

# The Homosexual Subculture at Worship: A Participant Observation Study

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**ABSTRACT:** The author worked for ten months as Director of Christian Education at a church serving the homophile community of a large metropolitan area. Using the method of participant observation, he concluded that the group is attempting to solve two problems centering on their sexual orientation and their religious needs. Past social conditioning has told the group that they cannot be both *Christian* and *homosexual*. The group resolves this cognitive dissonance by emphasizing the message that God loves all men, including homosexuals. This religious message is, contrary to expectations, expressed in theologically conservative language.

For ten months I worked as Director of Christian Education at the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which serves primarily the Denver, Colorado, homophile community. During that time I employed the methodology of participant observation to record my observations of the gay community at worship. Ten months' time gave me the opportunity to record a large number of observations. Two of these will be dealt with here: the interaction of the religious and social needs in the gay community and that community's theologically conservative stance. It is my contention that these two observations are interrelated.

## The Methodology of Participant Observation

I shared in the life activities of the group by participating in face-to-face relationships. Initially there were difficulties, until rapport and trust could be established between the group and me. Special difficulties were encountered because of my situation. I, a heterosexual,

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was working in a church that serves primarily the homophile community. This made for some difficulties at the outset. At first, I was both the observer and the observed, and the group tested me. The group was changed simply because I was present. This was especially true in social situations. Most of the effect of my presence involved their hesitation to discuss personal lives and to use language of the gay world. Gradually, as my presence became anticipated, accepted, and even trusted, these difficulties disappeared.

Although I shared the social and religious experiences of the group, however, I was not "of them" in total involvement because of their sexual orientation. Distance was always maintained. The paradoxical role of the participant observer requires both detachment and personal involvement, as I learned in the process of observation. I established, through my behavior, a detachment that did not hinder interaction with the group but did allow me to maintain my own boundaries as a married heterosexual in the midst of a totally gay community.

As a participant observer, I was exposed to the group's concepts and *weltanschauung* increasingly as I learned to "hear" their language. Being allowed to "hear" the language of the gay world I saw as a privilege, and as my involvement in the group developed, I found it easy to accept. This was possible, I believe, because, from the very beginning, my role as participant observer was understood by the group.

Aware of the need of the participant observer to "bracket" his bias, that is, to suspend as much as possible any preconceived notions about the group before entering into observation, I endeavored to make my biases explicit.<sup>1</sup> The two main areas of bias were *sexual* and *religious*. Concerning sexual bias, I could acknowledge the right of homosexuals to lead the sexual life they desire. My bias was not against homosexuality as such but involved the choice of sexual roles within that orientation. For example, I was aware of a personal bias against the "swish," i.e., the extremely feminine homosexual male. Part of this bias is related to my own concept of masculinity, which is part of my early socialization. Religiously I had a bias against the fundamentalistic orientation of MCC theology. Again my early socialization—some unfortunate intellectual and personal experiences as a youth attending a fundamental church in a small Indiana town—carries some theological implications.

Intellectually, I assumed, even before first entering the MCC's activities, that I would find the MCC fulfilling the definition of a social movement. I had the preconceived notion that within the MCC I would find a significantly large number of people, gathering collec-

tively, to solve the "problem" of their homosexuality: a common problem both religiously and socially. In addition I expected to find a sense of alienation and oppression among the members of the group, because of their sexual orientation.

The MCC in Denver, Colorado, is an attempt of gays to deal with a situation they define as oppression by the heterosexual society. The appeal of the MCC, as a religious community, is to the susceptibilities of the gay community.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the message of the MCC appeals to the susceptibilities of the homophile community, created by their need for a meaning in life that will remove the instability of the anxiety brought about by living and working in a predominantly heterosexual world in which they are "labeled" as deviant. They also express a fear about whether they can be *Christians* and *homosexuals* at the same time. My task as a participant observer was to isolate the psychological bond that ties the appeal of the MCC to the susceptibilities of the homophile community. After more than 100 hours of observation, I concluded that the appeal of the MCC is that it offers a "solution" to the religious *and* social problems of being gay. "Society may reject us gays, but God does not" is a commonly expressed sentiment. One professional leader of the church was fond of saying, "Jesus Christ is a good friend of mine." MCC's appeal to the susceptibilities of the gay community is best summed up in a frequently heard statement, expressing their search for self-acceptance: "I may be gay, but I'm not queer." The word "queer" has negative connotations for the group, based on its usage by the heterosexual society. This is especially true for the homosexual who wants to believe that "gay is good." The belief that "gay is good" is basic to the world view of the gay movement. The movement's ideology provides a theological legitimation for this belief. The belief appears to contribute to the cohesiveness of the gay community.

