

Edgehill
United
Methodist
Church

Pushing Life

The Story of Edgehill's
First Quarter Century 1966-1991

*Alice Cobb,
Editor*

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Edgehill's First Quarter Century

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Preface

We knew that we wanted to tell the story of our church but we knew also that we wanted it to be told in keeping with the Jesus Story which has been our central theme. So we decided to have one writer bring the story together in its major developments. But also, we decided to provide for many writers who have had such important roles in shaping our story.

Alice Cobb was one of the founding members of Edgehill United Methodist Church. A member of the faculty of Scarritt College at the time, she brought the resources of profound faith and quick wit to the formation of Edgehill. No one was better prepared or qualified than Alice to write the history of these twenty-five years.

The design of the book was worked out by Alice and Martha Hickman. First, tell the main story. Then embellish it with some critical details about people, programs and issues. Add to that some meanings and memories. Finally, for the record, include some of the more important historic documents.

Many people participated in getting the manuscript together. Finally, Mike Hodge collated the material and Ted McEachern prepared the final draft.

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Gay-Lesbian Issues

Hoyt Hickman

One day in 1971 Bill was visited by representatives of the newly-formed Nashville congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a denomination formed in 1968 with a ministry primarily in the gay and lesbian community. They told him that their congregation needed a place to hold weekly worship services until they could have their own building. They had asked every other church that seemed promising but had been turned down by every one. Several, however, suggested that they try Edgehill UMC; and so we were their last resort.

Bill brought the matter to the Administrative Council, and they unanimously voted to extend the invitation. The District Superintendent was informed, and he made no objection. The MCC preferred to hold their services Sunday evening, when we did not use the Big Room; and the arrangement worked well for both congregations.

Several years later the MCC decided that their ministry would be more effective if they held services in a room over a local gay bar, and the agreement to use our building was

terminated with good feelings on both sides. The two congregations maintained a friendly relationship.

A year or so later there was a wave of arson attacks against gay bars in various cities, with tragic loss of life. One of those burned was the one in which the MCC met. Once again they asked to meet at EUMC, and once again they were unanimously invited.

Then in 1977 the local media carried news of the MCC, stating that they met at EUMC; and as a result some persons raised objection to this arrangement at that year's Tennessee Annual Conference. Since several thousand dollars a year were given by the Conference and by the Nashville District to aid EUMC's neighborhood ministries, there was a motion to withhold these funds until EUMC stopped hosting the MCC. After a sharp debate, a compromise was reached in which EUMC was requested to reconsider its arrangement with the MCC.

Since a reply was not expected until the following Annual Conference, we had a year in which to formulate a carefully considered policy, and we made the most of this opportunity. A committee chaired by Hoyt Hickman studied the matter in active dialogue with the MCC. Since sentiment in EUMC seemed strongly in favor of continuing to host the MCC, it was agreed that both a proposed agreement between the congregations and a theologically based reply to the Annual Conference should be carefully drawn up and submitted to EUMC for discussion and approval. Both documents were unanimously approved by the Administrative Council, and in addition the reply to Annual Conference was unanimously approved at a special called meeting of the congregation. The Annual Conference took no further action

on the matter, and the MCC continued to meet at EUMC until they were able several years later to secure their own building. The relationship of the two congregations continued to be friendly and cooperative.

Meanwhile, EUMC had from its early days had gay and lesbian members, who found in the congregation freedom to be open about who they were and who were given various positions of trust and leadership in the congregation.

Affirmation, the United Methodist gay and lesbian caucus, was organized both nationally and locally and held both local and national meetings at EUMC.

In 1984, after the United Methodist General Conference had passed legislation barring "self-professed practicing homosexuals" from ordained ministry, a group of congregations, in cooperation with Affirmation, began a network of Reconciling Congregations.

Although there was a general feeling among EUMC members that we had been a reconciling congregation for years, there was also a desire to show our solidarity with other Reconciling Congregations and a feeling that for our own sakes we needed to make an official statement of our policy. Accordingly, a task force was appointed to draw up a statement declaring that we were a Reconciling Congregation and stating a policy opposing all discrimination against persons on the basis of sexual orientation. Such a statement was drawn up, shared with the whole congregation, and discussed after the late worship service one Sunday morning at a specially called congregational meeting, where the statement was supported without dissent. The Administrative Council at its next meeting unanimously adopted the statement, and EUMC became the first Reconciling

Congregation in the Southeastern Jurisdiction.

