Polyamory and Holy Union

In Metropolitan Community Churches

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Abstract

Metropolitan Community Churches have performed Holy Union commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples since 1969. An ongoing internal dialogue concerns whether to expand the definition to include families with more than two adult partners. This paper summarizes historical definitions of marriage and family, development of sexual theology, and current descriptions of contemporary families of varying compositions. Fourteen interviews were conducted to elicit the stories of non-monogamous MCC families. Portions of the interviews are presented as input into the discussion.
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the non-monogamous people and families who live with the pain of hiding in closets of fear and shame even within the denomination they call “home.” May the day soon come when the diversity of family configurations is supported and celebrated with appropriate rituals and rites.
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JOURNEY

It's hard to say when this journey began. All of us are sexual from before birth. Fetuses in-utero have erections. Baby girls sometimes learn to rub their genitals against their diapers while lying on their tummies to stimulate themselves (Crooks & Baur, 2002; Lidster & Horsburgh, 1994; Montauk & Clasen, 1989). I believe that all of us are also spiritual from before birth. The story of John the Baptist, inside Elizabeth, responding to Jesus, inside Mary, would attest to this (Luke 1:5-45). Jeremiah hears God saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5a). We are all spiritual beings and we are all sexual beings. The diversity of the creation in both these dimensions attests to the magnitude of possibilities inherent in a God who creates humanity in the divine image (Genesis 1:27).

Awareness of one's own sexuality is another matter. My story is probably not much different from that of the majority of women in my generation. I began to have crushes on boys and the occasional male teacher in junior high school and indulged in an ordinary amount of fantasy about dates, weddings, and happily-ever-after. Spiritually I was "born again" at the age of 10 when I "invited Jesus into my heart" in Daily Vacation Bible School. It was a real experience of transformation, giving me new insights and awareness of God in my life. It happened in a fundamentalist context where rules abounded and were clear. One rule no one doubted: No sex before marriage. It was the 1950s, less overtly sex-saturated times than the present. Girls who got pregnant dropped out of school quietly leaving behind only rumors that "she was in a family way."

As the oldest child in an alcoholic family I became the family star, covering my insecurities and lack of self-esteem with an impressive layer of
achievements. If my Girl Scout badge sash was covered with badges (rewards for developing skill in some specific area) people would focus on that and not see the vulnerable, emotionally neglected child underneath the uniform. My church experience only reinforced this pattern. I could recite more Bible verses from memory than anyone, participated in every church-related activity available to me, and became the darling of the church. I learned to conform on the outside and avoid feelings. Feelings were part of our fallen nature and not to be trusted. As a member of a separatist, fundamentalist church (Bible believing, pre-millennial, pre-tribulation), we spent a lot of time in Revelation and Daniel, knew Paul by heart, but very little of the life of Jesus. One part of the gospel stories we knew – the crucifixion, in great gory detail designed to make us feel guilt and shame as the ones who caused Jesus’ death by our sinful nature. Communion was a time to experience remorse and fear. If we received “unworthily” we might be slain on the spot by a vengeful God (like Ananias and Saphira.) My low view of myself was reinforced regularly in sermon and song.

I was taught to hate my female body. "All your righteousnesses are as filthy rags." (Isaiah 64:6) From the pulpit, the pastor who knew all the answers taught us that this was the most filthy, disgusting rag imaginable -- used menstrual cloths. Total depravity was a fundamental belief. I could do nothing that would be truly good in God’s sight. We were worms and only throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and claiming the substitutionary atonement bought for us by Jesus on the cross could save us. God "loved" us in spite of our own wretchedness. Since my self-esteem was already low, I accepted this as undeniable truth. Somehow the worse I could make myself feel about my rotten, sinful
nature, the more glorious was God’s grace to put up with me and let me live. Prayer was pretty much groveling for divine mercy.

We were taught that there might be Christians in other denominations, but that their leaders had duped them and when we got to heaven they would all be enlightened and agree with us on everything. Liberal and modernist were dirty words used to write off everything someone said who was not "one of us." Compromise was the tool of the devil, doubt was sin, and anyone who did not believe in "verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture" and the "fundamentals of the faith" was only a "nominal" Christian, not a real one.

This translated into a rigidly defined and constricting view of what the Bible "really says." Anyone who disagreed with the pastor on anything was probably "backslidden" and in need of correction. Individual Catholics might be saved, but the Catholic Church was the whore of Babylon and the pope was the anti-Christ. Catholic people were poor, misled souls who spent their lives working in a futile attempt to gain salvation, which we knew, of course, had already been won by Jesus on the cross. One needed to feel a great deal of remorse and to "turn your life over to Christ" so that you would be "born again." This was an once-in-a-lifetime event and made one a true child of God. Baptists did not believe in sacraments. Catholics believed that they were really sacrificing Christ on the altar at mass and this was in clear violation of the book of Hebrews. We had a Bible verse for everything.

We also believed the ecumenical movement was the devil's tool to create one world religion that would oppose Christ at his second coming. The communists were plotting to take over the world as the government that would support this religious
movement. Science was also suspect, as it pitted “mere human speculation” with the truths of divine revelation. Evolution was a theory invented to discredit Genesis. "Man" would never land on the moon or go into space. If that happened it would signal the beginning of the end times, because the space between heaven and earth was the devil's domain. Penetrating it would break the shroud of protection around the earth and create changes in the cosmos that would allow "fallen angels" to exert their evil influence on human affairs.

Women were to be subservient to their husbands. Men were to be the spiritual leaders in the family. Born-again women married to unregenerate men were to go to church if that was possible without disrupting the marriage, but were to make no other demands on their husbands that might antagonize them. Men properly made all decisions about family and church matters. Women could teach Sunday School children up to about junior high age and could give "devotions" among themselves, but were never allowed to teach adults. Women preachers were part of the "liberal effort to discredit the Bible" and were tools of Satan, though they might not be aware of it.

My journey out of fundamentalism began in college. In the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship group on the University of Michigan campus, which we called MCF (Michigan Christian Fellowship), I found faithful, spiritually mature, intelligent people who used the same Bible to prove opposite points. No matter what one’s view of the Bible, no one could claim to be an infallible interpreter. The friendly arguments over doctrinal matters were revealing to me on a deep level. Others loved Jesus as much as I did, had studied the Bible even more, were loving, beautiful people, and yet disagreed with me on what I had considered vital matters of faith. I was introduced to inductive
Bible study methods and learned to use the brains God gave me to reach my own conclusions. I had no idea at the time just how far this change would take me.

I first became aware of homosexuality reading my brother's copy of "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, but were Afraid to Ask." After all, I was in Nursing School and was expected to know these things. Besides, who could resist a book with that title? I don't remember being either repulsed or attracted to the idea of people having sexual relationships with others of their own sex. I was a generally accepting and compassionate person, in spite of my fundamentalist roots. If someone had asked me what I thought about homosexuals, I would probably have said: "They can't help it. They're sick." It was just one of many things that "sinners" did, like dancing, going to movies, wearing make-up, smoking, and "loose living," neither more nor less important to me than any of the rules I accepted as part of being Christian. After all, I didn't know any of "them" so why should I care about what they did with each other? I would have assumed that accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior would have "cured" them, just as I believed it would cure alcoholics or drug addicts.

Ironically, in one of God's little jokes on me, one of my MCF friends at the time was a woman to whom I started writing when I was a freshman in college and she was a senior in high school. Jenny was coming to U of M to study linguistics in order to become a missionary with Wycliffe Bible Translators. I was attending a small GARB\(^1\) church in Ann Arbor that gave me her mailing address. We struck up a friendship that lasted through our college years and was to return years later in God's plan to open my eyes to the needs of God's sexual minority children. But I had no idea during the 60's that she was a lesbian. How could I have known? She and I hung out with the same Christian
group, argued together in Dr. G's basement over baptism, eternal security, eschatology and the like, partied with the same group of friends in MCF faculty sponsors' homes, sang our hearts out around Mrs. G's organ and had male and female friends in about the same proportions. She did become a linguist, but came home to marry Bob. They became Inter-Varsity staff members serving for many years as a married couple. While they were still in Ann Arbor, my husband and I attended Bible studies in their living room. I didn't have a clue that there was anything unusual about Jenny, much less that our journeys would intersect years later to change the direction of my life.

I began dating the man who is now my husband when I was 15 years old. It was a stormy on-and-off relationship throughout high school. I went off to college; he joined the army as part of the build-up to the Viet Nam war. A year later, on leave, he proposed and I accepted. Our subsequent experiences of "making out" ended in the frustration of arousal without consummation. We were virgins on our wedding night.

Fortunately, the new pastor who did our pre-marital counseling was a wise man who regarded sexuality as a precious gift to be saved for marriage, and not something dirty or embarrassing. He gave us good advice about establishing a marital sexual relationship and spoke naturally and comfortably about sex. Bottom line: "Anything that pleases one of you and does not offend the other is allowed. There are no restrictions on the experience of sex within a marriage."

