So I walked out, and I walked into the middle of the rally, and I was standing next to many of the ministers, who were standing on one side with their Bibles open, and they were *spewing* unkind things to the people across the street, which were the People of Faith. And I stood next to them, and I just, I couldn't *believe* that this was coming out of Christians. That this level of hatred was *there*. And it was so, um, gosh, it was scary. It was *very* scary. And so I stood there for a little bit, they figured out who I was, and the crowd started to move around me, and I was thankful that the Capitol security and the state police came and escorted me back in.<sup>35</sup>

Representative Jill Chambers (R-Doraville) was the only Republican to vote *against* the bill. Though married, straight, a traditional fiscal conservative, libertarian-leaning, small business owner type of Republican, she did not fare any better than Drenner.

I was threatened. I was called names. I was told that I was the reason that the World Trade Centers fell—people like me. I was told that I was immoral, that I was burning, my soul was burning in hell. I was told that my husband and I, who were married by a judge, were not *really* married, we had only a civil union, and we would not be seen married in the eyes of God. I was told some very hateful and very bigoted and very spiteful remarks...on a very regular basis...

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<sup>35</sup> Rep. Dr. Karla Drenner, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 12 September 2004.

People actually came down to the Capitol. One of the most interesting things was to see people who, uh, (struggles for words, sighs) who want to tell us what religion *really* is, behave in a manner that is contradictory to everything I ever learned on how religion should be expressed, or at least the Christian religion. Interestingly enough, I know who practices what they preach now! (laughs) And so, (laughs) ...every single person that came down to yell at me or to give me flowers...they have their right in America to believe the way they believe, they have the right to voice it, and I will stand there and take it. Every single person that called me out on the issue, even if I knew I was going to get yelled and cussed at, I gave them the courtesy of coming out into the hallway and talking to them face to face.... And, there was even a bus load of folks who came up from south Georgia to see what a “gay-loving Republican” looked like, OK. I mean that—I’m-, literally! I’m serious! That’s what the guy told me when he calls me out, and I said, “Well, uh, as you can see, I don’t have horns and tail.” (laughs heartily)<sup>36</sup>

These stories capture the changed cultural dynamic in the South. Drenner and Chambers—very different women, different political parties, different personalities entirely—both had that Southern sense of expecting public civility (people acting “like adults”) as well as the live-and-let-live libertarianism (“they have their right to believe”). The women were confronted by representatives of the new fundamentalism, who inject themselves into the political sphere, attempt to legislate their own brand of religious legalism, and deploy provocative public speech that borders, and sometimes cross over into, hate speech.<sup>37</sup> The controversial bill, SR 595, *would* win that day and Amendment 1 became state constitutional law later that election year; but on that particular day at the Gold Dome, citizens in the gallery hoped against hope. Behind me I heard two gay men discussing some local history. “Yes! That Baptist church had snipers on the roof!” I heard one say to the other. I simply had to turn around and inquire into the astounding story I heard unfolding, a story they called the “miracle on Peachtree Street.” I would find out soon enough that many a gay Atlantan knows this story, though with slightly differing details (“snipers” is apparently an exaggeration).

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<sup>36</sup> Rep. Jill Chambers, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 16 June 2004.

<sup>37</sup> The Fred Phelps/Westboro Baptist Church group actually carries signs that state outright that God “hates” this group and that, but especially America as a whole for the single and unforgivable “sin” of homosexuality, or, more precisely, toleration/acceptance of homosexuals. In 2006 the group had taken to loudly picketing the funerals of war dead, and President George W. Bush outlawed these particular pickets.

The “miracle” was twenty years in the making, and the story begins when Atlanta gay rights activists organized a march soon after Stonewall in June 1971. For several years marchers tromped up Peachtree Street in Midtown (a large urban neighborhood in the heart of Atlanta just north of downtown and known for its concentration of gay male residents) to Piedmont Park, and then the marchers skipped certain years, returning to march regularly (yearly) in the 1980s, when HIV/AIDS hit the gay community. In 1986 the pastor of First Baptist Church made the comment that the disease was God’s punishment against homosexuals, and in protest about 350 local activists picketed the church.<sup>38</sup> Both Pride and the AIDS tragedy fueled the growing local feud during the rest of the decade. The parade did not really begin to grow in size until about 1988, when 1000 marchers took to Peachtree, the same year that Atlanta’s premier gay periodical, *Southern Voice*, debuted. The following year paid tribute to the twentieth anniversary of Stonewall, and the parade grew a bit more. From 1990 to 1991 (the time of the “Miracle” story) Pride festival attendance grew in size from 5,000 to 20,000, and from there parade size and festival attendance grew even more—40,000 in 1992, 100,000 in 1993, 150,000 in 1994, and finally to 300,000 thereafter.<sup>39</sup>

From the beginning, Pride marchers passed several churches on the march/parade route, not surprisingly, as it would be difficult to have a parade *anywhere* in Atlanta without passing many churches. One church, however, drew the marchers’ ire—the very large First Baptist Church of Atlanta. One early activist, Maria Helena Dolan, remembered a member of the church standing outside attempting to exorcise demons

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<sup>38</sup> Arnold Fleischman and Jason Hardman, “Hitting Below the Bible Belt,” 417.

<sup>39</sup> “A Brief History of Pride in Atlanta & The Atlanta PRIDE Committee Inc.”, <http://new.atlantapride.org/history>, accessed 2006, ©2001 - 2005 The Atlanta Pride Committee Inc.



from the gay folks who walked by, and these kinds of actions made First Baptist the target of gay anger. While most marchers would simply walk by silently, others would take to yelling retorts like, “Shame! Shame! Shame!” Eventually, the date and time of the Pride march was changed from Saturday to Sunday at 1pm in order to maximally disrupt and perturb the worshipping Baptists. One of the more radical sub-groups of gay rights marchers took up megaphones, marched in a circle around the church (the “surround the church march”) shouting out chants such as, “Burn down the church and bring back the goddess!”<sup>40</sup> Eventually, and not surprisingly, the church chose to close on Pride day and erected barriers protected by armed security guards to keep possible vandals at bay, though there was never an actual threat of harm to the church, contemporary marchers insist.

