

Renee McCoy

Reverend Dr. Renee McCoy is an activist and minister who was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1951. As a teenager, she was involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Catholics in Action. In 1976, she joined the Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit (MCCD), where she chaired the MCC Racism Task Force. A committed community-builder, McCoy co-founded the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) in 1978 and would proceed to found several more secular and religious organizations over the next ten years. Among these was Harlem MCC in New York City, the first Christian congregation in both MCC and the United States to be governed by African American LGBTQ persons. In 1988, Reverend McCoy founded Full Truth Fellowship of Christ Church, which began as a local Bible study for LGBTQ+ African Americans but would eventually become the first LGBTQ organization in Michigan to own land.

To learn more about Reverend McCoy, visit the LGBTQ+ Religious Archives Network: <https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/profiles/renee-mccoy>

Document A: Excerpts from “Renee McCoy | Oral History,” *LGBTQ Religious Archives Network, 2017.*

Monique M. Okay. So what year or time frame did you heed the call to ministry?

Renee M. Probably '76. So I started out as a deacon, and then went into student clergy. And then I was credentialed, I became licensed in New York, and started Harlem MCC in 1981.

Monique M. So let's talk a bit about the Harlem MCC. That was your first church and the first church plant. Were you bivocational at that point or were you in full-time ministry?

Renee M. I'm black. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] Well...

Renee M. I had a job!

Monique M. [*Laughs.*] For the record, can you tell us what your job was in addition to—

Renee M. ...I did some rehab work up in Harlem. I did some odd jobs. I did some writing for some old rich lady out in, up in—but I did whatever I could to pay the rent, you know. And start the church. But I didn't have... I had moved from Detroit so I didn't have a lot of... And I didn't

have a college degree, so I didn't have a lot to work with. But I did whatever I could to survive. And that was, I mean, that's what we did.

People, you know, we all lived in a, shared a brownstone... Then I was in relationships. We all, everybody pitched in to get the rent done, the rent taken. But Harlem MCC was because we needed something that was governed by black people, by black LGBT people, and that reflected our culture and our lifestyle. And MCC didn't have anything like that. So we started Harlem MCC.

Eventually, when I started the church, I was working as a—which, the job I had until I—I worked with homeless women. I worked with homeless mentally ill women in midtown Manhattan. And that was full-time with benefits. That was the job that paid the rent for real. And I worked there for seven years with the chronically mentally ill. I had a small caseload of chronically mentally ill homeless women. And I worked to get them to a point where they could be housed, at a 24 hour shelter. I was there. And I worked in the community to try and locate housing that they could...people that would take them.

And then I did the on the streets ministry with substance abusers and folks in Harlem and with the church. The same time that we started the church, HIV hit, so it was a street ministry for real. I was at MCC New York and Harlem MCC grew out of MCC New York. But also had started a black gay group in New York. It was actually third world. It was called the New York Coalition of Third World Lesbians and Gays 'cause it was black and Hispanic. So we did that. And we were a chapter of NCBLG. So I still kept the activism stuff going on. And then started the church. Just kind of grew out of all of that work. And did HIV stuff.

Monique M. So that was one of my next questions, was sort of the move you made career-wise from working on the ground from the church perspective to doing that as a career path, working with those persons living and unfortunately dying with AIDS. How did you balance the social justice cause? Was it your faith pushed you into that direction or it was a job?

Renee M. No, it was never a job. It was, you know, it was what you do. People were dying. This strange disease hit, and my friends were dying. You know, it wasn't, it was, NCBLG was

national at that point. We had groups around the country. We had the Detroit Coalition. People were dying out of there. We had the New York Coalition, and people were dying. And my job as a pastor has always been to protect life. So there was no inconsistency. I was working with homeless women, and HIV was there as well.

Before I started the church, and I guess it all kind of mashes together, 'cause I was doing the church, I was doing the Coalition, and I was working at the shelter, you know. We were... the Olivieri Center was right like two blocks from Madison Square Garden, so that was what my life was. What else do you do when people are dying? And people in my church were getting this disease. We were the only black church really that was dealing with gay stuff. So I look out—I mean, we never got really big, you know. But folks knew that that was what I did. And so when folks were dying, and I lived in Harlem, and I could see people dying, I did a lot of work with substance abusers on the streets of Harlem.

And whether they came to the church or not, they knew what I did, so they would call and I would do what I needed to do... So it was never—I mean, it wasn't a career path. It was just ministry... Yeah, I mean, I worked at the center for homeless women. That was what paid the rent. But HIV stuff, people were dying.

To read or hear Rev. McCoy's full Oral History interview, please visit:
<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/renee-mccoy>



Document B: "Church for a Different Community," by Renee McCoy, *Black/Out: The Magazine of the National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1989, pg. 60-61.

Church for a Different Community

Renee McCoy

On any given Sunday evening, a particular bar in Detroit, Michigan, frequented by Black lesbians and Gays, takes on an interesting change in clientele. Many of the men one usually sees wearing casual clothing are then dressed in suits. One can hear conversations at almost every table about church services or other church activities. Most attentive eavesdropping will reveal that most of the people in the bar are active members of one of several churches. There seems even to be a little network of individuals who visit one another's churches for special events and activities. Their average age is, perhaps, thirty-two; most have decent to well-paying jobs. Most reflect the conservatism of their blue collar mothers and fathers in dress and attitude.

The things they have most in common are their sexuality, their race, and the importance each places on attendance and involvement in the Church.

that this pastor and several members of his ministerial staff were Gay. Most of the members of that church's large, popular choir are Gay or Lesbian.