Dell and I were married in 1965. We had several "honeymoons" as the army, surgery, school, and other life events separated us and then brought us back together again. We had a baby every 2 1/2 years, "whether we tried or not," totaling four. Our roles were pretty traditional except that from the beginning he was a real parent, not just a
"baby-sitter" to our children. We were members of Huron Hills Baptist Church, a Baptist General Conference church in Ann Arbor. It was much more open than the churches I had been in previously, but still somewhere between conservative and moderate evangelical. Thinking was encouraged, some disagreement was allowed, as long as it didn't involve "essentials of the faith," and I grew spiritually from good preaching and opportunities to share the ministry.

In 1975 the church was considering a radical move to elect women as deacons. I was asked to run. I had already been attending deacon board meetings as the missions’ committee representative, but being a deacon was something else. I did want to serve the church, and had acquired quite a bit of education around world mission efforts, but should a woman serve in a leadership position in the church? I was not sure. True, she would still be "under" a male moderator of the board and a male pastor, but wasn't it against the Bible for women to be "over" men in any capacity? Weren't we to be "complementary" helpers to the careers of men, playing supportive roles? I was also terrified by the thought that I might be cause for controversy. Good Christian women did not make waves. It might hurt the "testimony" of the church if any dissent became public.

My dilemma was solved largely through the ministry of a dear old man of God from Great Britain who had spent most of his life as a missionary in China. I regarded him with respect bordering on sainthood. Nothing Arthur said could be disregarded or taken lightly. He reminded me that two-thirds of the foreign missionaries were women: 1/3 men, 1/3 wives, and 1/3 single women. In China they did everything, including pastoring churches. If it's all right in China, how could be it so wrong here? He loaned me a copy of All We're Meant to Be (Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). This was my first
exposure to Christian feminist thinking. I read the book and became one of the first two women deacons in that local church. I also counted the offerings, sang in the choir, taught adult Sunday School classes, led Bible studies, planned mission conferences, coordinated the Missions, Social Action, and Evangelism committees, and painted the walls in the new addition. In other words, I gave my time, talent, and meager treasures to serve my Lord in this church for 24 years.

While reading feminist Christian theology and women's faith stories, I also came across liberation theology and the stories of gay Christians and their struggles to deal with their own sexuality. Here were real people with real lives who had issues new to me. I felt some empathy for them and a kinship with their marginalized place in society and church, but it was like reading about missions and cultures on the other side of the world. It had no obvious connection to the world in which I lived. It was probably helpful though in opening my eyes and heart to hear the stories of those who are "other." These people were obviously not sick, but they didn't agree among themselves about whether same-sex behavior was sinful or not. I developed a beginning understanding of the difference between orientation and behavior.

In 1983 the pastor of my church and his wife both earned Doctor of Ministry degrees in Family Ministry. They offered to share his position as a couple. The reaction was contentious and ugly. People attacked their character as well as their motivation for making this earth-shaking, church-splitting suggestion. I began to read other Christian feminist writings and to reach conclusions that were surprising to me. In a conversation with a member of the pastoral staff, I argued that the rule of men over women predicted in Genesis 3:16b ("your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.")
was part of the evil that resulted from sin, not the plan of God for the human race. In the midst of this argument, something in me responded, "My God, Fran, you are a feminist." The thought had never occurred to me before then. A "straw vote" of the congregation resulted in the pastor’s wife, Madelyn, leaving Huron Hills Baptist Church to become an American Baptist pastor.

As Madelyn prepared for ordination, she had to write a personal statement of faith. She asked a group of women to help her think about the various categories required for the paper. I tried to write my own faith statement and learned a number of significant things. My theology had shifted markedly from what I was taught as a child. In some areas I could not articulate a clear, convincing position on a topic because I had not really thought it through for myself. I knew what my childhood teachers would tell me were the "right" answers, but I didn't know whether or not I would agree with them. I had given myself permission to think, but had not done the work of studying and listening to the Spirit that would allow me to have a truly adult personal faith. It was not that I doubted my relationship to God, nor even that I disagreed with any of the tenets of traditional Christian doctrines; I simply did not know what I really thought about a number of theological issues.

One day when pastor Chuck came to pick up his wife Madelyn, we were still embroiled in discussion about some issue or other. Listening in on the conversation he said, "Well, Fran, maybe you will be the first woman pastor at Huron Hills." I said, "Yeah, right," thinking, “Who needs it, I'm not up for martyrdom.” We all had a good laugh and went on our separate ways. He had, however, planted a seed in my mind that would not go away. Instead, the idea of "Pastor Fran" grew and was watered
inadvertently by people throughout the next few months. "Fran, you are a prophet."
"Tone it down, will you? You sound like a preacher." "If God is calling you to ministry,
you will be miserable until you say, 'yes.'" "You really should go to seminary. That's
where you'll find people to reflect ideas back to you." "That'll preach." I couldn't shake
the notion that I at least needed to look into this. My husband was, as usual, my strongest
supporter. He predicted that the only way I would be happy was to go where I seemed to
think I was being called.

It didn't seem possible to go to seminary full-time. I still had three of my four
children at home, plus a full-time job as a clinical nursing instructor for the University of
Michigan School of Nursing. (I had earned a Master of Science degree in Parent/Child
Nursing.) So I pushed thoughts of a "real" seminary education into the realm of "some
day." In the meantime however, being fascinated by the work of Phyllis Trible (1978,
1984), I decided to study Biblical Hebrew. With fear and trembling born of prejudice, I
enrolled in St. John's Provincial Seminary (Roman Catholic) as a special student. Just to
study Hebrew, of course. How much trouble could that get me into?

At the time I started classes at St. John's, the student body consisted of 54
"seminarians" (Roman Catholic priesthood candidates) and about 200 "commuter
students" some Catholic and some from just about every Protestant denomination, as well
as an occasional Jewish or Hindu student. There weren't many Baptists, but I was not the
first. About half of us were women, many were Roman Catholic women religious, and
others lay students like me. Having "only" four children made me unusual among the
parents. St. John's turned out to be exactly the kind of intellectual and spiritual cauldron
that could educate a Christian feminist female pastor.
I will never forget the first time I went to mass at St. John's. I stood outside the chapel wondering whether I should go in or not. Mass was required for "seminarians" but optional for everyone else. I saw a woman that I recognized from one of my orientation sessions and explained my dilemma to her. "I don't know whether I should go to mass or not. I mean, as a Baptist, is it appropriate for me to participate? How much can I do?" She laughed, said "I'm a Presbyterian and last week I served the elements to my section. Come on in." and thus became my companion on a whole new stretch of my spiritual journey. My plan was to be primarily an observer. I didn't expect to know any of the responses and thought that I might not agree with everything that was going on anyway. The only masses I had attended before were a pre-Vatican II funeral and a wedding.

The sensory richness of the place filled a need I had not known was in me. The iconoclastic furor of my Baptist past had robbed me of sensory worship experience. Colors, incense, vestments, flowers, candles, body language, and the sheer drama of the liturgy: I was totally drawn in. I felt as though I had come home to a place I knew, but had never been in. My plan to observe went right out the beautiful stained-glass windows. There was no way I was going to sit and watch when people went forward to receive. I needed that wafer and wine. This was family, home, a link to a past I hadn’t known I had, bonding with a worshipping community in a new way, time out of time, kairos ... and terribly confusing.

I took communion with my new-found brothers and sisters and felt myself joined with an ancient tradition going back to Jesus and the disciples, to Moses and Miriam, to Abraham and Sarah, to an ancient people coming out of slavery, salvation history continuing into the present, even into the future. And I knew that when everyone in the
room said, "I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed," a healing occurred. Students, staff, faculty, Catholics and Protestants, priests, nuns and "separated brethren," all were the same, saved by grace, part of an event that happened once, but that continues to happen repeatedly in diverse times and places, in many languages, in many cultures--the church universal. When the priest read the prayers for the day, I knew that the same prayers had been said on this same day for centuries, and were being said around the world again in many languages at that very time. When I took that wafer and wine, I became a part of something much bigger than anything I had ever known. In short, I had my first experience of sacrament. But, this was not supposed to be happening. I was a Baptist. I didn't believe in sacraments.

I went to mass on a regular basis during the years I was at St. John's. A class in Hebrew led to a course in Theology with a Scripture Studies major. I didn't understand what happened to me at mass; I only knew that I needed it. It fed me and I promised myself that I would deal with the theological issues "later." My life was enriched immeasurably at St. John’s. The mix of students made for lively discussions about many issues. We could argue vehemently in class or in the lounge and then worship together as sisters and brothers in the chapel. Worship was what made us a community. It reminded me of my Inter-Varsity days, only more so. I also got in touch with the anti-Catholic prejudice that I did not know I still carried, my surprise at the emphasis on grace, for example. These people did understand grace. I had not expected that. When I asked myself why I was surprised, I knew that I still had expectations about Catholic beliefs based on what I learned when I was ten.
I went through a number of phases in my understanding of Eucharist. At first I did not have a clue as to how big a deal it was for them to allow me to participate fully. When I realized how completely I had been welcomed, against all the rules, I felt as though I had my hand in someone else's cookie jar. I cried through a number of masses where I did not receive. The care and concern of seminarians who observed my distress only made it more poignant. Once when one of them asked me what the problem was, I responded "500 years of misunderstanding and hate." Their love won me over. In a New Testament class, the teacher/priest emphasized the trouble Jesus got into over who was welcome at the table with him. I went back to doing what I needed to do. My experience of being linked with these people and with all the people of God through the sacrament of communion was stronger than my lifetime anti-sacramental indoctrination.