All the while the other large churches on Peachtree took notice. And so, it started with Saint Mark United Methodist Church. The current pastor, Rev. Jimmy Moor, shares:

[I]t was actually driven by some lay people who were concerned about the neighborhood of the church and who asked the question, “who is in this neighborhood today?” And the answer to that question was, “well, there are a number of gay and lesbian persons,” and so they began to wrestle with that. That movement was strongly supported by a pastor at the time, Dr. Mike Cordle, and so they began to think about that and...these lay people began to talk.... But the event that triggered it was the Gay Pride parade, and as it came down Peachtree— and it goes literally right in front of the doors of St. Mark—and at that time First Baptist Atlanta was directly across the street from us, their building was there, and...the stance of that church was somewhat negative and hostile toward the marchers.<sup>41</sup>

Creative Director of Atlanta Pride, Al Pellenberg, remembers:

When the First Baptist Church still existed on Peachtree Street...the firsts they did was to hire off-duty policemen to make sure that we didn’t walk up on the steps. Then they changed the time of their services on the Sunday of Gay Pride so they wouldn’t be in church at the same time we were walking down the street. But I remember, there was a period of time when my mom

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<sup>40</sup> These comments about “the surround-the-church march” by Bill Boykin and Maria Helena-Dolan at public presentation organized by local organization, Touching Up Our Roots, at Radial Café, Atlanta, Georgia, 9 June 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Rev. Jimmy Moor, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 9 June 2004.

and dad were younger when they used to come up from Florida and march with us every year... and then they got a little older, and they really weren't able to march, but they would stand on the sidelines. And there is this wonderful story about how this one guy adopted my mother this one weekend, because he had just come out and his parents had thrown him out of the house. So she took care of him all weekend long... But the churches on Peachtree, when the First Baptist Church was espousing hate by hiring police-, my mom ran up on the steps and said (throwing arms up), "Go ahead! Arrest me!" (laughter)<sup>42</sup>

Georgia native son and prominent activist Harry Knox, the debut leader and current executive in charge of religion and faith issues with the Human Rights Campaign headquartered in Washington DC, also remembers bringing family to these early marches:

First Baptist Church was across the street from Saint Marks UMC on Peachtree Street, and the Gay Pride parade passes literally right between those two lots, going north toward Piedmont Park every year. And in the bad ole days the folks at First Baptist would have armed guards lining the sidewalk to keep us off of their property. And there was a terrible negativity in the parade route at the place, because so many gay people had come out of Christian backgrounds and been so burned and so hurt by that that they would focus all of that on First Baptist. And so as they would march by they would point their fingers at that side of the street and say, "Shame! Shame! Shame! Shame!" (gets choked up and teary-eyed) And it was really bad. It was just sort of a place, you know, where everybody just got out their bad feelings, and it was a shame, it was terrible. Well, the year before I had to make a church transition, my mother and my grandmother walked with us in the Pride parade, which was a wonderful experience for us as a family, just a tremendous, great thing. And I had warned them about that corner. Gram, in particular, I was concerned wouldn't understand and would be afraid when all this negativity happened. And I said, "Gram, this is going to happen, and we're just going to move to the side and keep walking, and in the very next block the party starts again and everybody is laughing and having a good time, so I just want to warn you that about half way through the parade route this happens."<sup>43</sup>

But the gay marchers, their friends, and family members would find something altogether different on the parade route in 1990. No one knew, but changes had been taking place at Saint Mark Methodist. Rev. Moor stated in an interview that the church had originally been "one of the leading churches both numerically and just about any other way you care to name back in the middle part of the twentieth century," but the church fell in terms of numbers and influence during the 1970s, as members responded to "white flight" as well as general suburban flight, and flight from the homeless, the

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<sup>42</sup> Pellenberg interview.

<sup>43</sup> Harry Knox, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 21 August 2004.

counterculture, and a contemporarily declining downtown area. The key to the “miracle” would lay with the new pastor at the time, Rev. Dr. Mike Cordle, who had arrived the previous year to take over leadership of Saint Mark, and his first Sunday at his new post just happened to be Pride Sunday. He and long-time lay leader, Henry Thompson, stood on the church steps and watched the parade go by. Harry Knox remembers:

What a lot of people don't know is that the bishop had sent Mike to Saint Mark to close it, because they had this big, huge, historic church plant that they couldn't afford to keep up; it was literally falling down around them. If they had a hundred people on Easter Sunday they thought that was *marvelous*. I mean, they had shrunk down to too few people to maintain even the physical plant much less the ministries of the congregation. It was a terrible shame, because this church was in the vanguard of the positive white response to the civil rights movement...And when Mike got the assignment...he and his wife, Julie, sat in the floor of the parsonage where they lived in north Georgia and cried, said it was the worst thing that had ever happened him. He had expected a wonderful appointment as a reward for having done really good service through a lot of ministry, and he thought this was going to be the appointment that would take off. (smiles) You know, it would be his jumping off place, moving toward a much larger ministry. And it turned out to be that, but because he made so, not because of the situation he was presented. The bishop asked him to go there because he is a wonderful pastor, and I think Bishop had the sense that he would do a good job of helping have the final funeral for this really wonderful congregation that had been in the forefront of the white response to the civil rights movement, the moderate white response to the civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s here. Rev. Dow Kirkpatrick was the pastor then and literally wrote the minister's manifesto that was the white moderate minister's response to Martin Luther King's call to the white church to step up and give leadership.

