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Life and Religion

Loving, adapting amid coronavirus pandemic to LGBTQ community
Raleigh church reaches out to neighbors

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by Hannah McClellan | UNC Media Hub



PHOTO | WILL MELFI

A member of Raleigh's St. John's Metropolitan Community Church choir sings during a service on March 1.

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RALEIGH — Vance Haywood was 24 the first time he went to a drag show performance.

Attending with friends, he was excited but nervous. As a gay man who'd grown up with a conservative Christian background, he was still learning how to be fully himself. Sitting underneath the dimmed neon lights, he was having fun. And then, Taj Mahal, one of the drag queens performing that night at Legends Nightclub, began singing a traditional hymn. The song stopped him in his tracks — it was one he'd grown up singing. Only a few years before, he'd left the church because of the non-affirming ideas taught there about LGBTQ people.

"I was like, oh gosh, here's my sign, I'm going to hell," Haywood remembered thinking. But as time went on, he changed how he thought about God and ministry. "It started weighing on me — wow, she was singing gospel music at a club. I'd never known something like that," he said. "That really opened my mind to think, God's here. God is everywhere I go and God loves me."

The performance allowed him to experience God anew.

More than a decade later, Haywood is now the lead pastor at St. John's Metropolitan Community Church in Raleigh. His encounter with the now late Taj Mahal still impacts his approach to ministry today.

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A colorful graphic for "Summer Break Library" with icons for "PLAY", "EXPLORE", "GIVE", "CREATE", "READ", and "WRITE". It includes the text "Enjoy Summer Break", "READ • LEARN • EXPLORE", "June 1 - August 8 2020", and "Sign up at summerbreak.cmlibrary.org".

A Wells Fargo advertisement featuring a man with glasses and a "Learn More" button. The text reads "Get the guidance you need on the road to recovery."

Years later, he discovered that Taj Mahal, a transgender woman, was an active member at St. John's the night he saw her perform at Legends. She had previously been the choir director at the church and considered her drag performances of gospel music part of her ministry, "taking God with her wherever she went."

"That was really powerful for me because, one, it brought all of that back up and really emphasized the start of my journey to acceptance," Haywood said. "It also helped me realize God was working through St. John's to touch me years before I ever knew what St. John's was."

St. John's MCC is like many other Christian churches in the country. There are services on Sunday, choir robes and communion. There is community; the sense of family among church attendees and a desire to put others first. There is a commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ. One thing sets St. John's apart from many other churches, though: they are openly affirming of LGBTQ folks.

This is what persuaded Haywood to return to church. And why he decided to stay.

'It's been my home'

St. John's was founded in 1976. At the time, gay marriage was still 39 years away from being legalized in the United States. Many sodomy laws were still in place.

The first meetings of what would become the St. John's congregation took place in an apartment on Morgan St., as an evening Bible study. The group, led by Willie White, who would become St. John's first pastor, and his partner, Robert Pace, decided to affiliate with the MCC denomination after just a few months of meeting.

MCC, founded eight years earlier, was the first denomination to completely affirm LGBTQ membership and pastors. There are now over 200 MCC affiliated or emerging churches globally.

Jay Cannady-Kelderman was the first person to attend the meetings, advertised at the time as a "gay Bible study," after seeing flyers as local clubs. He'd grown up going to church and was attending a conservative church in Chapel Hill at the time.

Though he said he'd never had a particularly negative experience as a gay man in those spaces, he was looking for a church that explicitly valued both his faith and his sexuality. St. John's was the first inclusive ministry he tried out. Forty-four years later, he still hasn't left.

"It's just given me the opportunity to worship as a whole person," he said. "It's been my home — I've met so many fantastic people. It's just been a huge influence on my life and I'm just so thankful to God that I'm a part of it."

Since its founding, Cannady-Kelderman has served on the Board of Directors and numerous committees. Today, he is on the church's audiovisual team and serves as a delegate for church conferences. His husband, Fred, serves as the minister of congregational care.

"As you can imagine, in 44 years I've seen thousands of people walk through those doors, and everybody doesn't stay, but I think everybody gets touched in one way or another," he said. "And then, of course, other people just can't leave — like me."

'Turned my whole world upside down'

Five days a week, St. John's serves hot meals to people experiencing homelessness and keeps its building open as a day shelter, in partnership with Love Wins Community Engagement Center.