Going to a Catholic seminary was a challenge intellectually and socially as well as spiritually. I had a lot of "catch up work" to do. I needed to learn the history of Roman Catholic theological thinking, find where my own theology meshed or diverged and why, and learn a new vocabulary and a new culture. Growing up Catholic was an experience that I had not had, but I was not shy about asking for explanations of "in" jokes or specialized language. I learned some of the subtleties of ecumenical discourse. Words can be very tricky. Sometimes disparate parties are talking about the same thing in different words. Even more divisively, sometimes we use the same words but have totally different concepts behind them.
I blossomed at St. John's. It was a place where I could be wholeheartedly Christian and feminist at the same time and not be in trouble. I was introduced to inclusive language; I was affirmed in my call to ministry and challenged to question everything about my faith. I began to get in touch, for the first time, with the idea that being made in the image of God meant that I had some intrinsic value, that I was a unique reflection of something of God, that the feminine could also be celebrated, appreciated, and cultivated. So while God chuckled through space, a little fundamentalist worm became a free-flying ecumenical butterfly.

I was in the last graduating class at St. John's. The school was closed 40 years after it had opened. We did not miss the prophetic significance of the number 40. Cardinal Mooney's body was exhumed from the basement and re-buried somewhere else. So the family that had adopted me without reservation, knowing that I would never be Roman Catholic, ceased to exist in that form. I was not to experience that feeling of being at home and with my family again until I walked into Tree of Life MCC many years later.

The summer of 1988 I graduated from St. John's, helped close the place down permanently, realized that I would get no support from my home church in my pursuit of pastoral ministry... and went into a faith crisis. There were personal issues involving my oldest child, I was exhausted from two years of full-time work, school, and parenting, and all the issues that I had put on the back burner for "later" were boiling over. I sought therapy.

God provided for my needs that summer in surprising ways. I met Donna, an American Baptist pastor in a rural Michigan town. I "happened" to pick up a newspaper at my cousin's house that contained an article about a new American Baptist pastor in a
nearby town. The parallels with my story were many. Donna was a nurse, had been raised in the Baptist General Conference, and was a mother of teenage children. We met at a restaurant and from the first day were finishing each other's sentences. When she called herself a sacramental Baptist, I knew that I had met a sister. Not only was Donna a soul mate, she was living, breathing proof that a woman like me could become a pastor. I would spend many hours over the next few years crying on her shoulder, sharing my anger and pain with her, and being inspired by her words and her example.

I decided to go to a conference in Chicago put on by Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC). This is an organization founded in 1974 as an offshoot of Evangelicals for Social Action. As I went I felt raw, vulnerable, sore, like a walking wound. The thought that I couldn't quite face yet, but knew at some level, was that I would have to leave Huron Hills and the Baptist General Conference, the church and denomination that had nurtured me for the past 24 years, and I would have to leave without their blessing. I was angry enough to consider seriously whether or not I really wanted to be associated with this thing called Christianity, let alone serve it. I had only recently become aware of the sexist nature of most of the language of the church and it hurt deeply. The effort of trying to "translate" the words of scripture, hymns, and sermons took more energy than I could gain from those sources. Any security I had felt in my relationship to God was shaken. I was a mess. I felt empty and unable to give, but had some hope of finding healing with this group of women. I had read about this conference in Daughters of Sarah, a publication of another Christian feminist group. Daughters had rescued me from despair as it arrived each month, so I hoped to find this same hope in person at the conference.
Each night the EWC conference closed with an optional evening prayer event. The woman in charge prayed for me in a way so sensitive, so priestly, so intuitive, that I felt truly cared for. I suddenly remembered the times I had sat in church listening to prayers for "all our young men away at seminary" and wondered if a middle-aged woman at seminary counted for anything. I let myself feel the pain of exclusion, and opened the way to comfort. One evening, sitting in a circle with our eyes closed, we listened to a tape of Colleen Fulmer (undated) based on the images in the writings of St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) who said, "Prayer is like being in a dark room with a friend. We may not be able to see, but God is there." The beautiful female voice of Colleen Fulmer sang:

DON'T BE AFRAID, I'M HOLDING YOU CLOSE IN THE DARKNESS,

MY LOVE AND MY GRACE WILL CARRY YOU THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT.

THE LIFE THAT I GIVE BUBBLES IN YOU LIKE A FOUNTAIN,

SO, REST IN MY WINGS, AND PUT ALL YOUR FEARS TO FLIGHT. [REFRAIN]

Tho you be burdened, I will cradle you deep in my nest,

Tho you be weary, My wings will enfold you in rest.

Tho you be desert, my rivers will flow deep inside

Tho you be barren, I'll fill out your womb with new life.

Tho you be orphaned, I'll always be here at your side

Tho you be empty, I'll bring forth new fruit on the vine.

Tho you be thirsty, you'll drink from the well of my side

Tho you be hungry, the finest of bread I'll provide.
Out of the darkness of the room, out of the dark night of my soul, God spoke to my need in a beautiful female voice saying, "Don't be afraid." I knew that I had reached a turning point. I had come to the end of the road, the bottom of the pit, and God was there for me. I was still depressed, exhausted, and confused, but I knew that no matter what decisions I made, even if I had to give up all that I "knew" of Christianity, God would not desert me. She would be there always. As a mother, I know the incredible bond that exists between a mother and her child. I still felt that it would be a long night, but I was no longer afraid of losing myself or my faith in the process.

Later that summer God gave me a beautiful metaphor. It was the driest summer on record for centuries in our area. The normally green, lush grass was brown and dormant. While this is normal in many parts of the world, here in Michigan we expect the world to be predominantly green all summer. We normally need to mow the lawn at least twice a week. It had been more than six weeks since we had had any rain at all. The dry, brown, lifeless-looking world mirrored my spiritual state. One day, looking out the window at nothing in particular, I noticed a patch of something white on the dry ground where grass should have been. It looked from a distance as though someone had scattered popcorn on a room-sized area rug. It was the brilliant white blossoms of wild morning glory. Flowers in the desert, not in spite of, but because of the dryness, because the lawn had not been mowed. The plants were there all along, but could not bloom in a "normal" season. I learned that I could give thanks for the dry-time as well as for the showers of blessing. I trusted God to work in me whatever I needed to blossom. Trust has always been a big issue for me, a lesson I could not have learned in the circumstances of my childhood.
It was also at this EWC conference that I first heard someone say, "I am a lesbian. I am a Christian. Hear my story." As a matter of fact, I heard a lot of women say it. The previous conference had led to a split in the group over a resolution supporting civil rights for lesbians and gay men. One part felt that to send that message would alienate conservative churches and eliminate any chance of winning them over to the cause of equality for women in home, church, and society. This conference was sponsored by the part of the group who felt that liberation for some cannot come at the price of continued oppression for others. Its new constitution would include a statement of support for "the lesbian minority among us." There was much sorrow and prayer over the pain of separation.

One plenary panel discussion was scheduled that included a male New Testament scholar, a representative from Exodus (an "ex-gay" ministry), and two lesbians, one a Jewish nurse who claimed Jesus as her rabbi, and the other a pastor from Canada who was in a custody battle for her children. That was the only public "coming out." But privately, over lunch, in discussion groups, in dormitory room gatherings, and other venues, many women repeated the same story to me: I am Christian. I am lesbian. I am struggling to serve God in the church, or even to stay in the church that will not recognize me as legitimate.

My own pain was so great and my process of beginning to heal so consuming at the time, that the repeated stories of lesbian Christians had little apparent impact, except as they were sisters suffering at the hands of a Christianity that they loved even though it abused them. Homosexuality was not my issue. It had nothing to do with me.
The following year I went to the conference of Christians for Biblical Equality, the other half of the group that had split from EWC. As I was getting settled in the dorm, I spotted my friend Jenny from U of M. She and a friend were at the conference together. We promised each other that we would get together some time and catch up on each other's lives.

This conference was frustrating from the beginning. In an attempt to solidify and define this new group, the focus was on who they were not. There was a lot of talk about "secular feminists" as the "others" who did not respect the Bible, but since the issues being discussed were religious, it was clear that this was code for the EWC group. The conference was also quite anti-Catholic and anti-liberal. Perhaps it reminded me too much of the church of my childhood with its "we're the only way to God" attitude. In marked contrast to the EWC conference, the history of this group was completely denied. It was as though it sprang as a new idea from the minds of the founders just the year before. Nothing like it had ever existed in history. I was appalled.