Saint Mark was known for its progressive work around women's issues, the homeless, and other contemporary urban issues that had presented on Peachtree. Atlantans called it a liberal church when liberal was “not something considered a good thing,” and their membership shrank as the years passed, leading the bishop to call for its closure. Knox continues: “[Mike] came there, on his first Sunday was Pride Sunday, and he and Henry Thompson... stood on the steps of the church and watched the gay pride parade go by. And he said, ‘You know, everybody was having such a good time,’ and he said, ‘Well, there was all that shouting going on, you know, they were all mad at First Baptist, but it just seemed like people were having a good time.’ This is the way Mike would see things. I would come in with this doom and gloom scenario in my mind, and Mike said,

‘Well, you know, they were a little mad at First Baptist, but everybody seemed to be having a good time.’ (Smiles)”

Dr. Cordle watched the marchers parade by that Sunday, turned to his friend and told him that the people he saw needed a place to go to church. “Yeah, but what are *you* going to do?” Henry responded, who had felt for a long time that gay people should be able to openly attend and join the church. The pastor replied, “Well, let’s talk about it,” so over the next year he met with the families of the church, asking what they would think if the church opened up its doors to gay members. The congregation nearly universally responded, “We’ve just been waiting on you preachers to catch up!” Some members spoke up and said that they had known gays for years as neighbors, co-workers, and friends, and they did indeed want them in church, but they did not think the *clergy* would welcome gays. At that point, Saint Mark as a congregation decided they would make the change, and they would make the decision *clear* during the very next Pride parade.

Harry Knox remembers approaching the dreaded First Baptist corner with Gram and family in tow, expecting negativity and shouting:

Well, when we got there, there was none of this. There was none of that pointing and shouting. Instead there were all of these tiny little ole ladies dottering out into the street with bright canary yellow fliers from Saint Mark, with little cups of water, and the flyer said something along the lines of “everyone is welcome at Saint Mark” and here is when we meet for worship. And people were just bumping into the furniture! We didn’t know how to react! And I heard, you know, all kinds of things, like “they must be trying to recruit us,” you know, “this must be some sort of ex-gay thing.” But there was also, “Where’s First Baptist?” This is so wonderful, the little ladies were just delightful,...and it was just an amazing experience and completely changed the dynamic. And people talked about it the rest of the day. It was all anybody could talk about. “Those folks from Saint Mark had a water stop on the parade route.” So when I was looking for a church again, my mother actually remembered that happened and [suggested I join] “you know, *that* church where they did the water thing.”

Al Pellenberg also remembers the occasion:

And Saint Mark and [later other Peachtree churches], taking what had started as sort of a small little grass roots thing with the water out there to becoming-, I mean, it almost became a mission

for them. It became a way for them to say that all Christians aren't like these bad people across the street, and it went from two or three people holding trays of water to it's now probably 100 people with their kids standing out there with their trays of water and the kids running through the line bringing cups of water to the marchers and stuff like that, and that's a cultural change. And I think that then leads to the gay and lesbian churches saying our visibility is important as well.

In a way, this mainstream Protestant congregation had its own "coming out" experience. As heterosexual civil rights activists before and other gay-affirming individuals, like Jill Chambers, learned, you do not have to be gay to be "queered" by society. The American religious fundamentalism that has become so popular in recent history not only rejects homosexuality as an aberrant and sinful life *choice*, but also refuses to permit others to have different opinions about homosexuality or much of anything else. And even those who overlook such Biblical sins as divorce or idolatry have come to fixate almost obsessively upon homosexuality. "And they lost two or three families," Knox continues, "and they all said, 'Good riddance to bad rubbish,' those families were never missed, and, instead, all of the gay folks came, and also all of these non-gay families with kids showed up, enlightened parents who said, 'I want my child raised in a different kind of a church than the one I was raised in. I want them to be part of a congregation that really welcomes everybody.'"

Saint Mark's attendance grew after that, and not just from gay members. Years later, the church now is a "wonderful, vibrant congregation," Knox reflects, with "tremendous ministries" with all kinds of outreach, and one of the strongest congregations in the city. Rev. Cordle came to preach routinely to 700-900 people every Sunday morning in a church that, when he got there, if they had 100 on Easter morning the church thought they were fortunate. Rev. Moor continues:

What [the marchers] found on *this* side of the street were a group of people handing out cups of water to the marchers as they went down. It tends to be a hot day, and so this was an effort to extend compassion and care to the marchers. And there was a sign up on the front of the church

that said, “Everybody is welcome at St. Mark.” And that made quite an impression on the marchers and on the people in the community. The word began to spread and some of the people began to come to St. Mark to see if it was true, or if this were just some ploy. What they found was a genuine welcome here, and that word began to spread, and so more and more folks from the community came to St. Mark. And the term “miracle on Peachtree Street” was coined by a long-term member of St. Mark who was here at that time—D. W. Brooks, who was one of the founders of the Gold Kist Corporation, and advisor actually to Presidents in this country on agricultural matters—but, that was *his* term for the turn-around in the church. And it led to a dramatic revival here at St. Mark in terms of numbers and of influence again. But it was that event, and that giving of cups of water to marchers that is considered by everybody here the pivotal moment in the transformation. The church opened its doors, and has attempted to do that consistently and faithfully since that time.

After Saint Mark, other churches followed, including Saint Luke Episcopal on Peachtree Street. Current rector Rev. Daniel Matthews shares his recollection of the “miracle” when it came to his church:

The gay pride parade comes by the front of our church on Peachtree Street, so...we have a welcoming water station. We have twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty, I don’t know how many people who stay after church on that day, and we stand out and we hand out cups of water. We bought a brand new hose, and we—I mean we’ve done this every year before, but the hose had a hard time reaching last time [2003], so we bought a brand new hose that would make sure we had plenty of [water]—and we filled all these huge vats with water and dumped all of this ice in and put out these cups,...and so we’re handing out all these neon-colored cups to people who were going by, and we’re stretched about 200 yards up the street, so we’re all over the place. And what happened eventually was, I discovered, since I was the closest to the church and there were people 100 or 200 yards further up, I wasn’t going to give anybody any water. So eventually I set down the water, and I just started shaking hands and talking to people, and I’m there in my [clerical] collar, and so they know I’m representing the church. The people started coming by and thanking me for the water, because they’d gotten their water 200 yards earlier, and the most profound, heartfelt thanks for the cup of water. The water tasted like we had ground rubber hose up and poured it into the water; the water was horrible. The smell of it was awful [because of the new hose], so it wasn’t that we were giving them some wonderful gift in the water; it was the act of offering it, which was so powerful for so many people. And it was powerful for me to have those moments where people would go by and say, “Thank you for being here. Thank you for opening your doors. Thank you for the cup of water.” And not one person said, “You know, (laughs) this tastes horrible!” Because that wasn’t what it was about. It wasn’t about the water at all. We could have been handing them empty cups. It was about the fact that we were offering them *anything* at all. And here was a group of people who were used to having the doors locked, and our doors were open and the gifts were being given out...And they were thankful. And that was a powerful experience for me.<sup>44</sup>