Due to the coronavirus, the meal program has expanded to include to-go, drive-through and delivery meal services. The regular program continues to operate, with additional sanitation measures in place and socially distanced seating arrangements.

This is the only "hot meal" program currently being offered in the county, Haywood said, and St. John's food pantry has tripled in operations due to the coronavirus, serving approximately 80 families each week.

"Being asked to stay at home and 'self-quarantine' comes with its challenges. Imagine if you had no house to go to, or had no means to get food and groceries to sustain you... For many, that is reality," Haywood wrote on Facebook regarding the importance of keeping the meal program running.

Billy Garrett works with Love Wins during the day and with St. John's at night as a cook. He's been



cooking since he was 15, and he loves being able to do it for a good cause. While cooking, he often listens to the services. He said he appreciates being around people who are unafraid to be themselves.

"It's a good church — these people have good hearts and I love it," Garrett said. "If they need me, I'm here."

Joe Crull, a volunteer since last year with his longtime girlfriend, and now fiancée, Josie, said he is always at St. John's on Sunday. For him, coming to the church showed him a different way to "think and feel" about LGBTQ people.

"It turned my whole world upside down because I used to be really prejudiced," he said. "There isn't one member of this church I don't love and adore. They're just beautiful people."

'I'm going to love you'

Even as the United States becomes increasingly less Christian and young people increasingly support gay rights, conservative Christian institutions are growing in power and financial resources, according to a Feb. 26 New York Times article.

Many young evangelicals are leaving their churches because of the lack of inclusion of LGBTQ people, the article stated, and the religious divide over this inclusion extends beyond conservative churches. Presbyterians and Episcopalians have split in recent years over gay rights; just last month The United Methodist Church voted to strengthen its ban of gay and lesbian clergy and same-sex marriages.

Decisions such as these leave churches that embrace gay rights, such as St. John's, in a unique position. In many communities, their church is the only one with openly LGBTQ-affirming policies.

This can come with misconceptions on both sides — from fundamentalists who do not claim them in their faith and from social justice advocates who are hesitant to work closely with a church.

MCC Emerging Church Specialist Wanda Floyd said this was a challenge for the denomination as it tried to get more involved with justice initiatives in the '80s and '90s.

"Because we were a faith movement, many people would not give us space because they grew up in a place where church had condemned them," she said. "So MCC has really had to fight to even be a part of some of the movements out there."

For Haywood, the goal is not to convince someone they are wrong by arguing with them, but to show them love.

Sometimes, this looks like wearing his clergy collar to pride events — showing LGBTQ people in attendance there are churches that will welcome them without asking them to change. Other times, it looks like handing water bottles on hot days to protestors with angry signs about homosexuality.

"In those situations, it's like, 'You're here to tell me I'm wrong, and in some cases to tell me I'm going to hell and I'm the worst thing in the world,'" he said regarding protestors. "But I'm going to love you and care for you through that. Because that's what Jesus calls you to do."

'We have to be able to adapt'

In the age of the coronavirus, like many other churches in the country, St. John's has moved to fully virtual services and gatherings.

Though the transition has been difficult, Haywood said it's also shed light on the importance of community, as well as things they'd stopped doing as a community — like writing letters or calling each other on the phone. Now, a team of people regularly checks in with members to see how the church can help with any needs.

Haywood is grateful the meal ministry in St. John's community center is able to continue, as it was deemed essential. Still, the physical separation for members is difficult.

"Probably similar to most churches — we're a very physical people. We want to hug people, we want to shake hands and we want to have that physical and in-person communication," he said. "I think for queer people it's even more vital, because many of us have been told we were other and different, and some still are in those places where church is one of the few places they can go where they know they can be all of who they are — and people are going to hug them and love them and mean it."

To Floyd, who started at St. John's in 1987 the weekend of her first gay pride event, adaptation is key for MCC churches. Not just during the coronavirus, but after, too. She said the churches have learned to adapt to cultural change over the years and must continue to do so.

One of those ways, she thinks, is by continuing to offer online services, to appeal to younger generations, even after people are allowed to gather in large groups again.

"There will always be queer people, of all ages, all over the place," she said. "We have to be able to adapt so that people can find their way to our doors."

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