One day at lunch I asked Jenny how she was doing. She spent the next ten minutes telling me about her family, her husband Bob, and her two children. I listened and responded in kind. Later that day I said to her, "You know Jenny, you never answered my question this afternoon. I asked how you were doing and you told me how everyone else was doing." She looked at the woman she was with and said, "We need to talk to you. Would you like to leave here for a while?" Now there was an offer I couldn't refuse. This conference was making me nuts. We went to a local bar.

Sitting across from each other drinking coffee, Jenny said to me, "We've never told anyone this before, but we think it's time to tell someone, and we hope maybe you
might understand. We are sexual together." The conversation lasted over three hours. Both of them held positions of leadership in their church. They had dozens of questions. I had no answers. I could not help them deal with what the Bible says, because I had never looked into it. I knew very little about homosexuality. When I said the word "lesbian" to them, they both cringed. Their only model of lesbian behavior was an adaptation of the worst of heterosexual roles practiced in a women's prison where they shared a ministry. They assured me that their relationship was nothing like the prisoners, who took "wives" to be their personal slaves. Even though I felt useless as a resource to help them sort out their issues, I did know about the resource they most needed. I told them about the women at the Chicago EWC conference and promised them names and addresses of lesbian Christians who had been on this journey and could walk with them.

My conversation with Jenny and her partner motivated me to do more reading. I read everything I could get my hands on relating to the Bible and homosexuality. Meanwhile, God was making sure I did not drop the issue. People started coming out to me on a regular basis. My good friend and mentor Nadean, who had counseled me through crises involving my teenage children, encouraged me during my seminary days, and provided an available sounding board and shoulder to cry on, casually said, "You know that I am lesbian, don't you?"

I went to a women's liturgy at an Episcopal student center where an inclusive version of Episcopal rite 2 was being used. A discussion about a woman's story from the Bible took the place of a sermon. In the course of the discussion, the priest who was leading the ritual talked about the pain she experienced when her partner lay dying. I
suddenly asked, “God, is everyone who understands women's oppression in the church also lesbian?”

I had invited Dawn, a colleague from my secular job, to go to the women's liturgy with me. Later we went out to dinner together. In the course of our conversation, I made a remark that, "If one more of my friends comes out to me, I don't know what I will do." I was beginning to know that God was trying to tell me something, and I was as reluctant to accept the challenge as I had been to go to seminary in the first place. Dawn responded, "What would you do?" I said that I would cope. I was just expressing my frustration that this issue would not go away. It was everywhere I turned. Several months later she would come out to me and allow me to share in her very personal struggles to go back to church. Dawn knew her need to be related to a faith community, but was only willing to do so as her lesbian self, no more pretending, no more "passing," no more shutting down.

After a few months of sorting myself out, I spent a year at First Baptist Church in Ann Arbor (American Baptist Churches) as a pastoral intern. It was a time of growth, but also very frustrating. One issue that shaped the experience was language. Shortly after I began to attend FBC, I went to Bob, the senior pastor, to express my distress at a psalm reading that had occurred on Sunday. I told him that I had changed the masculine words for myself, but felt as though I was in a battle...and I lost. Every time the worshipping person was described as "he" I felt diminished, until I was all but invisible. Bob's response was, "What can we do about it? Do you have any suggestions?" It had never occurred to me that this would be his response. Any time I had mentioned language issues at Huron Hills the response was to belittle my concerns. "You shouldn't feel that
way." "You're just too sensitive," etc. Here was someone, not only taking my pain seriously, but also asking me to be an adult and make suggestions about what he could do to address it. I said I'd have to think about it and get back with him.

Besides me, Bob had another "junior" staff member, a campus minister. Mark was an African-American Harvard Divinity School graduate who used inclusive language freely when he participated in services. The "old guard" at the church did not appreciate Mark’s and my attempts to be more inclusive. It became an issue that was discussed at the Executive Board meeting. The conclusion that they reached was that we could use any language we felt appropriate in sermons or prayers, but the scripture was inviolable and we should read from the version in the pulpit Bible so that people could follow along in their pew Bibles. I came to call it the "Required Standard Version."

On Easter morning I read the scriptures, as instructed, from the pulpit Bible. At the brunch afterwards one woman came up to me gushing praises about my reading, and telling me how her 12-year-old son had followed along as I read. While she talked my stomach was churning. Why did I feel so yucky when she was complimenting me?

A few moments later, another woman brought her young teen daughter to talk to me, saying that she had questions about the language of the Bible. I talked to her about how Hebrew, Greek, and many modern languages assign "gender" to everything. In those languages male pronouns do not have the impact that they have in English. If chairs, walls, tables, etc. can be "he" then it doesn't signal maleness, just a linguistic category. In English we usually use gendered pronouns only to refer to persons or animals with a given sex. So when the original hearers of the Bible stories heard "he" it did not necessarily mean a man. I grew up with mailmen, policemen, and firemen. She had
grown up with mail carriers, police officers, and fire fighters. During the entire conversation a nagging voice in the back of my head kept asking, "Are you betraying this child by trying to soothe her anger at the sexist words in the Bible?"

As I reflected on the two conversations, the problem became clear to me. I felt bad when being complimented because I was being made an ally supporting a rich, intelligent, handsome young white man, from a prominent family who had everything going for him already. *Of course* I cared about this child; *of course* I was glad that he had read along and was interested in the Bible. But I did not want to reinforce his sense of privilege and right to feel superior. He didn't need any reinforcement. The bi-racial, gawky teenaged girl on the other hand needed all the support she could get. If I did not use language that included her, who would? Who would tell her that she too was made in God's image and had inestimable value in God's eyes? At that moment I knew that I could never again use language that excluded others on the basis of gender, race, or any other factor. When Mark and I used inclusive language in worship leadership, it was the senior pastor who drew the flack. He was not "controlling" what we did. Although we both knew ourselves to be tokens, with little to no power to effect change in that congregation, we felt that it was worth it to model new possibilities for the black and female children who would see us sitting in the chancel in our clergy robes.

The "ordeal" of the ordination council went very well and was actually fun. In American Baptist polity, when a person has been licensed by a local church and has completed denominational requirements for ordination, a council is called. Letters go out to all the ABC churches in the area inviting them to send two voting members to the council. This is usually the pastor and one layperson. They are given copies of the
potential ordinand's statement of faith and call to ministry. It is a virtually "no holds barred" examination with questions allowed on anything in the paper. I had been involved in enough wide-ranging theological discussions with persons of varying convictions that I was not afraid of tackling any of the questions that might arise...except one. I was terrified that they would ask me about my beliefs about homosexuality. I rehearsed ways of skirting the issue. It did not come up.

On May 5, 1991 I was ordained in a ceremony uniquely my own, combining many aspects of my own spiritual journey. The invocation was twenty minutes long, including dancers who brought in the four elements from the four corners of the church, placing them around the communion elements on the altar. The sanctuary was smudged Native-American style; a gospel choir sang; my family participated; communion was served with a variety of breads; several friends read a feminist Eucharistic liturgy written by Carter Heyward.

My Baptist friends said I must be a frustrated Catholic; my Catholic friends reminded me that only a papal mass lasts two hours! Inclusive language was used throughout. I was especially moved to have Donna put a stole on me, Mark co-consecrate the communion elements, and two Roman Catholic priests included in the clergy mix that laid hands on me to ordain me. It represented an integration of my Baptist beliefs, my newfound love of sacrament and respect for the form of the Roman mass, and my own personal nature-based women's religious practice. I would find out later that several of the key participants were gay men or lesbians.

In June I candidated at North Rome Baptist Church and became its pastor in July. They were a wounded people who had been bashed by a former pastor. It took a good six
months for most of them to unfold their arms from their chests, let down their guard, and participate in worship. The only children were two daughters of the pianist. “Time as children” became a regular part of worship, even if I had to recruit adults to sit in the children's place, and the group grew to about a dozen children each Sunday. The pastoral search committee had said that they wanted strong leadership and a change in style, and they got it!

We began regular intergenerational social events, wrote a set of by-laws, revised the covenant statement (from 1886), cleaned out forty years of moldy, used up Sunday School materials, three sets of old hymnals, and leftovers from years of rummage sales from the basement. The American flag behind the centered pulpit gradually moved into the corner until I needed to "borrow" the flagpole for a banner the children made. The pulpit migrated to one side, while the original pulpit from a hundred years ago was restored and became our lectern. Painting and repairing the walls in the sanctuary gave me an excuse to move the four number boards to a side wall, making space for banners in front. I introduced them to the church year, liturgical colors, and participative worship. They came alive in their enthusiasm for the church. I would say that they actually became a church community for the first time, rather than a chapel audience. In spite of some frustrations (one family left the church because I did not use the proper "St James" Bible) it was a growing time for them and for me.

The next major turn in the road on my spiritual journey occurred on the first Sunday in Advent, 1992. I walked into the evening service of Tree of Life MCC and heard Rev. Paul Turner preach. The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) is a denomination founded in 1968 by Rev. Troy Perry, a gay minister,
to meet spiritual needs in the gay and lesbian community. The story of the founding and early history of MCC is told in the book *Don't Be Afraid Anymore.* (Perry with Swicegood, 1990) Several lesbian friends had asked me to help them find a church where they might feel welcome, so I went to "spy out the land."