First Baptist Atlanta fled the area altogether for the more affluent, white, and conservative neighborhood of Dunwoody further to the north, where they never had to face gay parades again, or, for that matter, roaming homeless individuals and other presumably less desirable elements of humanity. The churches that did not flee

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<sup>44</sup> Rev. Matthews interview.

downtown and central Atlanta areas chose instead to *minister to* those they found around them rather than leaving them behind. Over the decades these downtown denizens included gays and lesbians, the homeless, hippies and counterculture youth, diverse races and ethnicities, AIDS victims, and all walks of humanity. This process of welcome started, for some congregations, as early as the 1950s and 60s, when desegregation and integration caused many churches to flee the central Atlanta neighborhoods for more “white” areas north. Other congregations became specifically gay-affirming when gay rights activism came to prominence in the 70s, or when the AIDS crisis hit in the 80s, or when the national culture became seemingly spontaneously more openly accepting of gay Americans in the 1990s, as with the Miracle on Peachtree Street. Every year, new congregations come down from the proverbial fence that separates the two camps of opinion in the American culture wars to join the ranks of the religiously gay-welcoming.

The Miracle on Peachtree Street encapsulates succinctly the duality of Atlanta as a city. Two very different religious stances toward gay Atlantans stood face to face on a single prominent street, separated by mere yards. Since gay marchers and their allies could not convince First Baptist members to change their opinions, and since First Baptist could neither avoid the gay presence nor cast out the perceived demons behind the social situation, they chose instead to find new space to live out their religious faith. Atlanta becomes more divided within its borders on the issue of gays and religion even as the broader metropolis becomes more divided socially and politically between the inside and the outside of “the Perimeter.” Atlanta therefore has been both religiously oppressive of gays in recent history as well as courageously supportive. But long before and ever since

Peachtree Street circa 1990, “miracles” have been happening all over Atlanta and Georgia to bless gay religious congregants and challenge the socio-political status quo.

## **Conclusion**

In the 1970s, gay religious progressives by and large knew one another and constituted a relatively small, courageous vanguard. They met and spoke about and through very early gay-affirming churches, organizations, conferences, and social networks. Even if they did not know one another, they entertained very similar ideas about creating “whole” lives that honored both sexual orientation as well as more traditional or conservative religious backgrounds. Some gays were too abused by religion to have any interest in it, while others found happy sanctuary at a local MCC. Still others desired recognition from home churches or familiar denominations, or otherwise wanted to be a part of a church or ministry different from the MCC. Thus did gay-affirming congregations and gay-welcome at established congregations originate and grow.

After the original founding of Archbishop Hyde’s many churches and Rev. Elder Troy Perry’s MCCs around the country, other congregations came into being or became gay-affirming in an over-arching pattern that reflected 70s church happenings in Atlanta. The pattern suggests three paths of gay-affirming religious evolution. The first path involves independent gay religious institution building. New, predominantly gay congregations are established year in and year out—not Troy Perry’s original plan, but the ultimate outcome of his evangelical efforts. All over the country gay groups within established MCC churches might branch out to form *new* gay churches, ministries, or Bible study



groups to cater to specific religious traditions, social needs, ethnic backgrounds, or even new locations, that could not be met in either the Orthodox Hyde churches or the variant, generic MCC congregations (or other new predominantly gay churches). Joel Evans' group, EOM was one such group.

The second path involves denomination-level organizational activism, which is exemplified by Dr. Crew and Integrity, whereby an independent gay and lesbian group is formed *within* an already extant, and generally gay-hostile, denomination. A group like Integrity is not independent of the Episcopal church in the way the MCC congregations became their own denomination with its "freedom to invent church." On the other hand, these kinds of organizations have been established to cater specifically to the needs of gays and lesbians and their straight allies, to bring about greater affirmation of same, and even to host their own activities and worship services. Since the 70s every mainstream denomination has come to claim a gay and lesbian group, from the Catholic Dignity, to the More Light Presbyterians, Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and Rainbow Baptists, Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (Quaker), Lutherans Concerned, More Light Church Network (Presbyterian), Reconciling Congregations (Methodist), Family Fellowship (Mormon), Evangelicals Concerned and Accepting Evangelicals, Changing Attitude (Anglican), and so on. These organizations offer religious space, spiritual voice, and social acceptance to gay co-religionists, and can work steadily for change in a given denomination, though often face long uphill struggles.

The third and final path of gay-affirming religious evolution might be described as idiosyncratic congregational conversion, and involves individual gays coming out in their home congregations and working to change the opinions within that particular institution,

whether the denomination officially permits gay-affirmation or no. David Chewning and Oakhurst Baptist exemplify this path. In response to out lay members, an individual congregation might choose to welcome gay members, though without going public with their stance (a don't-ask-don't-tell kind of policy). Or, it might choose to be welcoming but not affirming, which means a gay member can be openly him or herself but the congregation will not permit holy unions or gay clergy, for example. Finally, a congregation can choose to be completely and openly gay-affirming and risk losing some dissenting members or even suffering reproach from clerical higher-ups.

All religious developments involving Atlanta area (or other area) denominations, congregations, and religious organizations, from the 1970s on have followed one of these paths. The exception to the rule is the Miracle on Peachtree Street. In this case, gay members did not work internally for congregational acceptance, and neither did the national gay Methodist organization influence matters at the time; instead, heterosexual church leadership reacted to a chance set of events to become gay-affirming, and they went out of their way to make sure the local gay community knew this.

