

History of Metropolitan Community Church of Knoxville (MCCK) (1977 through March 2011)

MCC Knoxville was started by a man from MCC Nashville, who had a dream of starting a church. Rev. Randall Hill, along with Tommy Marlin, Jr., led by the Holy Spirit, journeyed to Knoxville with determination, drive, and the support of MCC Nashville and MCC Atlanta.

On February 9, 1977, Nashville Pastor Rev. Thomas S. Bigelow, along with Randall Hill and Tommy Marlin Jr., approached the Board of Directors of the Nashville church and requested permission to start a “feasibility” study group in Knoxville. The request was approved on February 13, 1977.

On February 20, 1977, the first service was held at the Laurel Play Group Theatre and had an attendance of seven people. There were no musical instruments, but a great spirit was present. All who attended the service felt that history was in the making and they felt blessed by God.

MCC Knoxville’s community involvement was greatly influenced by “The Carousel”, a Knoxville area gay bar. Almost all of the people who attended the first services were regulars at The Carousel. With the immense help of these people, an outreach program was started on the campus of The University of Tennessee, which helped spread the word that MCC was beginning in Knoxville.

During this same time, a petition was written and signed by 19 members to request official study group status. The first congregational meeting took place on March 27, 1977, just one short month after the first service was held in Knoxville. MCCK secured a post office box, ordered songbooks, and was assigned a tax-exempt number. It was a glorious time which signified the beginning of something great.

By April 1977, good news was received from Nashville that MCC Knoxville had been granted official study group status. Many visitors from Nashville came to Knoxville to spread the word in the community and to support the church. MCCK is proud of the fact that from its beginning, it was self-supporting and never needed monetary support from the Nashville church. The Nashville church, however, was kind enough to donate two wine jars, one bread plate, and two candlesticks for the altar.

MCCK began its involvement in other areas of social action with other gay resources through radio and television talk shows to help educate the Knoxville community and surrounding areas. During the early part of MCCK’s growing years, many traditions were started...some of which continue to this day. A few examples of previous and current MCCK traditions include:

- April 20, 1977—First issue of “The Gloria” newsletter

- May 14, 1977—First potluck supper was held
- May 16, 1977—Beginning of an organization called “Gay Council”
- June 12, 1977—MCCCK started its first bookstore
- September 25, 1977-Rev. Thomas Bigelow installed MCCCK’s first 11 members
- September 1977—MCCCK began signing classes for the deaf and hearing impaired

In July 1978, Rev. Randall Hill’s pioneering ministry came to an end. Randall and Tommy moved to Florida and MCCCK began to grow in a new direction.

Candy Adams led the new ministry as Worship Coordinator and served in this role for two years. Adams resigned on June 1, 1980 as God was leading her to Quincy, Illinois. Dallas Warner served as interim coordinator of the church until a new Worship Coordinator was found.

In February 1981, temporary Worship Coordinator Brad Hamilton was brought into the ministry of the church. During Brad’s ministry with MCCCK, he and the congregation continued to move MCCCK forward with positive changes. One of those changes was a facelift of “The Gloria” newsletter. The new newsletter was named “The New Image” and remains in place today as one of MCCCK’s many methods of communication.

On July 1, 1981, Rev. Clifford Turpin came to Knoxville to serve as interim Pastor. After entering into a holy union with Thomas Klein, Rev. Turpin legally changed his last name to Klein.

In December 1981, MCCCK once again grew as it was granted mission status by the denomination.

In the spring of 1982, growing uncertainties and concerns between Rev. Klein and the congregation began to surface. In July of 1982, District Coordinator Gil Lincoln visited the Knoxville congregation for an open meeting to discuss the situation. Rev. Klein submitted his resignation at the next regular Board meeting and his resignation was effective on the last Sunday in August 1982.

On September 1, 1982, the Board asked Dallas Warner to serve as interim Worship Coordinator. Once again, God’s guidance and direction was felt in the congregation.

In September 1983, Dallas Warner resigned due to health problems. Rev. Kendall Krutchfield, a United Church of Christ clergy was elected as Worship Coordinator.

In November 1984, a congregational meeting was called to vote on closing MCCCK. The congregation voted instead to remain open and call a new Pastor. The vote was taken to call Rev. Bob Galloway as the new Pastor and his official start date was set for February 1985.

In January 1985, a Wednesday night Bible Study was started, as was a study on homosexuality and the Bible.

In February 1985, Rev. Galloway began and church attendance started to grow again. The Wednesday night Bible Study continued as well.

On Easter Sunday 1985, worship services relocated from the Unitarian Church to the Church of the Savior United Church of Christ building and services began meeting at 6:00 p.m. instead of 4:00 p.m. It was also at this time that the tradition of third Sunday Potluck began. Third Sunday Potluck also continues today.

In June 1985, the Gay Helpline was started in cooperation with Knoxville's Ten Percent (KTP) and was accepted as a ministry of MCKK. The church allowed the use of its phone lines and the Helpline still functions today on a weekly basis.