I had some apprehension that night about going into a church full of gay people. I didn't really know what to expect. Would I stand out in the crowd as "different?" What would the worship style be like? Would I feel like a fish out of water? Once again, God must have been fairly rolling with laughter in heaven's aisles watching me.

Even bringing communion alive for the Baptists in North Rome had not completely filled my need for sacrament. I was no longer free at the time of the local Episcopal worship, so was pretty empty of this kind of spiritual food. At Tree of Life MCC I found home again. Jesus met me there. Rev. Paul Turner's sermons always seemed to include an arrow to my heart. We bonded immediately and he became the spiritual director I was searching for. All the hymns were in inclusive language. I was given the gift of the music of my childhood without struggling with language. Hearing occasional feminine God-language from the mouth of a male pastor made me realize how much I needed to hear myself specifically included. Weekly Eucharist was the communion my heart craved. I introduced myself to them on that first night as a Baptist pastor and "a learner."

MCC communion includes a hands-on prayer of blessing. That first night Pastor Paul asked me if there was anything special I wanted him to pray about. I gulped out, "Not that I can articulate." How could I tell him what I was feeling? "Home" among a people "not like me," the Spirit at work in a palpable way I had needed for a long time, a
welcome without strings, a fraud accepting blessing I did not deserve, a familiar sense of
being drawn like a moth to a flame, a lion in a den of Daniels. I wanted out and I wanted
in. Paul prayed that God would remove my fear. Fear! How did he know? Granted, I was
probably a lot more transparently fearful that I realized, but this would not be the last
time that Paul seemed to know what I felt even before I could name it.

Friendship time after the worship service only added to the confusion. I noted
certain "swishy" behaviors of some of the men and was embarrassed to realize that I
noticed. While part of me said, "Why do they have to act that way?" another part already
recognized my own ingrained homophobia in the reaction. I was appalled that I might
judge someone on so superficial and personal a trait. These people were more than kind
and accepting of me, why would I shut them out for being who they are? Guilt ate at me
for two days. Finally I called Dawn and asked to meet her for lunch so that I could
"confess." She helped me remember that prejudice cannot be overcome until it is
examined.

My second visit to Tree of Life MCC captivated me in yet another way. After the
service a meeting was called of the membership. I hung around to observe. Someone had
taken home one of the offerings instead of going directly to the bank, and the money was
lost. Because he didn't want to get in trouble, he tried to cover it up. The discrepancy was
discovered. The astounding part was that the story was told, the person was held
accountable to pay back the money within a certain time period, there was a confession
and apology, and it was all done in a spirit of love. They were careful to say, "Yes, you
are still a member of the family. You are welcome here. We still love you. And the
money will be paid back in time or the police will be notified."
I would not have believed such an example of church discipline was possible. The confession was complete, sincere, and humble. There were hugs all around, and a few tears. The matter was considered concluded and not to be brought up again. Honest confrontation, confession, forgiveness, protection of the church from further harm, and full acceptance as a loved family member! The cynic in me would have given odds that I would not ever see this happen in church.

I shared my enthusiasm over my new church experience with Dawn. As I was describing the worship service, I was using "we" language. She asked me if I had heard what I said, and I replied that indeed it was an experience of "we." I felt completely at home there in just two weeks. On week three, as I went for communion, I said to Paul, "I want to lead North Rome Baptist Church to become welcoming and affirming, but I am so afraid." Terrified was more like it. I knew that to take on this issue would be to risk losing all that I had worked and struggled for in the past few years. I already loved these people at Tree of Life, but the thought of losing my pulpit and my identity as pastor Fran was more that I could handle.

Paul simply reached behind him, took healing oil from the altar, and the next thing I knew I was surrounded by people with their hands on me praying that I would be unafraid. I wanted that so. I needed it. At the same time, I felt like an imposter, thinking of myself as a heterosexual woman passing as lesbian. I didn't set out to deceive anyone, but I hadn't mentioned my own understanding of my sexual orientation. I realized how desperately I wanted their acceptance and didn't want to risk the feelings of being at one with them in the sacrament. The irony of the situation did not escape me. I was the one in the closet, experiencing in a small way the fear of being rejected because I was different.
In spite of my embarrassment and shame of deception, I must honestly say that something changed in me that day. I have been anxious about some events since then, but I have never been really afraid again.

I knew that I would have to come out to the congregation. I rehearsed my speech carefully. Prayers of the People time at Tree of Life resembles a Quaker meeting. People are free to share whatever is on their hearts. So I took a deep breath and did it. "I have something I need to tell you. I am a straight woman. I have a husband and four children. When I came here I was afraid that I would not be accepted, so I didn't tell you who I am. I don't know what God is calling me to, but I know that it has something to do with your struggle for liberation." Almost everyone made an effort to speak to me during the passing of the peace. One woman actually apologized for assuming that I was lesbian, saying, "I know how I feel when people assume that I am straight." One person said, "I knew all along. I just figured you were the token straight." The acceptance was nearly universal and expressed with hugs as well as words.

Only one man was upset with me. He confronted me with his angry feelings saying that I had had no reason to be afraid of them and my lack of trust would make it hard for him to trust me. I told him that I understood the pain that produced his anger. He didn't see how I could. Even this negative response had a positive effect. How wonderful that he did not go behind my back and talk about me, but rather came to me with his anger. I had not learned to expect direct dealing in church contexts. Most of us were so busy trying to be "nice," we didn't know how to deal with anger, so it just festered and made us distrustful, cynical and "careful" around each other. Gossip, however, was
rampant. How refreshing to be in a church that did not foster dysfunctional communication!

My talks with Pastor Paul became a regular part of my schedule. He was a more experienced pastor than I, and provided an objective ear to listen to all my hopes and plans and frustrations at North Rome. He was also my guide into the gay community. He kept me supplied with books, took me on speaking engagements, introduced me to people, and openly shared his story as a gay man in ministry. I went to a membership class and heard more coming out stories. Amid the uniqueness of individual lives there was a common theme of denial, struggle to change, oppression and spiritual abuse from churches, and finally some integration of spirituality and sexuality.

All of the gay and lesbian Christians that I met early on had struggled with self-identity since childhood. Some had been harassed in school; some had been kicked out of their childhood homes; many had endured aversion therapy and other psychiatric attempts to change their sexual orientation. Perhaps the saddest stories were the ones concerning treatment by pastors and churches. People had been publicly outed (identified as homosexual without their permission) when they went for private pastoral counseling, had been asked publicly to leave worship services, had been "shunned," had been told that God could not love them as they were and that they would go to Hell if they did not become heterosexual. Many had attempted suicide. Some had been through a time when they told God to "go to Hell." But here they were, joining a church that accepted them, because the grace of God had followed them like the hound of heaven.

When I became a regular at Tree of Life I told Pastor Paul, "I will do anything you ask me to do, including preach, but I don't want to be in charge of anything. I have
my own church to manage. I'm coming here primarily to meet my own needs for regular Eucharist, because the Spirit is at work here and I don't want to miss out, and because it feeds me." With a twinkle in his eye Paul said he guessed they would have to figure out a way to put me in charge of something without my realizing what was happening. He predicted that someday I would be an MCC pastor. Now there was a radical idea. In the first place I didn't think it would be appropriate for a straight person to pastor an MCC. How could it not look paternalistic? Secondly, how could I pastor a people whose life experiences were so different from mine? What did I know about surviving as a gay Christian in a homophobic society? And thirdly, having struggled to gain status in one denomination, I certainly didn't relish jumping through another set of hoops. He was right, of course, but I wasn't ready to hear it.

One incident on a cold, icy January Sunday set the stage for what was to come. Paul and his deacons normally came up from Toledo, Ohio on Sunday afternoons. Tree of Life MCC was an extension of Good Samaritan Parish MCC in Toledo. This day the roads were too icy to make the trip north. Those who lived nearby or who were north of the church had better conditions, and a reasonable-sized group assembled at the appointed worship time.

When I walked into the sanctuary, I noticed that the church leaders were clustered outside the office, conferring. I sized up the situation instantly and joined them in their discussion of how to do worship with none of the staff people available. I volunteered to preach. They were taken aback that I could do that without any notes. "Well, I did it this morning at North Rome. I will just do a re-run." Another woman and I agreed to serve communion, but we decided that a member ought to consecrate. The only one willing to
do this was the organist, so we had a rather strange little dance of musical chairs as he tried valiantly to be in two places at once.

Two things about that makeshift service were memorable for me. One was the reception the sermon got. During prayers of the people the young man who had been so angry about my original lack of candor thanked me for the sermon and said how glad he was that I was there with them. It was a peace offering on his part, which was gladly accepted. Even more significant though, was the experience of serving communion MCC style. As each person or couple came forward to receive, I dipped a wafer in the chalice and gave it to them, then wrapped my arms around them for prayer. The privilege of blessing people in that way was overwhelming. I had a sense of being a true priest, that is, one who opens the way between God and people. Words came to my lips from somewhere deep inside my soul. Almost everyone kissed me. That is a not uncommon gesture in MCC’s, but this was the first time it had happened to me. I basked in the glow of that experience for weeks. They loved me. I loved them. And God could use me to bless their lives. Emotionally I became a member that day. "Advocate for gay and lesbian people" had become part of my self-identity.