Interestingly, all heterosexual clerical narrators explained, when asked, that the reason they had personal changes of heart about gays and lesbians was their own personal relationships that they experienced with them, whether as family members, friends, parishioners, or co-workers. The specifics about these relationships varied and they took place at very different times in narrators' lives and also in historical time, but all stories shared this common theme. Further, while a few clergypersons profess to have never entertained any negative or less than fully inclusive attitudes/opinions about gays due to progressive upbringings, the vast majority had definite conversion experiences, as it

were, or at least struggled for periods of time. Both individuals and entire congregations grapple with changes of heart, theology, and policy not only vis-à-vis personal experiences but also within the context of historical socio-political happenings, from the civil rights movement to women's rights activities, from Stonewall and 1970s cultural happenings to the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, from interactions with the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus (founded 1981) to events such as the Miracle on Peachtree Street.

Indeed, miracles happened beyond Peachtree Street, and included greater Atlanta, the state of Georgia, and the United States as a whole. Some narrators have said that they believed "God has been doing something special in Atlanta" or "has had His hand over Georgia," and other similar comments.<sup>45</sup> Whether one believes this or not, there is no doubt that gay religious history in America finds a major historical cultural source in the Atlanta area and in Georgia. All told, this cultural evolution constitutes an over-arching Miracle in the Peachtree State, one might say.

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<sup>45</sup> Paraphrased quotes from many similar comments.

### **Thesis Conclusions**

It can be reasonably argued that no other single social/cultural issue in America currently captures the nation's attention and generates more concern and debate than gay rights and "values." This culture war has come to divide America against itself and consumes tremendous energy and resources. Squarely at the center of oppositional activism stands religion, and very little progress toward social tolerance and civil rights can come about without seriously and meaningfully grappling with the intersection of American religious life and the American gay population. Even as some states choose to ban gay marriage and civil unions and as politicians use the "gay issue" to negatively manipulate the electorate to their own ends, there are other states making different choices and many allies of the LGBTQ community who have worked very hard toward positive social change. Many of these individuals are from Atlanta or Georgia and nearby states, placing the South at the center of political and spiritual progress rather than the rearguard.

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Atlanta and Georgia had not lived under the state constitutional ban on gay marriage, civil unions, and domestic partnerships for even one year when the twenty-fifth biannual national convention of the United Church of Christ, that is the General Synod, came to town during the first week of July 2005. This was not to be just any Synod; the convention would take seriously a vote to sanction gay marriage within the denomination. The motion passed through committee after days of debate before facing the plenary vote on Independence Day in the cavernous auditorium of the Georgia World

Congress Center. The tension in the air was palpable. The press buzzed all about the convention area, and one small group of protesters stood outside—a father shouting hateful slogans, his wife tending to small children and a stroller while other bewildered small children held signs.

It was a familiar feeling, the hoping against hope for a change in the social tide, fearing only to be let down yet again. Vote after vote came and went on all kinds of social and justice issues, until finally the time came to debate gay marriage on the floor. Opponents worked quickly to stall the vote with parliamentary procedures that would have moved the vote to the next synod or scrapped it altogether. Suddenly a motion was made to take an immediate plenary vote, and it was actually going to happen. The many hundreds of delegates sat anxiously at their long tables in the great hall with two cards before them—a red one to vote a measure down, and a green one to vote in favor. The moderator read aloud the proposition and the seconds ticked by in agonizing slow motion before the call was made for delegates to vote by holding aloft one of their cards. What followed in that moment would make religious, queer, and Southern history—a veritable sea of green!

The UCC became the first mainstream Protestant denomination to officially support gay marriage. The General Synod almost never met in the South, so the coincidence struck me. And, this event was hardly the first gay religious milestone to happen in Atlanta/Georgia. Coincidentally, George Hyde was from Atlanta and Troy Perry had family roots and was called to ministry in Georgia. The first president to officially recognize gay Americans was a Georgian who also lived but a stone's throw from Perry's Georgia family. The founder of the Atlanta MCC lived in New York and felt called *away*

from the Big Apple *to* Atlanta, leaving the home of Stonewall MCC-less. Louie Crew founded Integrity in the Episcopal diocese of Atlanta while other gay religious Atlantans established congregations and organizations. Atlanta has hosted many organizational and gay religious “firsts” that make sense on the one hand, since the metropolis stands at the center of the Bible Belt while offering an urban refuge of progressivism and hope. Atlanta is “heavily churched” but also boasts a very large gay community, and to this extent the local history makes perfect sense. On the other hand, the sheer number and breadth of “coincidences” leaves one to wonder. For example, there is no reason beyond happenstance that Faisal Alam founded the international queer Muslim organization, Al-Fatiha, here.

Not every gay person wants marriage for him or herself, and not every gay-welcoming clergyperson or other individual interviewed for this project necessarily endorses gay marriage. Still, the marriage issue cannot be divorced from religion, and thus makes for interesting discussion and debate. And, though this thesis is not about gay marriage, the topic is very timely and both rounds out the history and offers a fresh discursive path into the overall thesis conclusions.

“Uncle” George Hyde and Aunts Josie and Daisy might never have conceived of “gay marriage,” even though they formed lifelong bonds with same sex individuals. Legalities aside, couples like those in Chapter 1 frequently formed variations of “Boston marriages” using whatever strategies they had at hand to do so. Therefore space for same sex couples was not restricted to Boston (in the only state at present that in fact permits equal marriage rights) and the northeast area, as the South could accommodate its queer and eccentrics to varying degrees. Bishop Hyde’s churches did not focus on gay marriage

issues, perhaps because it was too premature in the 1940s and 50s and because the Orthodox Catholic clergy were expected to remain celibate regardless of orientation. Nonetheless, the Bishop worked hard to encourage gay men to leave behind lives of “cruising” and fleeting sexual encounter for committed relationships, and he never has sanctioned divorce for anyone. All these observations both confirm Howard’s research, which reveals space for gay life pre-Stonewall and frequent trysting opportunities for men, and also reveals some space and inclination for longer term relationships in the South. Historically, there has been no such thing as a united gay community; and even today queers of every political stripe have a very hard time working together toward common goals, which Bishop Hyde also correctly pointed out. Collectively, gay Americans live lifestyles every bit as diverse (and certainly as conservative) as the straight population, though fundamentalists try to claim religion for heterosexuals alone and though both the media and the historical record has often over-represented gays and gay culture associated with bar scenes, urban settings, promiscuity, and even Gay Pride festivities.