#### Historical Antecedent: "The Lavender Riot"

Participants in social movements attach significance to the date marking the origin of their existence. Historical antecedents give groups a sense of history and accent their reasons for existing. Minority groups often use the date of physical abuse by a majority group as their point of origin. This is true of the gay movement.

In 1969 New York City Police raided the Stonewall, a gay bar in the Village. Suffering from police brutality and feeling that their oppression had lasted long enough, angry gays took to the Village streets. The result—three days of riots. This first "lavender riot"<sup>3</sup> marks the

beginning of an organized gay movement in America. As the Reverend Troy Perry,<sup>4</sup> the MCC founder, puts it, that is the day "we celebrate in Gay Pride; pride in ourselves."

On October 6, 1968, just prior to the riots, the Reverend Mr. Perry, a theological conservative, organized the MCC in Los Angeles. Perceived by its founder as an "out-stretched arm" into the gay community, the MCC has grown from the "mother church" in Los Angeles to more than eighty churches and missions throughout America, England, and Australia.

In June of 1971, the MCC-Denver was founded under the leadership of the Reverend Ronald Carnes. He arrived in Denver with a list of sixteen people who had contacted the Los Angeles congregation about the possibility of starting a church in Denver.<sup>5</sup> Those sixteen have grown to a congregation of 150 official members within a church community of 500. They have moved into shared facilities with a Unitarian church in the inner city of Denver. It is my contention that the MCC has grown so rapidly because it is a workable solution to the two major problems facing the homophile community: religious "respectability" and social acceptance.

### The Search for Human Acceptance

The members of the MCC-Denver face two problems: first, their relationship to God and their quest for religious understanding; and second, complicating the first problem, the member's sexual orientation, being homosexual in a predominantly heterosexual world. For the MCC members both problems are resolved by a search for human acceptance.

For them the two problems are dealt with by one solution: acceptance by God. In the Los Angeles "mother church" (prior to its fire-bombing on the night of January 25, 1973) hung a large banner saying: "We are not afraid any more." And they are *not* afraid any more. since their interpretation of Scripture and God's message tells them that through the MCC movement God is available to them.

In discussing the history of the MCC movement, Perry begins by saying that the original group of twelve individuals met "just because of our sexual orientation. We believed that God could do a thing like love us! It's true—God moves in strange ways."<sup>6</sup>

Homosexuals have made the assumption, as a part of their view of reality, that Jesus can solve their two problems: social and religious. More concretely, the MCC members see Jesus as available in the MCC worship services and as the best approach to these problems. Many

members have either been asked to leave heterosexual churches after publicly admitting their homosexuality or they have sat quietly in the pews hiding their "own being" until they could no longer deny to themselves and to their God that they were homosexual. Gittings described the hostility that is felt toward the heterosexual churches for denying homosexuals the right to worship:

We feel that we should expect from our churches all of the forms of spiritual, emotional, personal, and social support which they supply as a matter of course to heterosexuals, and that these should be supplied to us in a spirit of acceptance of us as homosexuals, not in a spirit of missionary zeal to convert us to heterosexuality.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Religious Message of the MCC*

In this context, a large portion of Denver's gay world has turned to the religious message of the MCC. Growing support is seen in the tremendous increase in both membership and attendance since its founding in June 1971. Apparently many gays in the Greater Denver area find the MCC solution to the combined problems of homosexuality and religious quest to be the best way to seek human acceptance. In the sermons of both Perry and Carnes the constant theme is that "God loves all men . . . God loves us." Jesus is seen as the liberating force in world history, the force that makes it possible for gays to declare that "gay is good" and "Jesus loves me" within the same context. For them the work and love of Jesus Christ in dealing with all types of people is the foundation for their own repentance and acceptance. Through accepting Jesus Christ, each MCC member's efforts to solve his problems become part of a solution to a community problem.