Participating in American Baptist Churches biennial convention in San Jose, California, gave me my first taste of participating in social action for gay liberation. This was an historic conference at which The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB) was holding its first gathering. It was like being back in the 60's, only this time I was a participant in the social action rather that an observer. During the 60's I supported the civil rights movement in principal, but was too much of a "good girl" to do anything personally. Now I made up for lost time.
Each morning, as the delegates gathered for the day's sessions, a choir of AWAB members and supporters singing hymns, spirituals, freedom songs, and "We are a Gentle, Angry People" (popularized by Holly Near) greeted them and handed out flyers asking, "Twenty Questions for our American Baptist Friends". The local TV station covered our "pray-in".

A lesbian friend and I were distributing flyers one morning when a woman approached with a friendly smile and engaged us in conversation about her missionary work and the wonderful music from the improvised choir. When she looked down at the paper we had handed her, she turned suddenly icy, said, "Oh, that's who you are" and stalked off throwing the paper back to us. I wanted to say, no, we're the same friendly sisters in the faith that you were talking to a minute ago. It was a very small thing, the hatred expressed in tone of voice and body language; there was never any real threat. Still, my heart went out to both my sisters. I wanted to protect and comfort my lesbian companion, to shield her from this sort of affront. And I wanted the one who walked away to understand, not to miss out on the friendship being offered to her. It was a small thing, but for me a defining moment. I knew that the evil had a name: Homophobia, and I was determined to do whatever I could to fight it.

The conference and the retreat afterwards were filled with memorable experiences of getting to know people, hearing life stories, participating in exercises to build understanding, and enjoying the beautiful climate and scenery of Northern California. My bond with the LGBT community was strengthened. I met many gay and lesbian American Baptist Churches leaders who were not out to their congregations and who
struggled to be faithful in a denomination that did not recognize their existence, let alone affirm them.

Attending the Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco was another highlight. All that wonderful sexual and emotional and spiritual energy focused on standing tall and unashamed before God and the world was truly amazing. I marched with American Baptists Concerned, one of 17 religious contingents in the parade. As we passed the reviewing stand the announcer said, "And here come all the groups you will never see in any of those right-wing videos." Since our voices couldn't compete with the singing of larger groups, we started chanting, "Two, four, six, eight, all the Baptists are not straight. One, three, five, seven, Baptist queers are going to heaven." The crowd roared.

I continued to pastor North Rome Baptist Church and attend Tree of Life MCC. Pastor Paul dropped a bomb that fall when he announced that he was resigning to accept a pastorate in another state. I had come to depend on him for support; I valued his friendship, his mentoring, and his pastoral care of me. How could God do this to me? Was I doomed to lose every source of support that was important in my spiritual life? The people at Tree of Life MCC were shocked and angry. We felt deserted. I threw a few temper tantrums reminding Paul that while I might have to accept his leaving I didn't have to like it. We had a good laugh when I told him that when I met him I was asking God to lead me in finding a spiritual companion. I was expecting to find a Catholic nun, but God gave me a gay man!

Before he left, Paul would place the final straw on the camel's back of my resistance to God's call to me to minister in the gay community. We met for lunch one day in Toledo. Over deli sandwiches he said, "Fran, there is an MCC church somewhere
with your name on it." I reacted, "What the hell do I know about growing up gay?" His answer: "What did Moses know about being a slave? He was raised in a palace." It felt as though the ceiling had just fallen in. He had taken my last excuse. I didn't need to be lesbian to pastor an MCC any more than I needed to be male to be a pastor to the men at North Rome.

Dell and I spent the next Saturday afternoon walking in the park and processing my newly articulated call and what that might mean for us. On Sunday night Paul echoed some of the same things Dell had said to me. I accused them of being in collusion; they blamed it on God. I sent for a UFMCC clergy manual and became an "in care" transfer clergyperson.

At North Rome Baptist Church things were going well. Attendance and offering were up. The people were more active than they had ever been in the life of the church. During one social event with both adults and children present, one of our members said something about "fucking faggots." I bit my lip and walked away. I didn't trust myself to respond in a way that was kind and effective and I didn't want to embarrass him in front of others. He is a rough and rugged construction worker whose language was often coarse. I wrote an open letter to the congregation saying that words like "faggot" felt like a punch in the stomach and offering to talk about it. I did not name him nor refer to the specific incident. The board asked me to lead a Bible study class about homosexuality. I agreed to do a three-week series.

I had reason to think that this would go well. We had had a sane and rational discussion about abortion in which people actually listened to what their opponents had to say. We had learned that we could disagree on an important matter without losing
respect for one another. The Wednesday evening course drew about half the usual attendance of Sunday morning worship. People were astounded that I would not tell them what to think, but presented scholarly evidence and asked them to come to their own conclusions. They were not used to being treated as adults held responsible to think for themselves. Guests at our last session talked about their own experience as gay Christians.

An opinion editorial in the Ann Arbor News became the catalyst for my next big step. Rev. Thom Saffold, another ABC pastor in the area related his journey from condemnation to acceptance of homosexuality and issued a challenge to Christian churches to talk about the issue. George, a lay minister from the Church of Christ responded. George and Thom had very different ideas about what the event would be like. Thom had envisioned a dialogue among a diverse segment of church representatives; George wanted a formal debate. In their efforts to reach compromise, Thom called and asked me to participate. He felt that my theology was more liberal than his and that we represented two different approaches to the issue, but with similar conclusions.

I let the ABC area executive minister know what we were doing. I didn't want him to find out via grapevine what we "activists" were up to. He begged me not to do it: "This issue will split our denomination." I suggested that, while this could be true, it did not depend upon whether or not I spoke up. "Have you thought about what this will do to your ministry?" "Floyd, this is my ministry." The devilish voice on my left shoulder wanted to say, "No, I just got up one day and asked myself what controversial issue I could risk my career on this time." I let the board at North Rome know what I would be
doing. They asked me to bring the publicity to church so that anyone who was interested could go.

The debates occurred on April 4-5, 1994 at the University of Michigan. I had spent much of that season writing the papers and preparing for this event. We began Friday night with "What is the basis for moral decision making?" Saturday morning we debated, "What does this basis teach us about homosexuality?" After lunch we did the question and answer session and then "What should be the response of church and society?" The weekend included a total of eight hours of sessions, which were video taped.

If nothing else had been accomplished by those debates, I would have been content with the opportunity to respond to one index card question: Is it true that there is only one true church like the Bible says, or could there be room for me somewhere? The "one true church" language is classic Church of Christ doctrine. I think this card came from a closeted gay or lesbian person from that group. I was delighted to talk about all the denominational support groups in existence as well as UFMCC, whose very purpose is to serve the spiritual needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities. I pray that whoever wrote that question will find hope and help from someone to accept their sexuality without abandoning their relationship to Jesus and the church. The poignancy of that question haunts me still. Is there room in the Church of Jesus Christ for God's gay and lesbian children? How long will we have to ask that question?

I flew from the debates to Atlanta to attend Paul's installation as pastor of All Saints MCC. I missed Paul and wanted to meet Rev. Elder Troy Perry,
founder of UFMCC, who would be preaching. I was one of several communion servers at the installation. Couples often take communion together in MCC. If servers know that this is a family, not just supportive friends, we break one wafer in two and give half to each. MCC communion is one of the few places where same-sex relationships are affirmed and blessed as the minister prays for them as a couple. When three people I had not met came for communion, I did not quite know what to do. I was temporarily confused by the fact that I only have two hands and needed to dispense three wafers. Looking to the nearby server for guidance I was told, "They are a household." Later I was introduced. "Hi, I'm Marvin. This is my lover Fred, and that is my wife Florence." I did my best not to appear shocked or overly curious, but I asked someone else at the first opportunity. They are indeed a household who own a home jointly and share a life together. She is described as "asexual," a best friend from childhood, and an author of gay fiction. My concept of what constitutes a legitimate family was expanding.

After three days in Atlanta, I returned to home and North Rome. When I arrived at the church about 3:30 in the afternoon there were many phone messages on the answering machine. Most of them were rather cryptic "we need to talk" messages from church leaders. As I was trying to guess what that was all about, I was visited by the chair of the pastoral relations committee. She said, "The board meeting tonight is not going to be a regular board meeting. We will talk about your relationship to the church." She stayed for about an hour filling me in on what had occurred while I was away. The publicity surrounding the debates had reached North Rome. People were upset because
they did not want to be associated with my advocacy position. After Doris left, I called several friends asking them to pray. "I think they are going to ask me to resign tonight."

