

How can we claim to be different?

Ever since I joined Metropolitan Community Churches I have had a running debate with people about what church is, and what it should be. As we approach Easter I am reminded rather forcibly that Christ was an example that was anything but passive and accommodating, but was sufficiently radical and challenging that the religious authorities had him executed. Our concept of church is too frequently a sort of social club where people participate in 'religious things' within a clearly defined comfort zone.

The temptation for a church like MCC, founded in the LGBT community is to 'do church' like everyone else, just a gay version – to buy into the temptation to build a church 'just like the straight people'.

This temptation goes hand in glove with the desire for church to be 'respectable', to not rock the boat or use imagery or language which is 'too gay'. At the basis of this mindset is an unspoken desire to build one's own Episcopal Church (or whatever) to make up for the one that excluded us.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is internalized homophobia. Moreover, it is the biggest wasted opportunity in 2000 years! The old religion – the faith that Jesus came to transform had as its basis the law – a legalistic approach to human behavior that failed to see people as whole human beings, but as a list of acts that needed modifying. I firmly believe that this tendency infected the Christian church as it grew, and especially as it lost its sacred space on the margins of society and began to achieve 'respectability'. In other words, the rot set in when the will of the rich and powerful came to define the ethics of the new church. Today, Roman Catholic moral theology and especially the branches known as natural law or casuistry seek to boil down human beings into 'acts' without reference to the intent of the heart, the past, the intellect, the soul and the body as one cohesive whole – created by God as a single astonishing being, not as a few disparate urges and unwholesome physical traits attached unwillingly to a soul.

I wrote a tagline for our church that I stand by with every ounce of my strength – 'Be celebrated, not tolerated!' This, for me, means that we consciously avoid being straight jacketed by concepts of what church should be, and what a church community should look like. It also means that we **MUST NOT** buy into the belief that anything 'a bit gay' or 'a bit campy' demeans the dignity of a church. People who are going to be put off by manifestations of LGBT culture in our advertising are going to be put off by some of our members who are (would you believe) actually **gay folk!** There are **transgendered** people there as well, and (wait for it) **Lesbians!!!** And they are there not as an afterthought - not as a barely tolerated subgroup but as the rich and fertile loam of our churches primary mission.

If you look like something out of a '50's ideal home exhibition with husband, wife, and two point five children, and seek only respectability and a comfortable place to hear your assumptions reaffirmed then you

are probably served already by dozens of churches in New Orleans and elsewhere. If however, you seek authenticity (even if you **do** look like a '50's ideal family!), and desire to appear 'whole and unbroken' before God – to offer your entire self for that transformation that comes when we begin to walk with God then maybe, just maybe we are on the same page. The church that fails to challenge the comfort zones of its members is unlikely to be reflecting any profound spiritual truth – and that includes LGBT churches. We have many of the same challenges as anyone else, and can be racist, sexist and homophobic (yes, homophobic). Life, and especially the new life represented by our spiritual journey is primarily about growth and change – in the natural world stagnation and immobility generally suggest that something is dead or fast asleep! A pastor's role is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable!

When I first suggested the name 'The Big Easy MCC' I had some vigorous objections, and at the heart of many of them (not all) seemed to be a suggestion that such a name was beneath our dignity, that it was flippant. Anyone who thinks I am anything other than deadly serious about building this church has obviously never met me! This is the same suggestion that has come back again and again with different aspects of our outreach here. I have been asked why we turn up in the bars most weeks, why I wear Tee shirts with slogans on and why we felt the need to turn up at Mardi Gras with a banner that read 'God loves you, we love you, LOVE the costume!'. Many LGBT people bear deep wounds from cruel and ignorant churches – they know what church is, and what it means and it is the enemy. By reaching into the cultural world of the LGBT community and affirming it, but saying we celebrate this culture and we value it, we are not ashamed of it or what it means then we are saying to all those people who have fled from church that **WE ARE DIFFERENT!** We are saying in a very loud voice that we think everyone is not just **born equal** but **remains equal**, that hard studs and drag queens, professional suburban gay couples, go-go boys, street drinkers and those on the very margins of 'respectable' society are astonishing, shining creatures created by God and ripe for the richness of a life consciously walking with God. All goes into the spiritual pot – not just those bits we feel comfortable with, but all of us; it is God who makes things new in startling and extraordinary ways, and who uses startling and extraordinary people like us.

*Rev Clinton Crawshaw is the full-time pastor of The Big Easy MCC. They meet every Sunday at 5.00pm, for full details of Christian Education classes, social functions and events, and also to check out online sermons, go to [www.bigeasymcc.com](http://www.bigeasymcc.com). Tel: 504 214 4340 to speak to the pastor or email at [revcrawshaw@yahoo.com](mailto:revcrawshaw@yahoo.com).*