In August 1985, AIDS Response Knoxville (ARK) started as a ministry of MCKK. ARK provides education to the community about AIDS and supports persons with AIDS, their friends, and their families. ARK provides training to persons who serve as "buddies", people volunteering on the Helpline, and provides housing and food for people living with AIDS.

In September 1985, MCKK voted to support the work of Knoxville Habitat for Humanity by donating time and money, and continues to support Habitat today.

On Memorial Day 1986, MCKK participated in the International Candlelight Memorial Service for people who had died from AIDS and for people who were living with AIDS. In September, MCKK participated in the AIDS Vigil of Prayer by holding three special worship services and 50 hours of prayer for those affected by AIDS.

In January 1987, AIDS Response Knoxville became an independent organization, leaving the umbrella of MCKK, although the church members and volunteers continued to support ARK through gifts of time and money. A great deal of Pastor Galloway's time was also donated to ARK as he served as coordinator of the group and President of the Board in both 1987 and 1988.

In 1987, MCKK celebrated its 10th anniversary with a square dance and game night. A dinner was also held and District Coordinator Mary Moore was the guest speaker. The anniversary was a chance to reflect on the journey of MCKK and to celebrate its growth.

1988 was a year of growth, change, and challenge for MCKK. Worship attendance continued to grow and this growth combined with the Pastor Galloway's responsibilities with Aids Response Knoxville began to wear on him. The congregation rallied behind Pastor Galloway and began to take on more of the ministry responsibilities of the church. The church office was moved out of Pastor Galloway's house and into a rented space. In July of that year, it was discovered that the church Treasurer had taken almost \$2,000 of church funds. The treasurer paid back about \$1,200, but died before repaying the full amount. The congregation responded to this challenge with great care for the person, although they also struggled with great disappointment in his betrayal

of the church. In the end, one week before the former treasurer's death, the congregation voted to forgive the debt and invited him to reconcile with the church.

Due to the success and growth of MCKK, the congregation was asked by people living near Chattanooga, TN to assist with starting a church in their community. MCKK started the process of researching this opportunity, and in September 1988, the Chattanooga Parish Extension of MCC Knoxville was started. It was with great joy that MCKK had been invited to share in the beginnings of a new work of Christ. MCKK has watched and assisted MCC Chattanooga ("The Rock") as it has grown both in numbers and spirituality. With great pride and praise to God, MCKK celebrates MCC Chattanooga's growth from their beginning to standing on their own today.

After having some challenges in 1988, MCKK decided to add more fun to its life as a congregation. The church supported the World Church Extension with an offering and an international food-themed potluck. The congregation gathered to play games like football, volleyball, and enjoyed dancing. MCKK also renewed its relationship with its host congregation at Church of the Savior and the two congregations participated in a joint clean-up day at the church property. They ended the day with a celebratory "Feast of Fools".

In 1989, as further evidence of the growth of MCKK, the church sent Pastor Galloway and a lay delegate to General Conference in Minneapolis. Never before had two members of MCKK been sent to General Conference! The lay delegate represented MCKK at the ordination of Pastor Galloway during the conference.

In November 1989, Pastor Galloway was honored by the Knoxville Roundtable of the National Conference of Christians and Jews for his work in the Gay and Lesbian community and for his ecumenical work. That same month, MCKK was featured on the "I Believe" television series on a local Knoxville station. As a part of the feature, a special service was held and MCKK was recognized for its healing ministry and its work with AIDS patients and families.

In December 1989, the church had two significant landmarks in its work with other denominations. The AIDS Vigil of Prayer ended with a "Service of Remembrance and Hope for Those Affected with AIDS". The service was sponsored by the Knoxville Ministerial Association and was held at St. John's Episcopal Cathedral. On Christmas Eve of the same year, MCKK and Church of the Savior held a joint service. This was the first time MCKK held a joint service with their host congregation and it was the largest worship service ever held in that building with 102 people in attendance.

In February 1990, MCKK's 13th year, MCKK was officially recognized as a Charter Church in UFMCC. In April 1990, at the request of the Gay Christian Student Support Group, Rev. Troy Perry visited Knoxville and preached at MCKK. The attendance that day was 110 people, which was the largest crowd in MCKK's history at that time.

In mid-1990, MCKK would once again be challenged. An arsonist struck the church office in the early morning hours of Monday, July 16. While the building was deemed a total loss, both ARK and MCKK were able to save most all of the furnishings and office equipment. In the aftermath of the fire, the church community worked hard together to move the church office to a new space, and cleaned the furnishings, files, books, and equipment. The congregation felt strongly that the arson that was meant to destroy the church would actually be a catalyst to renewed faith and action.

Continuing with MCKK's work and compassion for the AIDS community, the AIDS Memorial Service in August 1990 was held at the Knoxville Museum of Art. The event was sponsored by ARK and the event was held in conjunction with the showing of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. In addition to MCKK participation in the event, there were also representatives of the United Methodist Church, National Baptist Church, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Knoxville Christian Fellowship, and Conservative and Reformed Jewish synagogues. It was truly incredible to see so many communities of faith come together in support of the AIDS community.