In Chapter 2 a watershed decade unfolded, in which Rev. Troy Perry founded the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in 1968 and almost immediately began performing gay holy unions. Perry’s activism and the work of other gay activists in the 1960s and even earlier problematize the traditional American LGBTQ historical metanarrative by showing that gay citizens had open lives and owned political and religious agency *before* the political and cultural watershed that was Stonewall. This decade saw the zenith of civil rights activism in the South and also the new deployment of anti-gay political rhetoric designed to stigmatize contemporary activists. As the

decade progressed into the 70s, American (not just Southern) conservatives began to foment a socio-political backlash against liberal progressivism and secular humanism on the cultural rise at the time, and hence that South nurtured a new, post-modern Bible Belt to resist change. Today the South is often stereotyped as being backward and conceived as the historic home of the Bible Belt and fundamentalism, though history tells quite a different tale. Even the King family worked closely with an openly gay man to orchestrate the civil rights movement.

A gay clerical narrator, Rev. Tony Crapolicchio of Trinity Church of Religious Science in Atlanta, shared a story of his coming out experience, which proved revealing of recent Southern history:

My background is-, my mother was Southern Baptist, was raised Southern Baptist.... My father was Catholic. And so needless to say, the fact that the son was gay was kind of an issue. My grandmother, Beulah May, that I quote often from the podium, is the person that I have my first religious memory with. Not spiritual memory, but religious memory. And she and I used to sit down, and we would watch Ernest Angely, the faith healer, together. And she loved Ernest Angely. And so you fast forward to when I come out of the closet, and I-, I love my grandmother more than anything. I come out of the closet, my family's not very happy, okay? There was a lot of anger, a lot of things said that probably shouldn't have been said at the time. Who cares now, okay? And so my grandmother calls me up one day, and I'd already moved out of the house, and we chitchatted a little bit, and she said, "Well, I need to talk to you." I said okay. She said, "I understand your mother's mad at you," and I said, "Yes ma'am, she is." She said, "I understand the rest of the family's mad at you, too." And I said, Yes ma'am, they are." She said, "Well I have something to say about all this." And at that time, at that instant, you know how your stomach falls in the pit-, you feel in the pit of your stomach you're gonna throw up? That's what I felt. Because she hung the moon to me. And she said, "Boy, you just remember that I love you no matter what. And you can tell everybody else to go to hell." She *never* cussed, and that's the first time in my life I ever heard her cuss. I knew then it was gonna be okay.<sup>1</sup>

The Reverend's grandmother represented an earlier time when the South, especially more rural and small town areas, could accommodate queers and eccentrics, before the rise of a recent fundamentalist movement and powerfully negative discourse around homosexuality. Were one to assume that the history of gay rights and social recognition

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Tony Crapolicchio, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 15 August 2004.



followed a simple teleological line of historic “progress” out of “darkness” and “desert,” then the grandmother would be angry and the parents accepting. While it is entirely possible the matter was coincidental and involved internal family dynamics, the story still serves to illustrate a bigger point—generationally, the recent history of gay welcome and anti-gay activism often divides the most senior citizens from their children and grandchildren. More specifically, while many younger heterosexual clergy and individuals raised with homophobia had a change of heart and embody social progress, many others who were raised by tolerant pre-Stonewall parents have changed to actually *take up* homophobia in an historically and familially foreign/new way since the 1970s.

This is true for the Atlanta King family. The national cultural and regional historical divides stood in starkest contrast at the recent 2006 funeral of Mrs. Coretta Scott King. The Reverend and his wife had known gay activists, working with them closely during the civil rights movement despite protests by colleagues and associates, and Bayard Rustin can never be erased from history. Gays had more of a place (or possibility of place) in Southern society, including African-American Southern society, than many realize, and the very recent national culture wars have obscured some of this history. Mrs. King, an American heroine of grace and class, the grandmother of the civil rights movement, was met at her Atlanta funeral by a contingent of Fred Phelps/Westboro Baptist Church protestors, who stood outside the church and held aloft signs that read, “Salem not Sodom,” “You’re going to hell,” “God hates you,” and “No fags in King’s dream.” Sadly and almost ironically, her youngest daughter, Rev. Bernice King, worked with local mega-church pastor, Bishop Eddie Long in 2004 to orchestrate a march of thousands against gay rights and marriage, and launched the march from The King Center

to falsely endow the event with the blessing of the family heritage and history. Also, Dr. King's niece, Alveda C. King, founded the faith-based organization, King for America, Inc., through which she preaches against homosexuality. The generational divide demonstrates the divide that has only very recently grown in this country and is neither limited to nor deeply rooted in the South.

Chapter 3 described gay-affirming religious happenings in the 1970s South with narrators for whom marriage meant a great deal, since those who desired more traditional or evangelical faiths than even the MCC offered also desired more traditional relationships. Dr. Crew attested that the very founding of Integrity began with his relationship with his “husband.” Both Rev. Temple and Bishop Sims came around to accepting Integrity and believing that gays should have sacramental equality, including marriage, and the Bishop even offered to marry my life partner and me in a park in front of his house after our interview. Joel Evans’ group, Evangelical Outreach Ministry, specifically wanted a more traditional, conservative faith group to serve the gay community, and Evans to this day belongs to a congregation whose gay pastor is “married.” Oakhurst Baptist, like Saint Mark Methodist and many other congregations around Atlanta and Georgia have come to welcome and affirm gay members and supports gay marriage as well. Not all mainstream denominational clergy and congregations agree, but the social change that has taken place in support of gay religious faithful is remarkable.

