

In praise of tolerance

The 10th anniversary of St. Jude's shows that acceptance goes a long way

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By Ben Steelman

Staff Writer

ben.steelman@wilmingtonstar.com

Ten years ago, a few dozen believers began gathering at Wilmington's Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship, among the pine trees off Lake Avenue – "in the woods," as Kevin Rooks, an early member, joked.

Those meetings led to what became St. Jude's Metropolitan Community Church.

"We named it after the patron saint of the impossible," said Bob Jenkins, a founding member.

A decade later, this impossible cause seems to have survived. In the heart of the Bible belt, where homosexuality widely is regarded as a sin, a congregation of gay men, lesbians, their relatives and friends has managed to thrive.

Not only that, the church has been able to function quietly with the toleration, and even the support, of its neighbors.

"Our attitude isn't, 'Look, aren't we wonderful?' " said the Rev. Amanda McCullough, the church's senior pastor for the past four years. "Rather, God obviously had a purpose for us being here, and let's be serious about it."

The church's board of directors plans a "lasagna gala" for 6:30 p.m. Friday in the church fellowship hall at 511 Castle St., "cooking for whomever shows up," Rev. McCullough said. What the church bulletin bills as a "miraculous concert" will follow at 8 p.m.

"We want it very much to be an inward-looking celebration, not a hullabaloo," Rev. McCullough said, "and we want to focus on those who have been the torchbearers."

Among other anniversary-related activities, she added, the church is compiling an anniversary booklet of personal testimonies, memories and blessings.

At first glance, it might be hard to tell St. Jude's from any other Protestant congregation.

The 11 a.m. Sunday service follows a familiar pattern: hymn-singing, Bible readings,



The Rev. Amanda McCullough prepares Communion during service Sunday at St. Jude's Metropolitan Community Church, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

responsive readings, a sermon and Holy Communion.

The bulletin includes a list of names to remember in prayers, appeals for volunteers to help with children's church or the Congregational Care Team, plus notes of pig-pickin's, congregational business meetings and other special events. (St. Jude's plans 9/11 memorial services at 7:30 a.m. and 6 p.m. Wednesday).

The monthly schedule sheet notes Tuesday night choir rehearsals, prayer groups, a newcomers' class and a Sunday brunch between the 9:30 and 11 services.

It takes a while for the differences to become clear.

St. Jude's plays host to regular meetings of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Next to the church office, church members are helping renovate a Castle Street storefront for a Gay and Lesbian Community Center, scheduled to open Oct. 11 for workshops, social events and secular community programs.

"We're a presence," said John Potter, who had attended Roman Catholic and Baptist churches before joining St. Jude's. "I can go to any church I want to. We do teach the Gospel of Christ – Christ comes first. Unlike so many pulpits, from this church you will hear no negatives, no hate."

Debates in other churches over homosexuality, the ordination of gay clergy and gay marriage or commitment ceremonies definitely played a role in St. Jude's founding.

"Many of us were active in other churches," said Mr. Jenkins, who had been a longtime member of Fifth Avenue United Methodist Church. "When the denominations began all this clatter, many of us were disturbed by this. We knew there were a lot of younger people who'd been damaged by this violence."

The church began as a core group with 20 to 25 members, Mr. Jenkins said. Leo Teachout, the organizer of GROW, an early gay activist group in the Lower Cape Fear, was among the more prominent early members.

In his letter for the church's anniversary booklet, Kevin Rooks remembered attending a small Baptist Church in Pender County, "a church where half the congregation were related to me, my family, the people that are supposed to love me the most."

"As I set there, surrounded by my family, I wondered what the Rev. Póóó and those who I attended service with every Sunday, my family, would think if they knew the truth,th," he wrote. "Would they love and accept me or show me the door?"

Mr. Rooks joined St. Jude's in 1993, soon after it was organized. "In this church, my belief that it is possible to be both gay and Christian was reaffirmed," he said. He was baptized and fulfilled what he believes is his calling to the ministry, becoming one of St. Jude's "Clergy in formation."

In the early days, Sunday services drew about 50 worshipers, Mr. Rooks recalled. Now, attendance averages about 90 for St. Jude's 11 a.m. service, with smaller numbers at the early service and the 7 p.m. Sunday musical service.

The church is affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), which describes itself as "a Christian church founded in and reaching beyond the gay and lesbian communities."

The first Metropolitan Community Church was founded in a Los Angeles living room on Oct. 6, 1968 by the Rev. Elder Troy Perry, a former Baptist minister and the author of *The Lord is My Shepherd and Knows I'm Gay*. St. Jude's hopes to have Elder Perry visit Wilmington sometime in January, Rev. McCullough said.

Today, the UFMCC has 44,000 members in 300 congregations in 17 countries, according to *The World Almanac*. *Adherents.com*, a Web site for religious statistics, identifies it as one of the fastest growing denominations in the United States.

Within a few years of its founding, St. Jude's bought a small wood frame church building, which formerly housed a Primitive Baptist congregation, just off Fifth Avenue on Castle Street.

The church gradually became more active in the community, organizing a Senior Aging Health Responses Expo and a youth group for gay and lesbian teenagers. It provides meeting space for a gay-oriented Alcoholics Anonymous group and, with PFLAG, it sponsored a concert by the "One Voice" chorus.

The church plays an important role, reaching out in neighboring rural areas where gays may lack support, said Naomi Swinton, a member and a consultant on the community center project.

"This has been a Christ-centered church and community that is ecumenical and welcoming to people of all different traditions," she said.

"St. Jude's being here has given support to the student group on campus," said Matthew tenHuisen, an associate professor of mathematics at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and a faculty adviser to PRIDE, the university's gay student organization. PRIDE and St. Jude's youth group have worked together, Dr. tenHuisen added, "and I think both groups have benefited."

Locally, relations with other congregations have been "very positive and pleasant," Mr. Jenkins said. St. Jude's has never been a target for fire-bombings or other serious hate crimes, as MCC churches in other towns have been.

"I think St. Jude's has an important place in the community," said the Rev. Joseph W. Cooper, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Servant. "I think it's a shame we have to

have separate churches, but I think they have a powerful and useful ministry."

St. Jude's has cooperated in raising funds for the homeless along with the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd and St. Luke A.M.E. Zion Church, organizing benefits at Castle Street's Town Hall.

Rev. McCullough joined in the Ministerial Roundtable organized as part of the 1898 Centennial observances, and she was elected as a representative to the New Hanover County Human Relations Commission.

"Amanda has made herself extremely well liked" in the roundtable and other activities, Rev. Cooper said.

In fact, Rev. McCullough said, St. Jude's found itself having to fight the temptation to become "like every other mainline church," with the gay presence "an unspoken understanding."

"We have a lot of members who were hurt from homophobia in their church upbringing," she said.

For many St. Jude's members, however, the similarities among believers remain most important.

"I never think that we're different," said John Potter. "There are just people here, and we're like them."