We knew, however, that there were three couples in the congregation who were unhappy with EUMC's becoming a Reconciling Congregation, but knew they were in a minority and did not wish to break the consensus. We realized that we had hidden estrangement that called for reconciliation within our own congregation. As one member, who is lesbian, put it, "I've so often been in situations where I was afraid to express my real view that it makes me feel terrible to think I'm helping to put someone else in such a situation."

A task force was formed for the purpose of reconciliation, and after preliminary private conversation, the three couples invited Marnie Cotton and Hoyt Hickman to what turned out to be a series of three all-evening living room discussions. The first was on what the Bible teaches about homosexuality. The second, at the suggestion of the couples, was on what the Bible teaches about reconciliation. At their suggestion, the third session was a face-to-face meeting with persons who were gay or lesbian. It was stressed throughout these sessions that the goal was not to get everyone to agree in their interpretations of the Bible or their personal views, but to see how each of the views expressed was one that Christians might honestly and with integrity hold.

In the months and years that followed, members or prospective members have from time to time decided not to be part of EUMC because it is a Reconciling Congregation, and in every case we have accepted and respected their decision.

We also began to include discussion on sexual orientation from time to time in youth and adult classes, including the Discipleship Classes primarily for new members.

In March 1987 five representatives from EUMC

attended the first national convocation of Reconciling Congregations in Chicago.

By the fall of 1987 we realized that being a reconciling congregation was an ongoing area of work just as surely as our other organized work areas. Hoyt Hickman was elected to chair the Reconciling Congregation Committee for 1989 and 1990. This has been an active committee from its inception and has generally met monthly. Its projects have included gathering information as to feelings among gay, lesbian and straight members of the congregation; promoting continuing education and advocacy in the congregation at worship and in classes of every age level; relating EUMC to Pride Week in Nashville and to the Reconciling Congregation movement regionally and nationally.

Three times in 1990 EUMC participated in wider gatherings of the Reconciling Congregation movement. In February three representatives attended the second national convocation in San Francisco. In June a delegation from Grant Park/Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Atlanta visited EUMC for a rich week-end of sharing our respective experiences. They were the second and only other Reconciling Congregation in the Southeastern Jurisdiction. In October a delegation from EUMC returned the visit and had a week-end of sharing that included a third congregation in Jacksonville.

Here follows the report made by the church to the Conference.

Edgehill's Report to the 1978 Tennessee Annual Conference

Preamble

We are writing to give you carefully considered responses as a congregation to the action of the Tennessee Annual Conference last June, urging the pastors and congregation of Edgehill United Methodist Church to review our position in regard to supplying our facilities to the Metropolitan Community Church in order to bring our policy in line with the policies of the General Conference of 1976.

It is important that the history of our arrangement with the Metropolitan Community Church be understood. Edgehill Church was approached by the Metropolitan Community Church in 1972 with a request that they be allowed to use our large room for their Sunday services at an hour that would not conflict with our own services, since they had no other space in which to meet. After careful consideration, our Administrative Board/Council on Ministries unanimously approved the request, and the Metropolitan Community Church began worshipping in our large room on Sunday afternoons. Shortly thereafter the Metropolitan Community Church had an opportunity to worship elsewhere and began to do so, but after some months they made another request to hold their worship in our large room and were again, after careful consideration, unanimously permitted to do so by our Administrative Board/Council on Ministries. Since that time the Metropolitan Community Church has regularly worshipped in our large room, more recently on Sunday evenings, to the entire satisfaction of both congregations. The weekday ministries of the Metropolitan Community Church have always been conducted elsewhere. The Metropolitan Community Church has through this entire period regularly contributed (paid rent) to Edgehill Church in return for this use of our facilities. No district, Annual

Conference, or denominational moneys have ever, either directly or indirectly, supported the Metropolitan Community Church. The arrangement was reported and known to our congregation as a whole and proved entirely agreeable to the congregation. We read with interest the actions of the 1976 General conference and saw nothing in what was done there that seemed inconsistent with our policies. Until last spring we had heard no challenge to our arrangement with the Metropolitan Community Church.