Anti-gay religious zealots have not tended to come from Georgia—though there are many virulently anti-gay congregations like First Baptist all over Georgia—but they do certainly tend to hail from the South. Take for instance the following: Billy Graham

(North Carolina), Jerry Falwell (Virginia), Anita Bryant (Florida), Pat Robertson (Virginia), Jimmy Swaggart (Louisiana), Dr. Paul Irwin (North Carolina), Precept Ministries International (Tennessee), John Hagee (and *numerous* other televangelists, Texas), Oral Roberts (Oklahoma), Exodus International (ex-gay ministry, Florida), Love in Action (ex-gay ministry, Tennessee), Adrian Rogers (Tennessee), Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays (Virginia), Witness Freedom Ministries (ex-gay organization for African-Americans, Georgia), Metanoia Ministries (Florida), and the infamous Fred Phelps (Mississippi, now Kansas). Interestingly, religious activists not from or based in the South are often located in the Los Angeles/ Southern California area, even as Rev. Elder Troy Perry's first gay Bible study, Dignity, and the first gay synagogue first called that area home.<sup>2</sup> The Southern based anti-gay ministerial history is indeed curious, since the South never epitomized a fundamentalist Bible Belt before the 1970s, roughly.

Often, anti-gay activists, like Anita Bryant, use the cause of family to defend their positions, as though the mere existence of gay people somehow challenges "normal" families and gay citizens' desire for recognition of their unions somehow threatens the institution of marriage altogether. If you enter [www.family.org](http://www.family.org) online you will find the anti-gay religious organization, Focus on the Family, site. If you enter [www.jesus.com](http://www.jesus.com), you will find the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) homepage. Perhaps religious queers were just more skilled with the Internet than anti-gay zealots, or perhaps the difference is subtly telling. Many gay and gay-affirming Christians, outraged with the behavior and beliefs of homophobic co-religionists, have come to call themselves "red

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Grant, NARTH, Dr. James Dobson, and quite a few televangelists as well; further, Billy Graham became famous after a 1949 crusade in Los Angeles, and we should not forget the Azusa Street revival that launched a new wave of Pentecostal faith all over the nation 100 years ago. Then there were the Bakkers, Jim and Tammy, who had professional ministerial lives in North Carolina and also Southern California, and whose son recently started a gay-affirming church/ministry called Revolution Church in Atlanta.

letter Christians” or “Christians not Paulines” to distinguish their faith based on Jesus’ teachings as stated in the red lettering that often appears in Bibles. They contrast themselves in so doing from fundamentalist Christians to draw upon cherry-picked Jewish Levitical law from the Old Testament and small excerpted quotes from Paul to justify their oppositional claims and beliefs. Organizations like Focus on the Family are doing just that—focusing on modern social and cultural (power) structures with which they feel comfortable and with which they endow a discursive aura (or halo perhaps) of religiosity and timelessness, in complete dissonance with actual history and many scriptural teachings. Such organizations are arguably more socio-cultural than religious, not reflecting Christian discipleship as much as the political status quo. Rev. Ike Parker (of the predominantly gay All Saints Christ’s Church United, formerly All Saints MCC) commented on the matter:

You've got to be a person willing to...sort out what is of God, what is of flesh, what is of human teaching, and what is religious idolatry over against what is of God. You see, there's this idolatry of the family...There's a lot of that in different churches and religions and denominations, of the family is everything. And a particular *kind* of family—the family in which the man is superior to the female, the female submits herself to the male...then the first child a little bit more important than the second and third child. And I ask, how does that fit with God's teaching of the value of every being and every person? God would teach equality. God would treat each child, each being - the husband, the wife - equal. And in their treating each other that way, they bring out the healthiest and the best in one another and produce the best for the family. But we have this kind of structure of ideal, idol family that has to function a certain way. And it is very harmful. I think it's very ungodly, and I think it's just been sold to-, primarily in the Christian faiths, it's been sold as *the* way...Every single individual out there is a family unto themselves and a part of the family of God's creation, but they're made to feel a little less important, because they're not a husband or a wife in a particular ideological situation.<sup>3</sup>

All over the South, the nation, and even the world, people are working to “sort out what is of God,” and in the process are learning to replace homophobia with gay affirmation. Many gay clergypersons have credited their struggle with their faith and orientation with making them more socially sensitive and better pastoral guides, while

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Ike Parker, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 23 July 2004.

many heterosexual clergy claim better Biblical scholarship and connection to God in the process of learning gay welcome. The recent history of the intersection of gay America and religion is checkered with progress and backlash, tragedy and triumph, yet still with a sense of overall progress that owes a fair share of credit to Atlanta, Georgia, and the South.

### **List of Narrators**

(All interviews took place in Atlanta except where indicated, and narrators' institutional affiliations *at time of interview* are listed in parentheses.)