Their belief is that Jesus will listen to the requests of the gay community, just as He listens to those of all mankind. There is strong peer-group need to interpret events in the world as evidence of Jesus' love for them. One member of the MCC often told me that, when someone in the church has a problem, "nothing is more powerful than a church-full of fairies praying." An example of this "power" occurred when a prominent lay leader of the MCC was on vacation in southern California. About a week after he departed from Denver for Los Angeles, the Las Vegas Police found luggage with R.'s name and address in the trunk of a car driven by a man suspected of murder in Los Angeles. Word reached the Denver church that R. had disappeared and that his luggage had been found in the possession of a suspected murderer. A "church-full of fairies" was gathered and an around-the-

clock prayer session started. Several days later it was learned that R.'s luggage had been stolen by the suspected murderer and that R. was safe with friends in San Francisco. For the MCC members, Jesus had answered their prayers and safely returned R. to Denver. Their explanation is simple: "God does listen to prayers, even from us gays." Such an attitude leads to a feeling of acceptance from God.

Another example of their perception of God's love for them is the case of C., who is congenitally deaf in one ear. At the second annual conference of the Fellowship in Los Angeles, September 1-4, 1972, C. regained partial hearing during a group prayer session. From previous base lines, the gain in decibels has been verified at the University of Colorado Medical School. To the gays, this provides further evidence that God listens to their prayers.

In addition to a feeling of acceptance by God, there is a strong community support system at work. This community acceptance contributes to the willingness of MCC members to pool their private problems. Individually, many gays are unable to cope with the problem of their homosexuality. Eventually this problem reaches a subjective intolerability of great intensity. As MCC members gain the impression that fellow worshipers share their own perceptions and feelings, a common basis for communication, concerning both sexual and religious problems, is provided. This interrelationship of problems is revealed in the frequent religious messages communicated in the language of the gay community. One evening at Vespers, one of the professional staff said to the gathering, "Jesus Christ was a chicken-queen." The point being made was that Christ loved small children.<sup>8</sup> There is a combination of religious themes and gay language used in the MCC. This combination speaks to the need to address two problems: sexual and religious.

By providing a belief system centering on the affirmation that a better world is concretely available, the MCC offers plausible solutions to an individual's problems. Members feel that something can be done and they want to be a part of that something. The MCC has more than thirty-five percent of its membership involved in church committee work. The average per capita offering at Sunday services is more than four dollars (and this is from a congregation that is predominantly nonprofessional). Recently a Sunday service produced \$600 from a gathering of 100 people.

The degree of involvement of MCC members depends upon the orientation of the individual. Some individuals simply come to MCC as a "good place to cruise." For these individuals (cruisers) the worship service is a prelude to the social hour that follows in the church

basement. The two events, the worship service and the social hour, are psychologically separated by physical location. The physical change of location allows the two situations to be sharply defined. During the service, individuals do not engage in any social behavior with sexual overtones. But leaving the chapel and walking down stairs to the large social room changes the psychological orientation. Hand-holding, embracing, and cheek-kissing are then permissible.

Those who view MCC as a sexual hunting ground can usually be differentiated from those with a sincere religious interest by the degree of involvement in the church. Seldom are cruisers official members of the church; they are marginal individuals who attend on occasion. Official members take prominent leadership roles in the church. In the terminology used by Fichter, the membership of the MCC is defined by personal criteria.<sup>9</sup> These criteria are intention to be counted as a church member, religious observance, and social participation. Fichter's institutional criteria of baptism, place of residence, and racial (or national) origin are discounted by the sexual orientation of this community. Thus official MCC members exhibit a willingness to be counted on the church rolls, participate actively in the MCC worship activities, and also take part in the MCC non-church-related social activities. The cruiser's behavior does not match this. The cruiser does not fulfill the minimal religious-spiritual requirements necessary to be considered a member.