Most of the Gays and Lesbians in that church and many other churches throughout this country wish things were different in the churches they attend and support with their dollars, time, and energies. Some accept the Church's conditional acceptance and its participation in their continued oppression, believing that God will make it up to them in the sweet by and by, or that oppression is justified because their sexuality is a sin. Some have even sat silently by as condemnation of the persons they love and their lifestyles rained down from soapboxes disguised as pulpits. Others feel that sexuality has nothing to do with worship, God, or the church, and is not an important enough issue to press. Most also believe there to be no other alternatives to worship and ministry.

We have sat in its pews, preached in its pulpits, served on its boards, committees and commissions, and sang in and directed its choirs. We have given it our time, our talents and our dollars. The Church has responded with condemnation, avoidance or silence.

They also share the experience of having to hide their sexuality in order to worship in those churches or participate in various ministries, on boards, and committees. Several months ago the pastor of one of these churches died from AIDS, refusing right until the end to disclose the cause of his illness to the public, even though the cause of his illness and his sexual preference was common knowledge throughout the Gay community. Most of the individuals in that bar knew without a doubt

60

As an ordained minister who pastored a primarily Black Lesbian and Gay church in Harlem for more than five years, I have experienced alternatives to the oppression we face in churches. I have had the luxury of being part of a worshipping community consisting primarily of Black Lesbians and Gays and the joy of doing such a special and fulfilling parish ministry. Increasingly, Black Lesbians and Gays throughout the country are expressing desires for more churches designed to

address the needs and concerns of Black Lesbians and Gays.

One such group has already begun in Detroit, MI. Presently called Full Truth Bible Study and Ministries, this group has been organized in order to celebrate and develop the full truth of our lives; we are Gay men and women; we are Black; we are Christians; we are empowered by God's love to be proud, prosperous, and productive. Since the beginning of Lent we have met weekly for prayer and study. Mother's Day marks the beginning of monthly worship services. Our goal is to expand both worship and ministries by the Fall, including projects for AIDS education, peer support, literacy improvement, children's programs, and job development. Upon completion of this next year as executive director of NCBLG, I will devote full-time energy to the growth and development of this church.

Frequently I am asked why Christianity, and why should there be "special" churches for the Black Lesbian and Gay Community. My response to the first question is simply that Christianity works. It may not be the choice for a lot of people. It is, however, a doctrine and a way of life with which I feel comfortable and in which I believe. The very core of Christianity is love, love for God, for one's self, and for one's neighbor. When one slices through the words and rituals of the various church groups, one discovers a way of life which mandates service and empowerment. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. House the homeless. Minister to the sick, the imprisoned, the lonely, the broken, the hopeless. Affirm God's unconditional love, acceptance, and participation in the activities of all humanity. Celebrate life and claim liberation and wholeness.

Like many others, I have been frustrated and angered by the failure of organized religion to effectively respond to the "call of the gospel." Like many others, I have felt the sting of the lies



of so many religious leaders about Lesbians, Gays, Blacks, women, the poor, and more. There is, indeed, a difference between organized religion and Christianity.

The response to why there should be “special” churches to address the needs of Black Lesbians and Gays is a bit more complicated. One would think that with all the churches in existence in our community already, we don’t need another one. Often the solution presented is for Lesbians and Gays in other churches to just come out in those congregations and make the church respond favorably. There is certainly more to it than this.

The Black Church has been in the forefront of all progressive human and civil rights change since slavery. It was what strengthened us and got us through the bad times. It is a very real and important part of the Black American Experience in this country. It has also been a source of strength for us and a vehicle for joy, celebration, praise, and thanksgiving for God’s care and concern. It has been the Black Church that has handled the business of the Black community. It staffed and financed the civil rights movement; its music became that movement’s battle hymns. For decades it was the only social service agency in our community. The Church is the most powerful institution in the Black community.

Although the Black Church has been instrumental in bringing about positive growth for the Black community as a whole, it has miserably failed Black Lesbians and Gays. We have sat in its pews, preached in its pulpits, served on its boards, committees and commissions, and sang in and directed its choirs. We have given it our time, our talents and our dollars. The Church has responded with condemnation, avoidance, or silence.

At the same time, the Church is very

important to many of us. Most of us were raised with tremendous church influence and feel the pain of that loss in our lives as Lesbians and Gays. We miss the rituals and the ceremony. We miss the hymns and the prayers and the testimonies about how great God has been to us. And, we need the forums it offered for education and the social services it provides. The answer to why “special” churches is simply that we have waited too long already for the Black church to respond to the needs of our community. There is some hope that it will change. In the meantime, we must be about providing for our own needs—spiritual and otherwise.

Churches that openly welcome Black Lesbians and Gays will move beyond surface toleration of our sexuality and lifestyles. They will affirm and bless our relationships. They will educate our community about issues facing our lives. They will assist in the care of our children and our elderly. They will make alliances with our families and friends who are not Lesbian or Gay. They will take the edge off of the many fears and anxieties we usually face alone. They will seek to shape the visions we all share of quality lives and communities.

At the round table discussion at the close of the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Conference in February, the participants expressed the desire for more Black Lesbian and Gay churches and for increased education and dialogue with existing Black churches. Individuals have already begun responding to this need. The work the Reverend Carl Bean is doing in Los Angeles and our new group in Detroit are just the beginning of yet another exciting adventure into the depths of our wholeness. The twenty-first century promises to find us realizing with joy and happiness more of the full truth of our lives as proud, spiritual, healthy Black Lesbians and Gay men.

Close Reading & Reflection Questions

Please reflect on the following questions based on your reading of this Case Study. Then, discuss your findings with your group.

1. What is one of the issues that Renee McCoy tackles in her ministry and activism? How is faith a part of her solution?
2. How did Reverend McCoy's religious beliefs serve as the basis for her community-building?
3. Reverend McCoy calls the Church the "most powerful institution in the black community." How could the Church be a powerful institution for black LGBTQ+ people?