

*God of Justice, who calls us to heal your broken world, grant us the courage and commitment needed to do you will when it comes to calling out injustice wherever it is. Amen.*

October 21, 2018 – Isaiah 58:10-12

### **“Pursuing Justice”**

The pursuit of justice is a part of our DNA. Metropolitan Community Churches was born out of the oppression that the LGBT community had been experiencing in the 1960s and before. And by the end of MCC’s third decade, pursuing justice was still integral to its existence.

In 1997, our Moderator, Rev. Troy Perry, and our Vice Moderator, Rev. Nancy Wilson, would point out in their Report to the President for the White House Conference on Hate Crimes (<http://exhibits.lgbtran.org/files/original/05149e91fd558d0e1bb07878f11916d5.pdf>) that an astounding 7% of UFMCC congregations had been targets of arson or fire-bombing over the previous three decades.

The letter would go on to list the details of incidences, the first of which was the fire which destroyed MCC’s “Mother Church” in Los Angeles in 1973. Though the fire proved to be arson, no charges were ever filed.

In New Orleans that same year, a deliberate fire of the Up Stairs Bar – the worst fire in the history of New Orleans – would take the lives of the church pastor, associate pastor and ten members of the congregation, reducing the congregation by one-third. No one was ever charged with this crime.

In 1978, MCC of the Resurrection in Houston would be the subject of a campaign of harassment initiated by the Ku Klux Klan, which included threats (including death threats) by phone and letter against the pastor, Rev. Jeri Ann Harvey, and the church, with a Ku Klux Klan cross burned on the church property.

St. Luke’s Metropolitan Community Church, holds the dubious distinction of being the only UFMCC congregation to twice be fire-bombed, once in 1982 and again in 1983.

In 1986, after more than a year of threats against the pastor of MCC of Stockton in California, Rev. Virgil Scott was brutally murdered. Evidence indicates that Rev. Scott was interrupted while engaged in church-related work. His body was severely beaten and he was stabbed seven to ten times. Prior to his death, shots had been fired at his car, and death threats left on his answering machine.

These were just a few of 27 attacks within the first three decades of MCC’s existence. Revs. Perry and Wilson would point out that the attacks were based on twin hate crimes motivations: hate crimes motivated against our spiritual beliefs and hate crimes motivated against our members’ predominant sexual orientation. It’s small wonder, then, that pursuing justice is such an integral part of what it means to “be MCC.”

Our scripture reading this morning was written to the residents of Jerusalem after they had returned from 50 years of exile in Babylon. When they looked about and saw the destruction of their homeland, they were instructed to rebuild. And as they did, they were charged to never forget what it was like to be exiles, and they should treat others with justice.

MCC churches would take this to heart, and working for a world in which everyone is treated fairly would go beyond calling out the injustices against our own congregations. In December of 2011, after approximately two years of work, the Global Justice Team of MCC became The Global Justice Institute – or GJI – a separately incorporated 501(c)3 that is housed in the offices of Metropolitan Community Church in New York City. Its Mission Statement reads in part: “...to be an agent of change by building bridges that liberate and unite voices of sacred defiance...in acts of justice.”

In Kenya, GJI, working in partnership with the organization, Other Sheep, has opened a community center, which creates a safe space for both worship and education programming focusing on HIV and safety for those who trade sex for money and survival.

In Asia, outreach which started in Malaysia, now has moved through China. And last year an MCC clergy participated in the first ever pride parade in Vietnam.

And for the last two or three years, GJI has been working in Brazil with communities of LGBT people and also those living with HIV and AIDS and those overcoming drug addiction.

Here locally, our church has also taken on a variety of justice issues. I have participated in local rallies and forums on immigration and refugee reform. I serve as an executive board member of the Greater Waco Interfaith Conference which seeks to build bridges between Waco's faith communities. Our church offers a food pantry and the only support groups in McLennan County for people who are living with HIV and AIDS. I am active in local racial reconciliation efforts. Our church has been a local leader in the fight for marriage equality. And we continue to fight for LGBT civil rights because even today in Texas, LGBTQ individuals can be fired from their job, denied a place to live or refused service at a business simply because of who they are or whom they love.

And I serve on the steering committee of the Heart of Texas CROP Hunger Walk which will be taking place on November 11. You have in your worship bulletins envelopes for contributing to this annual event. Twenty-five percent of the money raised goes to Waco's Caritas which last year served more than 4 million pounds of food to 91,000 people. The rest of the money raised goes to Church World Service in its fight against global hunger. You will also see a yellow insert with ideas about how to participate in Hunger and Homelessness Week. Take a look at it, and write in the comments section of your welcome card what idea you think our church could do during the month of November or December. We support these efforts because the prophet Isaiah, in this morning's reading, reminds us, "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."

For me, being a follower of Christ means I am committed to doing justice. And I do justice because I believe refugees and immigrants should be fully welcomed; I believe all people deserve access to affordable healthcare; I believe women should have autonomy over their own bodies; I believe every race and gender and sexual orientation deserves respect; I believe the planet and atmosphere are our responsibility to care for; I believe all faith traditions are equally beautiful and valid; and I believe poverty and hunger are unacceptable.

There are people who feel I'm too political. They wish our church wasn't so involved in such divisive issues. But when God called Moses to lead the people out of Egyptian slavery, that was a political act. When God told the Israelites to rebuild Jerusalem after 50 years of exile in Babylon, that was political resistance. When Jesus said to love your enemies, that was also an act of political resistance, as was his welcome of the marginalized.

Friends, if we want to just come to church on Sundays and have warm and fuzzy feelings about ourselves, without considering those who have been marginalized for any number of reasons, then we simply aren't doing the will of God. To the people of Isaiah's day, God made clear that just going through the motions of religion doesn't please God: "You serve your own interest on your fast day," God said, "and oppress all your workers...Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:3-4,6)

One of our denomination's four core values is the core value of justice, which states, "Working to talk less and do more, we are committed to resisting the structures that oppress people and standing with those who suffer under the weight of oppressive systems, being guided always by our commitment to Global Human Rights." And thanks to the tireless efforts of people like Rev. Elder Diane Fisher in Eastern Europe, MCC has become identified as the "Human Rights Church."

I think I like that, don't you? Today in other parts of the world, we are known called the Human Rights Church, and with the ongoing guidance of God's Holy Spirit, we will continue to be. Amen.