It should be added that marginal individuals (cruisers) are not frowned upon by the official members. In fact, in most cases, they are welcomed. The attitude is that "They are here, as opposed to a gay bar, and are listening to the word of God." More than one individual who originally came to MCC to look for sexual contacts has been converted and become a full-fledged member. And, as with most new converts to an organization, they work in the church with a zeal often embarrassing to long-term members. One recent convert, P., worked in the church office doing typing, filing, answering the phone, etc., to the point of physical exhaustion. His doctor finally limited him to three days a week at the church office for fear of further physical harm. For the past year P. has held a seat on the major governing body of the church.<sup>10</sup>

Those who do move from cruiser into the convert or membership stage are helped in their decision by the church's authority as a guide in spiritual and social belief systems.<sup>11</sup> Within the gay community the most strongly defended beliefs are those that relate to social problems and to religious problems. Among the authoritative sources is the movement's founder. In a recorded sermon, Troy Perry states

that there is a great deal of "phoniness in the straight world. We gays have no hypocrites; we have become a family."<sup>12</sup>

Authority for the belief system comes both from the folklore of gay life concerning heterosexuals and from the Bible. In a Christian Education class, I once asked for biblical references on homosexuality. Immediately I was surrounded by members quoting from memory passages in both the Old and New Testaments. They know their Bible! Because so often biblical passages are used in argument against homosexuality, biblical knowledge provides a strong defense against these arguments. Of particular importance within the belief system, based on the Bible, is a homosexual interpretation of the story of David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18-20). In addition, some members claim that Jesus "had to be gay because he fits one psychological model of antecedents to homosexuality, i.e., he lacked a father figure, traveled with twelve other men, and never married."

Most of the biblical arguments in the member's belief system center on passages discrediting *other* activities: women wearing pearls and gold (1 Tim. 2:9-10), serving milk with dinner (Heb. 5:13), and women wearing hats in church (1 Cor. 11:5-6, 13). This line of argument is not directed at establishing a biblical position on homosexuality. It is directed rather to biblical passages that today's world considers meaningless. The suggestion here is that the passages cited by "straights" against homosexuality are of the same kind and should, therefore, be discounted. However, some selective perception is at work. Passages on pearls, gold, hats, and milk are discounted, but the story of David and Jonathan is emphasized. Their selective perception of biblical passages speaks to their need for self-protection from traditional Christian arguments against homosexuality. In the MCC community it appears in both their religious and sexual belief systems. The need is to protect the individual from additional anxiety. Turning to the community and to the church provides a source of acceptance and reassurance.

### *"Gay Is Good"*

The gay community has a store of folklore that centers on its superiority to the heterosexual world. That folklore provides data to "prove" that "gay is good." Once "gay is good" is accepted into a belief system, a sense of pride develops and has the effect of affirming the belief system. Gay pride is stressed to help overcome the oppression that many gays experience. On the record "One God," recorded at the MCC-Los Angeles, Troy Perry leads his congregation in the singing of "We Shall Overcome"—a song usually associated with the



civil rights movement in the South. On "gay pride," as an authority Perry says that "up until a few years ago no one would think that you could be gay and proud of it." But now gays can be glad that "God in His goodness" created gay people. Realizing this legitimizes the belief that "Gay is good." God's love is the basis for self-pride.

However, it must be added that this pride is often a paranoid reaction against heterosexuals. Conspiracy beliefs are prevalent among groups regarded as deviant from societal norms. The *weltanschauung* of gays was difficult for me to comprehend until I understood the conspiracy premise as providing a unifying idea for gays. Recently the Denver Police arrested more than 100 gays in a weekend raid of gay bars and steam baths. The gays viewed this "purge" as further evidence that "gay is good." "Why else should we gays be persecuted unless we are a threat to the straights?"