When the Annual Conference passed its resolution we immediately moved to carry out its request. The two pastors involved had an immediate consultation to insure that both congregations were accurately informed of the situation, and on the following Sunday the situation was discussed in both worshipping congregations. The next day was the regular meeting date of our Administrative Board/Council on Ministries, and they unanimously agreed to follow through on the Annual Conference request under the guidance of a special task force. This task force investigated the situation and made regular reports to the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries over the next few months until it was agreed that all the pertinent facts were known and there had been sufficient time for mature reflection. Even after the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries had reached a unanimous decision it was agreed that on a matter of this consequence the whole congregation should be consulted and take part in framing our response. Accordingly, a draft of a possible response was prepared and revised, first by the special task force and then by the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries. It was then printed in our congregational newsletter as up for consideration at a congregational meeting called for March 14. At this meeting, the response (which follows) was discussed in detail, perfected, and approved.

Our Response

After careful inquiry and study, we find nothing in *The Book of Discipline* that forbids or even discourages a United Methodist congregation from permitting a Metropolitan Community Church congregation to hold worship services in its building. Indeed, we have discovered that a number of Metropolitan Community Church congregations throughout the United States hold worship services regularly in United Methodist buildings.

Furthermore, we see our permitting the Metropolitan Community Church to worship in our building as being obedient to the gospel and example of Jesus Christ in ministering to all persons, and to Paragraph 71 D of *The Book of Discipline*: "Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self." In Nashville, at the present time, many homosexual persons can find only in the Metropolitan Community Church the ministry and guidance called for by *The Book of Discipline* and by the gospel itself.

We are quite aware that this same paragraph in *The Book of Discipline* also includes these words: "We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." Although not all United Methodists agree with these words, we see in Paragraph 71 D, taken as a whole, our denomination's attempt to follow our Lord in saying both "Neither do I condemn you," and "go and sin no more" (John 8:11), in having fellowship with those whom others condemned (Luke 15 and elsewhere), and in being instruments of this promise "him who comes to me I will not cast out" (John 6:37).

Who of us can claim that we always succeed in following the

fullness of Christ's example, or even fully understand its implications?

The Metropolitan Community Church affirms that it is *not* a "gay Church" but "a *Christian* church with a special ministry to gay persons." We have seen that they are sincere evangelical Christians who are committed to the Lordship and leading of Jesus Christ and are coming to Him for guidance on their journey of faith, and we therefore cannot in good conscience cast them out or believe that Christ would do so.

They, like us, affirm that we are all falling short of the example of Christ and are seeking His help in growing from wherever each of us is now to something better, on the way to a perfection that *none* of us has achieved or even fully understands. We do not condone or bless *anyone's* present practice but consider that the practices of *every one of us* need to be held up to the searching light of Christ as we all hear his words, "Neither do I condemn you" and "go and sin no more."

This principle of ministry to all persons and the refusal to cast out anyone who comes to us for Christian ministry has been at the very heart of Edgehill Church and of Wesleyan Christianity since our beginnings, and to compromise this principle would be both to compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ as we understand it and to be inconsistent with the whole historic thrust of our ministry.

We recognize that there are always dangers and pitfalls in seeking to be "*in* the world but not *of* it," and we thank all those who have warned us of some of these. We invite any and all of you to come and observe the whole range of our ministries to all sorts and conditions of people in our city. Give us the benefit of your criticisms and suggestions. We want you to know more about the redemptive ministries which your gifts have so generously supported, and we are looking forward to our continuing ministries with your help in the years ahead.

The following letter was sent to each member of the General Conference Task Force To Study Homosexuality, written by Mike Hodge.

I am writing you in your role as a member of the United Methodist Task Force to study homosexuality. I know that much of your work has been completed, but there was one aspect of this question that I felt was not being examined. I know that you have heard much testimony regarding the biblical texts regarding homosexuality, the psychological understandings, and personal testimony from gay men and lesbians who have been shut out of the church. Though I could add to all of these areas, I want to focus on another one: *the experience of God's grace within the life of a congregation*. After all is said and done, we will have disagreements over biblical texts, over proper psychological interpretations, and even over the meaning of personal testimonies. All of these understandings must be tested in the crucible of the day-to-day life of a congregation. The Scriptures say "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). The early church was clearly marked by the quality of its life together: "See how these Christians love one another," said the amazed first-century world. *It is this life together that I wish to offer as a major factor in the discussion regarding homosexuality.*

My local church is a "Reconciling Congregation" and has intentionally tried to accept gay men and lesbians as an integral part of the church's life. I want to tell you why this is important to me as a "straight" church member and as the father of 3 sons.