Adams, Rev. Joanna (Morningside Presbyterian Church), 4 January 2005.  
 Alam, Faisal (Al-Fatiha), 2 November 2005.  
 Batuyong, Father Patrick and congregation (St. Michael the Defender, Catholic), 2004.  
 Beard, Robert (Druid Hills Presbyterian Church), 1 November 2004.  
 Beyers, Rev. John (Grace United Methodist Church), 13 July 2004.  
 Brown, Father Eric (Faith Empowerment Community Church), 28 August 2004.  
 Bryant, Linda (Charis Books & More), 5 April 2005.  
 Buchanan, Rev. Kimberleigh (Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, GA), 17 June 2004.  
 Candler, The Very Rev. Sam (The Cathedral of Saint Philip), 10 November 2004.  
 CarterMcCallister, Rev. Davita (First Congregational Church), 7 September 2004.  
 Chambers, Jill (Republican state legislator for Doraville area), 16 June 2004.  
 Charles, Rev. Gary, (Central Presbyterian Church), 19 October 2004.  
 Chesnut, Dr. Saralyn (Emory University), 22 July 2004.  
 Cirou, Archpriest Joseph (Saints Sergius and Bacchus Church), 5 September 2004.  
 Crapolicchio, Rev. Tony (Trinity Church of Religious Science), 15 August 2004.  
 Crew, Dr. Louie (Integrity and Rutgers Professor Emeritus), 9 August 2005.  
 Davis, Rev. Susannah (Saint Paul Methodist Church), 20 January 2005  
 Drenner, Dr. Karla (Democrat state legislator for Avondale Estates area), 12 Sept. 2004.  
 Eley, Rev. Paris (Tabernacle Baptist and The Vision Churches), 12 January 2006.  
 Evans, Joel (Evangelical Outreach Ministries and All Saints CCU), 3 November 2005.  
 Fraysse, Susan (North Decatur Presbyterian Church), 4 April 2005.  
 Friend-Jones, Rev. Budd (Central Congregational Church), 3 August 2004.  
 Garner, Bruce (All Saints Episcopal Church), 2 February 2005.  
 Gooch, Nina (Atlanta Friends, [Quakers]), 22 June 2004.  
 Gracz, Msgr Henry (Shrine of the Immaculate Conception), 11 August 2004.  
 Graetz, Rev. Paul (First MCC Atlanta), 15 June 2004.  
 Graham, Rev. Dr. Chris (Church of the Savior Baptist turned UCC), 28 June 2004.  
 Helminiak, Dr. Daniel (West Georgia University), 20 August 2004.  
 Helton, Rev. Dr. Carol (Inman Park Methodist Church), 5 February 2005.  
 Henry-Crowe, Rev. Susan (Emory's Candler School of Theology), 20 August 2004.  
 Hyde, Archbishop George A. (Orthodox Catholic Church of America), 10 Dec. 2005.  
 Knox, Harry (Freedom to Marry, now HRC), 21 August 2004.  
 Kurtz, Becky (Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship), 17 April 2005.  
 Jones, Rev. Antonio (Unity Fellowship of Christ Church), 22 July 2004.  
 Jones, The Very Rev. E. Claiborne (Episcopal Church of the Epiphany), 27 Sept. 2005.  
 Jordan, Dr. Mark (Emory University), 10 August 2004.  
 Lesser, Rabbi Josh (Congregation Bet Haverim), 21 July 2004.  
 Lewis, Congressman John (via AEN appearance), 2005.  
 Kaney, Rev. Rex (Druid Hills Methodist Church), 19 July 2004.  
 Kelly, Kathy (Marriage Equality Georgia), 2004.  
 Maniscalco, Father Philip (St. John's Beloved Catholic Church), 17 November 2004.

Martin, Rev. Dr. Kathi (God, Self, and Neighbor Ministries), 21 July 2004.  
 Matthews, Jr., Rev. Daniel Paul (Saint Luke's Episcopal Church), 22 Sept. 2004  
 McConnell, Craig (All Saints Episcopal Church), 17 October 2004.  
 Mitchener, Rev. Marsha (First Existentialist Church), 2005.  
 Moor, Rev. James (Saint Mark Methodist Church), 9 June 2004.  
 Morgan, Rev. Randy (New Covenant Community Church), 15 June 2004.  
 Morris, Rev. Kathy (Trinity Methodist Church), 20 September 2004.  
 Neely, Rev. Jay (retired MCC and Int'l Christian Community Churches), 2004.  
 Nelson, Bruce and Sue (PFLAG), 2005.  
 O'Connell, Rev. Carole (Unity North Atlanta Church in Marietta, GA), 6 July 2004.  
 Parker, Rev. Ike and congregation (All Saints Christ's Church United), 23 July 2004.  
 Pellenberg, Al (Creative Dir., Atlanta PRIDE Committee), 23 March 2005.  
 Perry, Rev. Elder Troy (MCC retired, West Hollywood, CA), 19 May 2005.  
 Peters, Rev. Lanny (Oakhurst Baptist Church), 16 September 2004.  
 Ray, Amy (Indigo Girls, Emory grad), 24 February 2005.  
 Raybon, Rev. Dr. Norma (First Congregational Church), 7 September 2004.  
 Reinertsen, Rev. Gordon T. (Saint Luke Lutheran), 16 August 2004.  
 Royalty, Rev. Beth (All Saints' Episcopal Church), 9 July 2004  
 Saliers, Rev. Dr. Don E. (Emory's Candler School of Theology), 11 January 2005.  
 Saliers, Emily (Indigo Girls, Emory grad), 7 December 2004.  
 Samuel, Rev. Dr. Kenneth (Victory Church UCC), 8 November 2004.  
 Sanchez, Rev. Elder Armando (MCC), 22 November 2004.  
 Schmeling, Rev. Bradley (Saint John's Lutheran Church), 12 August 2004.  
 Semmens, Sharon (Georgia Equality), 14 June 2004.  
 Shawver, Rev. Renne (Christ Covenant MCC), 16 June 2004.  
 Shirley, Rev. Timothy (Virginia-Highland Church), 10 June 2004.  
 Sims, Bishop Emeritus Bennett (Episcopal Church, Hendersonville, NC), 30 June 2005.  
 Smith, Rev. Leevahn (Truth Center MCC), 1 August 2004.  
 Soloway, David (Havurat Lev Shalem), (via e-mail) 10 October 2005.  
 Southworth, Rev. Don (Northwest Unitarian Universalist), 23 August 2004.  
 Stroupe, Rev. Nibs (Oakhurst Presbyterian Church), 26 October 2005.  
 Taylor, Rev. Sharon (Ormewood Park Presbyterian Church), 9 August 2004.  
 Temple, Rev. Canon Gray (St. Patrick Episcopal Church), 9 June 2004.  
 Thigpen III, Rev. William McCord (St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church), 17 June 2004.  
 Thomas, Bette (First Congregational Church), 7 September 2004.  
 Treadwell, Perry (Atlanta Friends [Quakers]), 27 July 2004.  
 Turner, Rev. Paul (Gentle Spirit Christian Church), 10 June 2004.  
 Tuttle, Rev. Connie (Circle of Grace Community Church), 26 July 2004.

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