Consequently, to the MCC member who perceives a conspiracy by straights to persecute him, ideology has an important appeal. This ideology, a conservative theology, has an implicit or latent function not related to its explicit religious referent (God). In reality, the ideology is a belief system used to create a more satisfying reality by removing anxiety about being homosexual. Significantly, increased attendance at Sunday worship, Thursday night Vespers, and Christian Education classes occurred during the "purge." MCC members turned to God for the answer because to them it had become evident that their fellow man would not help.

An interesting point here is that in the face of perceived danger from the heterosexual community, some gays in the MCC turn to a religious solution—the *immediate* return of Jesus Christ—that they adopt to avoid facing the hopelessness of the secular situation. As one professional staff member often said to me, "I wish Jesus would come and make everything right." The turning to a religious solution, which from the viewpoint of an "outsider" has a low probability of occurrence, is part of their past societal conditioning, which tells them that their sexual situation is "insoluble." Thus, not expecting a secular solution today, they turn to a spiritual solution. Their search for meaning in the face of danger is an attempt to find a more satisfying reality. This tends to make gays more susceptible to the theologically conservative message of the MCC.

#### "Jesus Loves Me This I Know for My Peer Group Tells Me So"

The most puzzling observation for me was the theologically conservative stance of the church. I was aware of recent movements by several liberal churches to open their doors to the gay community,

and, accordingly, I expected the MCC to be theologically liberal. Why did the gay community ignore this new openness and insist on establishing a conservative church organization independent of the heterosexual churches?

Jones claimed that the homosexual identity has been imposed on homosexuals so long that it has become incorporated into their self-image.<sup>13</sup> The homosexual is viewed only in terms of his homosexuality. For the homosexual himself, this sexual identity assumes a disproportionately dominant place in his *weltanschauung*. So, ironically, the liberal heterosexual churches, eager to amend their past attitudes, have recently opened discussion with the gay community and, in the process, have actually contributed to even greater emphasis upon sexual identity. The liberal churches, in making specific policy statements on homosexuality, identify the individual as first a homosexual and second a possible Christian. However, the homosexual wants to be recognized as Christian first, gay second. Homosexuals in the MCC believe that the attitudes of heterosexual churches have been at odds with the very essence of Christianity: that *all* human beings are children of God.

In addition to a well-intentioned, but misdirected, emphasis by the liberal churches on homosexuality, there is a sociological dimension at work in the conservativeness of the MCC. Fundamentalism is a product of a marginal culture. It is most often dominant in areas or among people isolated by geographic or social distance from the changing modes of thought. The gay community is a vicinally isolated community, set apart by its sexual orientation from the predominantly heterosexual society. One plausible hypothesis, therefore, is that the gay religious community is fundamentalist because it wishes to go back to the purer standards of bygone days, the days "when Jesus loved everyone." While liberals are concerned with changing the social order, the fundamentalist orientation accents an individual's belief system. The MCC has constructed a theologically conservative belief system around their interpretation of Jesus' teachings of love: He loves all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

In liberal churches there is little or no demand made upon the believer; more stress is placed on the corporate body of the church. Thus, gays view the liberal church as an "extension of the closet," allowing the homosexual to remain homosexual without facing the religious and social questions inherent in his sexuality. He can hide his homosexuality amidst the corporate body of the liberal church, which never forces him to deal with its implications for his Christianity. Facing his homosexuality by coming to the realization that according

to Jesus' teachings gay can be good requires more than mere membership in a corporate church body. It requires a personal conversion experience.

It is the theologically conservative church that provides avenues for personal conversion. Here the accent is on the individual believer as a human being, as a homosexual. For the MCC member the conversion experiences takes the form: Jesus loves *all* men; He loves even gay people; ergo gay is good. The MCC's theological position, that Jesus loves all men, supported by peer group consensus, allows the homosexual to become a Christian and maintain pride in his homosexual life style. The liberal church, not aware of or stressing the homosexual *dasein*, makes admission into their form of Christianity too "easy" for the homosexual.