I went into town and bought chocolate and cider. I'm not sure whose needs I was taking care of, but I knew the meeting would be tense and emotional, so I wanted provisions for the journey. The board members started arriving about a half hour early. Most of them were solemn, a few were crying before the meeting even started. They tried to break it to me gently. The meeting lasted two hours. There was a lot of talk about how much I had done for the church and how more had been happening lately than anyone had ever expected, BUT--I was too controversial for a country town.

I was asked to leave quietly without giving the congregation an explanation. I refused. I offered them two options: call for a vote of confidence from the congregation or vote as a board to ask for my resignation. I did not recommend the first option, as I feared it would further divide the church by forcing people to take sides. They voted six to two to ask me to leave. Then the chair of the board wanted to know what I was going to do. I asked for some time to think and pray about it. After all, I had known for only a few hours that this might happen. I didn't have a plan.

I called my husband and then went to visit with the lesbian couple for whom I had visited Tree of Life in the first place. Now they would comfort me as I adjusted to the long-term results of that step.

The next morning I had a meeting with a group of American Baptist pastors who met to do case studies. It was a most memorable meeting. In the morning we learned that Donna had to have brain surgery for tumors that might be cancerous, and in the afternoon I told my story of rejection and listened while the group processed it. That afternoon I
walked and talked with a friend by the river for hours. She bore the brunt of my
alternating anger, tears, and struggle to decide what to do now. By late afternoon she
suggested that what I really needed to do was to go home and sleep on it and trust God to
lead.

I woke up on Friday with a plan. I did not think that prolonging my leaving would
be good for the church or for me. I knew that many people would stay away just to avoid
controversy. So although I technically could have had a six-week departure schedule, I
began to plan to resign on the next Sunday.

I am proud of the way that service went. The grapevine let everyone know that it
would be my last Sunday, and the church was packed. I preached from Galatians, trying
to make the parallels between the struggles to include the Gentiles in the early Jesus
movement and the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in today's churches. I told them
they needed to make a choice before they called another pastor. What kind of church
would they be? "You can't have grace for yourself and law for others."

We concluded the service with communion MCC-style, using intinction and
offering prayers of blessing. I wanted to be able to bless them even as I left them. I
worried about whether I could authentically pray for the few who I knew to be
antagonists. I had provided a tray of cups and the other half of the loaf of bread for
anyone to use who was uncomfortable with the blessing part. I needn't have bothered.
They went downstairs and gathered around the coffee pot to celebrate their "victory"
while I poured out my heart in private blessings on these dear folk who had been "my
people" for three years, knowing that I would not see most of them again.
The following Tuesday, I cleared all my things out of the office. I wiped out the message on the answering machine, took down notices with my name on them, and said goodbye to the beautiful church building that had emerged from the old, neglected meeting place. I gave my blessing one last time to the centuries-old oak tree in the front yard and the many flowers, bulbs and bushes I had planted myself. There is a "burning bush" plant at North Rome Baptist Church that was given to me by the congregation as a Christmas gift and was planted in the yard with much ceremony. My prayer is that someday they will hear the voice of God saying, "whosoever" (John 3:16) and remember the pastor who tried to say it to them in 1994.

The April of changes had just begun. Two of my children graduated from college that month. My mother's caretaker broke her leg and was no longer able to look after her. Mom, needing 24-hour care, came to live at our house. I was able to find help from visiting nurses, and my daughters provided "gramma care" when they could, but the effects on my household were wearing and stressful.

Meanwhile at Tree of Life, we had been managing since Paul's departure with a pastoral team of four people. Tom was a Roman Catholic permanent deacon from Toledo who was officially our pastoral leader. Jamie was a theologically conservative young man with a bent toward Pentecostal faith expressions whose Baptist preacher father had thrown him out of the house at age 14 when he admitted to being gay. He had a lot of MCC experience to share with the team. Harold was a former Methodist lay leader who had been advised that he could never be a minister in that denomination unless he repented from being gay. The team had been functioning well, but soon both Tom and Jamie left because of health issues. And that is how I became pastoral leader of Tree of
Life MCC. There was never actually a time when I was not preparing sermons. And of course, messages from God are always as much for me as for my hearers.

The grant that supported my work as a nurse researcher at U of M ran out. North Rome was unable and/or unwilling to pay the severance amount they owed me. I went from two half-time paid professional positions to teaching one class per year (.15 FTE) and being virtually a volunteer at Tree of Life. I realized that we would have to put my mother in a nursing home as my gramma-sitters all began to burn out.

In this time of turmoil and transition, I decided to enroll in the doctoral program at Ecumenical Theological Seminary. It may seem illogical to take on a new role at a time like this, but it made sense to me. I needed to figure out who I was now and I needed help to navigate uncharted waters. I realized that I was doing a kind of cross-cultural missions and had a lot to learn about gay culture. I needed the support of others who could understand being called to do something most would consider outrageous. My experience at St. John's had convinced me of the treasure of studying in an ecumenical environment, especially with those who could challenge my ideas without demeaning my intelligence or faithfulness.

My first learning contract included a lot of listening. I needed to hear my new congregation's stories and understand their lives. Partly I did this in after-church gatherings at a local restaurant. We would laugh and talk and almost invariably get around to "God talk" or to sharing faith stories with one another. People who came to church for the first time could be in any phase of the coming out process and from any faith tradition. Attempts to reconcile sexual identity with relationship to God and to churches were a constant theme. I grew to appreciate Harold's pastoral responses and felt
myself privileged to be included in such intimate conversations. I think God healed us as much in those "after church" sessions as during our times of worship together.

My first mini-project grew out of a class called Biblical Storytelling. The importance of story as communication in the electronic age, and the similarities with storytelling in Biblical times rang true with my own experience. The major changes in my life had occurred primarily as a result of people and their stories. Study was often prompted by a need to integrate my own story with a larger story, or to let someone else’s story speak to me beyond my own cognitive dissonance.

The seminar, Sexuality and Spirituality: the Travail of Integration, taught by Walter Wink and June Keener Wink sparked my second project and paper: "The Erotic Contemplative: Reflections on the Spiritual Journey of the Gay/Lesbian Christian." Using a set of videotapes by Michael B. Kelley (1995), Australian spiritual director from the Roman Catholic tradition, a small group of gay men and lesbians shared deeply from their personal lives. Their stories moved me and bonded us together as a group. I began to look at the Bible and its stories through queer eyes.

Liberation theology had taught me that stories have a different character when read through the eyes of people on the underside of power and that God might show a preferential option for the poor. Feminist theology had taught me that everyone reads a text through the lenses of her own social location and to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to the Bible. Queer theology, too, encouraged reading deliberately through the eyes of marginalized people, outsiders, “the least and the last.”

After a class at Chicago Theological Seminary called “Queer Family Values,” my third project was “Rite of Blessing for a Leather Family: A Journey Toward
Understanding." (Available at ETS library, 2930 Woodward Ave, Detroit, MI) One of my parishioners, a former Orthodox priest, had established a new household of three men. (Kepeller, website) They are part of a subculture known as Leather people.

Guy Baldwin (1993), editor of *Drummer* magazine, describes the origins of Leather as a lifestyle. During World War II, many gay men met others like themselves for the first time. The belief that "I'm the only one" or that "I must be the dregs of humanity, because perverts like me must be awful people" couldn't stand up to the reality of buddies and respected officers and peers who were also gay. It also became clear to them that there are many ways to be gay. War is high stress, serious business. Discipline is needed for survival.

"The gay vets had the secret knowledge that they fought and served every bit as well as straight soldiers, and this information strengthened their self-esteem. All of these things came to be associated with the disciplined, military way of life, as it existed during the wartime years.... Upon their return to the States, about 1946, many of the gay vets wanted to retain the most satisfying elements of their military experience and at the same time, hang out socially and sexually with other masculine gay men." (Baldwin (1993), 108)

Gay ex-soldiers found the culture they sought among the motorcycle clubs. They found the leather gear of bike riders an adequate replacement for their military uniforms. Riders and other butch men wore leather for practical reasons: it prevented injury; those practicing exotic sexualities wore it as a kind of signal of who they were and what they were interested in.
One member of the new Leather family asked if I would ever do a rite of blessing or a holy union for three people. I had a great deal of respect for the spirituality and mutual love of the three men, but I said that I would need to do some homework first. This led to my third mini-project. Writing the paper taught me much about the spirituality of BDSM, an acronym for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism, also usually including elements of fetishism. People in BDSM relationships may refer to themselves as the “kink” community. The cardinal rules of the BDSM community are that encounters must be “safe, sane, and consensual.” “Scenes” are carefully negotiated, as are household rules for those who live in community. Communication skills are developed. Vulnerability, trust, and self-control are tested. Spiritual experiences are valued and may occur as a “scene” unfolds. (Baldwin 1993) Doing the research and developing a ritual for a rite of blessing with them was my first exposure to non-monogamous families and their pastoral needs.

