AIDS – Yesterday and Today: “Breaking the Stained Glass”
by Rev. David Farrell, Pastor Emeritus MCC San Diego, CA (USA)

It was wonderful to be an MCC Pastor in 1980, leading a young and vibrant congregation in sunny San Diego, California. I grew up in this fairly conservative, mostly Republican, city by the sea. It had been a small town, but by 1980 it had become (almost without any of us noticing) a vast military/industrial complex, and the 8th largest city in the country. Our healthy, young (average age 25-45 and predominantly gay male) congregation had just completed a successful capital campaign and moved triumphantly into a new church home which was too large for them, when AIDS slipped into San Diego silently as a shadow on a sunny day.

This invisible predator moved swiftly among us…unseen, unnamed, unnoticed… smooth…like a warm knife moves through butter. It left in its wake a narrow corridor of disease and death at the heart of San Diego’s gay male community. We would learn to name it AIDS and to know it well as disease and death invaded our church and community we served.

Death was so new to us. As the founding generation of MCC, we had no real experience of death in our midst at all. There was no elder generation; no normal cycle of life and death. And only the men got sick and died. The example of women in our community rising heroically to minister to us is the proudest story of my generation. For many gay men, the strength and unselfish courage of women during the early years of AIDS dealt a death-blow to any lingering vestiges of male superiority. They were church-goers (or not), they were lesbians (or not); they were our friends, mothers, sisters, mentors, nurses, drivers, shoppers, housekeepers, nurses, cooks and caretakers...they were magnificent, and they were there for us! and I'll never forget it.

We didn't know the cause of AIDS then. There weren’t any effective treatments, and it almost always ended the same way. A sudden onslaught of little-known or half-forgotten cancers and other terrifying illnesses would attack a weakened immune system and MCC had another suffering patient (and another funeral) on the way. There weren’t really any gay-affirming churches then and it seemed as though everyone in town was coming to MCC for services.

An odd thing happened in all of this. In the beginning, many gay people had been indifferent (if not openly hostile) to MCC and its ministry. The disgraceful ways in which so many churches had shunned us and shamed us and cast us out over the years had crippled many of us spiritually and emotionally, and left us with “a chip on our shoulder” for organized religion. We came by it honestly. I felt it too. But that didn't mean we stopped believing in God, or a higher power, or a life beyond this one.

So, when I visited AIDS patients in the hospital or at-home, they were glad to see me, but as death drew near, their thoughts turned to the churches of their childhood. The young men really wanted a priest, minister, or rabbi from their own religious tradition. Most of them wanted a church burial. They wanted their lovers to be in charge of the arrangements. They wanted their relationships honored. They wanted their friendships and affiliations respected. And, they wanted the cause of their death acknowledged. Our churches had previously denied us all of the above, but things were different now, weren’t they? We were dying. Foolishly, perhaps naively, I hoped so. How sad and disappointed I was to learn that, even in the face of suffering and death, young
gay men were still being denied the comforts of faith.

In San Diego, MCC stepped into the breach. Never before had our congregation been so challenged. For the first five years, with the help of God, a united community, and a struggling group of home-grown, bootstrapped charities, we did it all...and we were glad to do it. Indeed, I believe God had raised us and strengthened our church for just “such a time as this.” MCC was truly the spiritual center of our community.

We were called to perform the “corporal works of mercy”...to feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; harbor the harborless; visit the sick; ransom the captive; and bury the dead. All of us, clergy, boards, deacons, and congregation were ministering with both hands to all comers. Together, we searched for ways to acknowledge the diversity of lifestyles in our community because we had to. We learned a lot about illness and death and relationships because the learning was thrust upon us. We opened our minds and hearts to other faith traditions because we had no choice. And, along the way, we mastered the practices of family counseling and intervention, revolutionized the ritual of grieving, and raised Funeral and Memorial Services to an art form.

I don’t mean to say that nobody else was willing to help. I think many other clergy or churches wanted to, and some did. I thank God for them. And there were also clergy from a variety of faith traditions who wanted to help, but were either afraid to, or just didn’t know how. Others just kept wishing it would all go away. Some of the more bigoted preachers were at their very worst, taking cheap shots about AIDS being God’s punishment for being gay and wallowing in their own sanctimony until their own clergy, their inner circles, and some of their children started dying from it.