In May of 1991, MCKK once again found itself with a challenge as Pastor Galloway resigned. Rev. John Rice became the interim minister. Dr. Rice, a Methodist minister, owned his own company called "WorshipWorks" and was a specialist in liturgy and worship.

Following Dr. Rice, Rev. Jim Richards was called as Pastor in October 1992. Rev. Richards had been a Presbyterian minister for 31 years and was listed in both the first and second editions of *Marquis' Who's Who in Religion*. He had also serviced pastorates in Grand Island, New York; Tacoma, Washington; and Topeka, Kansas. He had also been the Director of Communication for one of the early ecumenical agencies, the Metropolitan Inter-Church Agency of Kansas City and Deputy Director of Communication for the United Church of Christ denomination. Rev. Richards would later be awarded two awards by the Gay Pride organization for his leadership and outspokenness in the community.

In 1993, a social action committee called Liberty and Justice was founded by MCKK. The need for this committee became evident after a major confrontation occurred between religious fundamentalists and the gay community in the metropolitan area. In March 1993, the Knox County Commission sought to adopt a resolution petitioning Congress to deny any effort to provide civil rights to gay male and lesbian persons. Rev. Richards enlisted a group of 30 to 50 people from across the community to confront the Commission. A meeting took place between the committee and the Commission and it was agreed that the item would be removed from the Commission's March meeting agenda. However, the local "Christian" radio station quickly spread the word about this decision and on the day of the Commission meeting, more than 600 people crowded into the Commission chamber. Most of this crowd arrived in church busses and many of them were from outside Knox County. The Commission's committee faced a very loud and hostile crowd of "Christian" fundamentalists and made no effort to remove the item from the

agenda, allowing it to pass with a great majority. It was at this point that it was determined that an ongoing body which would be representative of the gay and lesbian community was needed to combat the rising tide of hate in the community, thus the birth of the social action committee “Liberty and Justice”.

In 1994, it became obvious that due to continued growth, the need to find a new worship space was imminent. Worship attendance was averaging 80 to 100 people and special occasion peaks were as high as 160 people at times. The need for classroom space and the ability to schedule events at the convenience of the congregation throughout the week were also driving forces behind the decision and the planning to purchase a building began.

MCCCK had a special visitor in 1994 when Dr. Mel White came to Knoxville. Dr. White had been the ghost writer for right-wing, anti-gay, religious figures including Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Dr. White had also been a ghost writer for Billy Graham and a speech writer for Ollie North. In 1994, he authored the book “Stranger at the Gate”, which detailed his life story as a gay man who fought his sexual orientation, spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to be “cured”, attempted suicide, but finally accepted and acknowledged that his sexual orientation was a gift from God. Dr. White called upon his former clients to stop their lethal rhetoric and gay bashing. Over the years, Dr. White was a guest on many national shows such as The Phil Donahue Show, 60 Minutes, and The Oprah Winfrey Show and was a champion for the gay community.

In the fall of 1994, the membership of MCCCK passed the 100 mark. Not unlike many MCC congregations, though, MCCCK has a constituency of nearly 500 people who attend with some degree of regularity, receive the newsletter, and participate in ways outside of worship, but do not choose to put their names on the membership role.

In November 1997, MCCCK had grown large enough to need its own space. After many years of being hosted at the Church of Christ on Weisgarber Road, MCCCK purchased its current facility at 1059 Tranquilla Drive.

In November 2000, Rev. Jim Richards retired and in December 2000, Rev. Bob Galloway was appointed Interim Pastor. In his second time as Pastor of MCCCK, Pastor Galloway served for another 10 years. In the Summer of 2010, Pastor Galloway announced that due to growing health concerns, the time had come for him to step down to a part-time role as Pastor. A Pastoral Search Committee was formed and began the search for a new Co-Pastor for MCCCK. The search committee interviewed numerous candidates from all walks of faith, but God ultimately matched MCCCK and Rev. Jill Sizemore together for the next step into the future of the church. Pastor Galloway announced his full retirement date of March 8, 2011. Shortly before this announcement, Pastor Galloway was honored with a 2011 Peacemaker Award by the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance (OREPA). The Peacemaker Award is given to individuals whose

commitment to securing rights to all people has anchored their lives there could not have been a more appropriate and deserving person than Pastor Galloway.

In February 2011, Rev. Jill Sizemore was officially installed as MCKK's new Pastor. Rev. Elder Ken Martin officiated the service and members of the congregation presented symbolic gifts to Rev. Sizemore. Rev. Elder Martin indicated that the installation brought to full circle a process that started when he ordained Rev. Sizemore in the waters off the coast of Hawaii. The service was followed by a dessert reception and a climate of excitement, growth, and change has been set for the future of MCKK.