Edgehill UMC began in 1966 as an intentional inter-racial congregation. At that time, both white churches and black churches had trouble understanding WHY anyone would want to start such a congregation. The congregation chose to locate its building in a neighborhood torn by the strife of Urban Renewal. Church members became involved in tutoring programs, working with area residents in studying low-income housing programs,

trying to ease the city's agony over school desegregation, supporting innovative arts programs for black youth, and much more. In the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., church members naturally gravitated to the church building for mutual support. "It was then that we knew we were a church," said one church member, who was a black lawyer.

Today our church building is a converted house, and we worship in an expanded garage. In that same enlarged garage, we feed about 100 homeless people every Tuesday and Friday. In the afternoons, children from the nearby housing project are tutored, dance classes are held, and so on. Wednesday night brings a "Prayer and Praise service" and Sunday night holds a Faith-Sharing Group and a Healing Service.

I have told you all of this, not so you will be impressed by our "social activism", but so you will understand that we began in 1966 as a "reconciling congregation", trying to deal with racial diversity, economic diversity, and diversity of our own religious understandings. *The point that I am trying to make is that being a Reconciling Congregation for gay men and lesbians is important to us as a part of the larger "reconciling" that we believe the church -- and God's Kingdom -- to be about.*

Our church has been very lucky in that we have gay and straight members working together on many issues. And we have been blessed by the talents that gay men and lesbians have brought to our congregation. My eight-year-old son's Sunday School teacher is a lesbian who has a PhD in childhood development. When my wife and I had twins and were very exhausted from caring for two tiny babies, a lesbian couple in the church who are close friends began cleaning our house once a month as a gift. Gay and straight members of our congregation love our children, and have given and received love from us as a family. Our twin boys are now 4 years old, and the three children are the focus of our lives. My wife and I have discussed that if we were both to be killed in an accident, we would want two close friends who are a lesbian couple

to care for our children. And it is important to us that these children know and value the members of our church: black and white, gay and straight, homeless and affluent.

But it is hard to convey to you the *quality* of our life as a congregation, the pain and yet the celebration of being gay and straight together. Some of our congregation testified before members of your committee when the Listening Post was here in Nashville. Three church members spoke and about 30 of us crowded around them: black and white, ranging in age from 3 to 83. One of your committee members said, "I wish we had a picture of this." I wish it were possible to capture in a picture the importance of this issue in the life of our congregation. *Let me describe one recent experience as a "word picture" that comes close to expressing my feelings.*

As I have said, our congregation is a diverse one that has worked to value differences and yet celebrate unity. Recently, a baptism took place. The child was dressed in an antique, long baptismal robe, somewhat out of place in the "garage-turned-sanctuary," yet obviously important to the family. The two pastors, one black, one white, did the baptism together. Two hands dipped into the water, black fingers and white fingers joined upon Amy's head as the words rang out: "This is your household -- the household of God." Laura, 83 years old and a civil rights veteran, assisted with the service as lay leader. Seven-year-old Daniel joined the ceremony uninvited, looking down and saying, "Hello, Amy." In the congregation were several gay and lesbian couples. Two gay men stood quietly, each with one arm thrown naturally around the other's shoulders, welcoming a new member of their household. A "thirty-something" father -- HIV positive -- sat holding his young children and watching a ceremony that declared the responsibility of that congregation for a child, perhaps even for his children. Then this collection of maddening differences that calls itself a congregation -- then we all stood and sang "Bless her life Lord, come by here" and as we sang I felt that we were asking for blessing

on the terrible tensions that filled each one of us, gay and straight, black and white, college professor and housing project resident -- the tensions between what is and what will be, between who we are and who we may become, and between the signs of life and the signs of death in our own experience. And somehow these tensions became valuable and necessary for our own lives as we shared them. These tensions and the terrible mystery I felt in their presence are holy for me. And as Amy was welcomed into her new church family, all of us were drawn a little closer to the "banquet of God" - the vision of a Kingdom in which barriers are broken down and all are united in God's love. "Amazing Grace," indeed!

Thank you for hearing me out. And thank you for your work as a committee. I hope that this has given you a small glimpse into the life of our congregation. I also hope that you will be able to consider the actual experiences of congregations in your work as a committee.

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