By 1985, I was exhausted, overwhelmed and surrounded by fear, death and denial. It seemed few people were talking and nobody was listening. I knew I had to find a way to break through the stained-glass windows of denial that were insulating so many local churches and clergy from facing the reality of this crisis. These were their people too!

In January 1985, I held a press conference to announce that MCC San Diego would be hosting a 50-hour AIDS Vigil of Prayer, beginning on a Friday evening and continuing uninterrupted for 50 hours. The Sanctuary would be open day and night with Staff and volunteers in constant prayer. There would be a series of musical presentations and 5 ecumenical worship services. Our entire property would be devoted to AIDS awareness and education. Every AIDS organization would staff a booth with information about their needs and services. Doctors and nurses would offer latest AIDS medical information, and legal experts would educate GLBT people about legal remedies available to them. Volunteers and offerings would be raised for the various local AIDS charities. People with AIDS would share their experiences. Every religious leader and every congregation in the city would receive written invitations and schedules and would be personally invited to attend and pray with us at some time during the 50 hours. We wanted to offer an event that would give everybody an opportunity to participate, and give everybody a way to attend.

The weekend came, and male and female clergy from a kaleidoscope of religious traditions
showed up in a bewildering assortment of vestments to participate in the various worship services. Prayers were offered; blessings were bestowed; resentments were spoken; confessions were made; apologies were offered and accepted; forgiveness was given...and all the while a steady stream of people crowded our seminars and display booths, and moved in and out of our Sanctuary; praying, listening to music, engaging in quiet contemplation, or writing a message to lost loved ones on the massive AIDS banners placed on the walls for that purpose. Lessons were learned, grief was shared and many people were strengthened and comforted...and for a while there, it was like we know it’s supposed to be when the people of God gather together: “Fulfill you my joy, that you be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” (Philippians 2:1-2)

It was a perfect storm...or the planets were aligned, or maybe it was simply God’s will, because it proved to be the right event, in the right place, with the right focus, at the right time, and it worked like a Swiss watch! The church community, the GLBT community, and the larger community responded enthusiastically to the whole idea. Everybody did their part. An outpouring of volunteers, a torrent of free publicity (in both gay and mainstream media), and an overwhelming response from other clergy and churches, all came together in a blessed harmony that stunned us all!

Media coverage before, during, and after the vigil, was massive and uniformly positive. One rabid fundamentalist congregation staged a loud and vulgar protest out in front of church on Sunday morning and received a scorching TV editorial for their efforts. We took a lot of stills and video during the weekend, and got footage of the media coverage from all our local TV stations, and permission to use it in the video we were making of the vigil weekend.

When we shared our video with MCC Fellowship officers, I was asked if our congregation would implement this program Fellowship-wide. We were honored to do so. In 1986, MCC San Diego led the Fellowship in the very first International Aids Vigil of Prayer. We created a comprehensive “how-to” kit, with a copy of our video, tee shirts, polo shirts, postcards, even envelope seals with a distinctive Vigil logo. We sent the Vigil Kit to every church in MCC, and I made presentations at several MCC District Conferences.

We didn’t know how successful it might be, so imagine our surprise and joy when MCCs around the world embraced the idea wholeheartedly. All of our congregations did it on the same weekend. That meant that prayer, AIDS education and AIDS awareness programs never stopped all around the world for 50 hours on that weekend. As in San Diego, other churches and organizations cooperated and participated in unheard of numbers. When MCCs sent in their final reports and the results were tabulated, we found that over five thousand (5,000+) churches worldwide had participated in the 50 hour International Vigil.

Many say that Rev. Troy Perry and Metropolitan Community Churches have altered the course of religious history. It’s true, I think. MCC does change things...it changes minds, melts hearts, and alters the course of people’s lives. MCC changed me in dramatic ways, giving me back my faith, my sobriety and health, and my vocation to ministry. That’s why we were there when the first waves of the AIDS pandemic hit our communities; it’s why we’ll still be here when HIV/AIDS is gone.
Who ever dreamed that a Prayer Vigil could be voted “Event of the Year” by a local GLBT community? Well, that’s exactly what happened in San Diego, California in 1985. At General Conference in 1987, the MCC Fellowship honored our congregation with an award for the most effective Fellowship program in MCC history. And we have taken enormous pleasure and satisfaction in seeing the weekend Vigil of Prayer evolve into the international “World AIDS Day.” We didn’t know any of this when we started out. We were just taking the next step...just trying to be authentic...just trying to be faithful. That’s all we’re called to do.