The personal religious background of Troy Perry is another major factor in the MCC's conservative stance. In *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*, Perry talks about his Pentacostal background.<sup>14</sup> Perry himself underwent a dramatic personal conversion, from which he emerged as a Christian and a homosexual. The personal message of Perry's conversion experience has carried over to the MCC by-laws: All men are justified to God through faith. For the homosexual whose sexual existence is justified through faith in God, gay is good.

In general the hostility felt toward heterosexual churches, liberal or not—the result of unfortunate past experiences—makes gays suspicious of recent attempts to begin dialogue. Even if dialogue were established, liberal churches, predominantly heterosexual, cannot provide a common basis for communication. Not having the same need for self-protection, their members operate from a different system of selective perception and hence cannot be a source of acceptance and reassurance to gays.

### Some Conclusions: "No, Honey, We're a Church Group!"

The MCC is a plausible, even necessary, social-religious movement supported by members who are attempting to solve personal problems of sexuality and religion. Observation of the MCC was complicated by the fact that two problems are combined: the need for solution to a sexual problem and the need to relate to God. It was impossible in our observations to determine when the MCC speaks directly to the problems of homosexuality and when it speaks directly to religious problems. We would assume that the two are so closely interwoven that no differentiation could be made. We can say that the MCC community sanctions the interpretation of Jesus' teachings that

tells them that their existence is justified through faith in God. Certainly, psychologically, if not always behavioristically, the two needs are being met by the solution of the love of Jesus as interpreted theologically by the MCC.

The members of MCC appear to have been placed, by their sexual orientation, in a position of cognitive dissonance. They enjoy their sexual life and find it impossible to give up, but, at the same time, for most of their lives they have been taught that God cannot "love a faggot." The anxiety from their sexual orientation has its roots in society and in their past religious experience prior to the MCC. To resolve the conflict they add new cognitive elements. These new cognitive elements originate from the group's interpretation of the teachings of Jesus: His love for all men. In part, this interpretation has been done for them in the persons of Troy Perry and Ron Carnes and in the MCC movement. Their anxiety is lessened by their new belief system, which gives them a view of reality necessary for the maintenance of their psychological security: God loves all men; gay is good.

Recently along with 100 MCC members my wife and I attended an international circus on tour in Denver. During the intermission, ten members were posing for a photograph with one of the circus clowns. A woman, passing the group, commented loudly enough to be overheard, "It's a bunch of fairies." One MCC member quickly replied, "No, honey, we're a church group!"

And a church group they are and must be.

### Reference Notes

1. As a further check on my bias and potential "contamination" of my observations, my wife accompanied me on approximately one half of all my visits to the MCC and to homophile social activities.
2. See Hans Toch, *The Social Psychology of Social Movements* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 12-17, for discussion of the susceptibilities of social movements.
3. The term used by the homophile community.
4. All complete names used are of individuals who have publicly stated their homosexuality. Initials are used to disguise others.
5. The MCC has quite a missionary zeal. Carnes was given a one-way tourist class plane ticket from Los Angeles to Denver, the list of sixteen names, and the blessing of Troy Perry. From that beginning he was to build a church community.
6. Troy Perry, "Editor's Comments," *In Unity*, June/July 1972, no pagination.
7. Barbara B. Gittings, "The Homosexual and the Church," in *The Same Sex: An Appraisal of Homosexuality*, ed. Ralph W. Weltge (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), p. 149.
8. In gay argot a chicken-queen prefers young children for sexual activity.
9. Joseph H. Fichter, *Southern Parish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 17-32.

10. However, it should be pointed out that P. recently acquired a friend through a gay pen club. Now he has ceased working in the church office and is preparing his home for his friend's arrival. Perhaps the degree of involvement in the church is not always an adequate differentiation of those who are there for cruising and those there for genuine religious reasons.
11. Authority is here used as anything that serves as a source of beliefs.
12. Troy Perry, "One God," Custom Fidelity Records, Hollywood, California, 1972.
13. H. Kimball Jones, "Homosexuality: A Provisional Christian Stance," in *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*, ed. W. Dwight Oberholzer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 150.
14. Troy Perry, *The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay: The Autobiography of the Rev. Troy D. Perry* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1972).