An unexpected and radically disturbing change in my understanding of myself took my life in a new direction. Much to my surprise and dismay, I fell in love with a co-worker who is a trans-woman. My struggle to incorporate this intimate emotional relationship and still be faithful to my marriage, and my process of recovery from the confusion and pain that resulted, became the subject for my fourth heuristic paper. Redefining myself as bisexual had major repercussions in my church community. The loving, supportive representative of the “straight” world the congregation once saw, became just one of them. People who saw me as “mom” had to develop a more realistic view of this now more ordinary sister and fellow traveler. I not only fell off the pedestal, I broke it into pieces on the way down.
I learned more about bisexuality through reading and attending bisexual support groups. Generally, bisexuals are people for whom sexual attraction is not contingent on gender or on shape of someone’s genitals. One of the fears that people have about identifying as bisexual is the common myth that all bisexuals are interested in relationships with both men and women at the same time. Others resist the label because it seems to imply a binary gender system that they do not accept. At the bisexual group I met all sorts of people with an unending diversity of relationship styles including some who identify as polyamorous.

Polyamory is a new word derived from *poly*, more than one, and *amor*, love. “Responsible non-monogamy” is an alternative identifier. A new group for “poly” people or people interested in a polyamorous “lovestyle” started and I joined. At these monthly meetings between 20 and 35 people come to discuss various relationship issues. Currently, most of the people in the group identify as heterosexual or bisexual, with a few gay or lesbian families. Most identify as pagan, but people have asked me privately about MCC or about issues with Christianity.

At MCC General Conference, July 1999 in Los Angeles, a resolution was passed to combine the definitions of Rite of Holy Matrimony and Rite of Holy Union in the bylaws. These were two separate rites with almost identical descriptions, Holy Matrimony for legal (heterosexual) marriages and Holy Union for same-sex couples or other couples who desired non-legal, church-sanctioned ceremonies. The Board of Elders saw this as a statement that, not only does the denomination do holy unions for same-sex couples, but we also consider them the same as a marriage for heterosexual couples. The bylaw, as revised, reads:
The RITE OF HOLY UNION / RITE OF HOLY MATRIMONY is the spiritual joining of two persons in a manner fitting and proper by a duly authorized clergy or Interim Pastoral Leader of the church. After both persons have been counseled and apprised of their responsibilities one toward the other, this rite of conferring God’s blessing may be performed (Bylaws, 1999).

The two-thirds majority to change this bylaw came easily, although there were more abstentions than usual. What complicated the decision was a proposed amendment to the bylaw amendment to take the numbers out of the description, so that it would read: “Holy Union/Holy Matrimony is the spiritual joining of persons…” rather than “two persons”. This motion came from the floor, seemingly “out of the blue” with no preparation of the delegates. Normally there is a long process of discussion and debate before any substantive changes in bylaws can be made. Including this change in the bylaws would have allowed MCC pastors to perform holy unions for families with more than two adult partners.

Speakers in favor of the motion to amend issued eloquent and moving pleas to be inclusive of all our queer families and not make those in multiple-partner relationships into second-class citizens. This amendment passed by simple majority in the clergy house, but failed in the lay house. A simple majority of both houses would have put the issue up for vote as part of the Elders proposed bylaw change. The proposal to combine descriptions of the two rites would not have had the 2/3 needed to pass with this amendment to eliminate numbers attached.

Some people wept and some left the room. These were people who felt betrayed, hurt, and angry that the denomination where they had, at last, found a spiritual home
would not recognize their relationships as equally worthy of support. I was livid and saw this as an injustice and violence against our own people. All the “angry mother bear” instincts in me were triggered. How dare we exclude our own families the way society excludes us? How could we desert a part of our queer culture by implying that polyamorous families were of less value or were less deserving of blessing than families of same-sex couples?

Shortly after General Conference, one district started a proposal to bring this up again at General Conference 2001 in Toronto. In order for a bylaw amendment to come to the floor, three districts must pass it in the exact same wording. In the discussion that occurred at the Great Lakes District Conference in May, the resolution again passed in the clergy house, but not in the lay house. The arguments against changing the bylaws sound to me very much like the arguments mustered by the larger society against same-sex marriages. I wrote the following:

Déjà vu

For a brief moment, I wasn’t sure where I was. The arguments were familiar; I had addressed them before. But something was wrong. During my momentary time warp I thought I might be hearing all the usual arguments against same-sex marriage.

1a “The Bible says…”

1b Well at least this time it was “the New Testament assumes…” or was it the speaker who assumed?

2a “My marriage would be threatened if we allow gay marriages.”
“My marriage is special. My holy union was a real covenant. Allowing this would diminish the value of my relationship.”

“If we say ‘gay is OK’ then everyone will want to do it.”

“If we allow this, we’ll have all sorts of people coming out of the woodwork wanting us to recognize their relationships too. It could get bizarre. Someone might want to marry their collie.”

“The church would suffer if gay relationships were blessed; ‘normal’ people wouldn’t want to come any more.”

“We have enough trouble convincing people that we are a real church. If we do this, it will only confirm the fears of the homophobes opposing gay marriage.”

“It’s against the [sodomy] law.”

“It’s against the [bigamy] law.”

No, I wasn’t at “The Church of True Laws.” I was at District Conference listening to my brothers and sisters opposing the resolution to take the numbers out of our UFMCC description of holy union/holy matrimony. Same arguments, different question; or is it?

The resolution failed to pass in three districts, so the issue was not openly discussed at General Conference 2001 in Toronto. In discussions with other liberal pastors I pointed out that if our lay people did not have the same quality education in sexuality as we had, it was our own fault. A pastor in a neighboring state organized a weekend conference on polyamory (multiple-partner relationships) that I attended. It was taught by an experienced marriage counselor and included time for sharing of stories. As
people talked about their lives and their struggles to fit into MCC culture, I was filled with warm feelings and a desire to advocate for this minority within a minority: polyamorous families in the context of MCC.

The well-meaning antagonists asked for data. What do the sociologists say? What are the theological implications? What kind of families are we talking about, anyway? This was the origin of my question for this paper: How can the lived experience of adults with more than one life-partner inform the question of the definition of Holy Union within MCC?
CONTEXT

My social position as I write this paper is as a white, American middle-class, female, bisexual MCC pastor with a reputation for advocating for people on the margins. My pastoral concern is the full inclusion of all chosen families in the safe space the denomination seeks to create (Perry, 1990). For polyamorous families this would include creating rites of blessing or holy union that are suitable for their needs to have their families blessed in the sight of God by the church.

This project takes place within the social and institutional culture of MCC (The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches).

MCC = Since its founding in 1968, MCC has grown into a denomination of approximately 300 churches in 18 countries throughout the world. Worldwide membership surpassed 40,000 in early 2000. In many small communities, the Metropolitan Community Church is the only local lesbian and gay-oriented organization.

The story of MCC begins with one man, defrocked by his Pentecostal church for homosexuality and recovering from a suicide attempt, who dared to believe God's promise of love and justice for all people. The Reverend Troy Perry, then twenty-seven, received a call from God to found a church that affirmed gay men, lesbians and all other outcasts. UFMCC was born a few months later on October 6, 1968, when the Reverend Perry led eleven men and one woman in the first worship service...Foreshadowing the diversity that was to flower in the next decades, the congregation that morning encompassed people of
Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish backgrounds, including one person of color (a Latino), one Jew, and one heterosexual couple.

All people - gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and heterosexual - are invited to new life through the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ in the Metropolitan Community Churches. MCC puts its faith into action by creating a global community of healing and reconciliation, and by confronting the injustices of homophobia, sexism, racism and poverty through Christian social action (mccchurch.org).

The “Universal” in the official denominational name signifies a worldwide fellowship. Recent restructuring was designed to give non-USA churches a more equal status in decision-making and equal access to resources. The multi-cultural, multi-national nature of the Fellowship means that specific polity involving such things as organizational style, worship style, and educational requirements for clergy vary from country to country. Local churches are given a great deal of autonomy. The popular phrase to describe the restructuring is “less regulation, more resourcing.” MCC tries to be sensitive to the unique cultural and structural needs in its various communities. For this reason, cross-cultural and cross-denominational attitudes are important to the discussion of the definition of Holy Union/Holy Matrimony.

Congregations include persons who identify as having diverse sexual orientations or gender expressions: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and straight friends and allies. MCC also ministers to others who do not feel welcome in mainline churches, such as the deaf community, those with physical disabilities, and the homeless (http://www.mccchurch.org). Much pastoral ministry consists of welcoming home to God.
those who have felt abandoned or abused or betrayed by the church of their childhood, or who have always thought of Christianity as the enemy. MCC is a denomination of outcasts and marginalized people from every religious and theological tradition, although Christian baptism is required for membership.

People come to MCC wounded and wary. It often takes a great deal of courage to enter an MCC for the first time. Past experience of church has been mixed at best; many have not been to a worship service in many years. Newcomers do not know what to expect, nor are they at all certain they will be accepted. Internalized homophobia may cause suspicion of anything “gay.” The job of MCC churches is to welcome strangers home to the God who has loved them all along, no matter what others have told them.

Increasingly, one speaks of sexual minority communities (plural) and the list of initials associated with non-normative sex and gender grows longer. LGBTIQ = lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning. Nonetheless, a common oppression draws these highly diverse groups together for support.

Because our primary ministry is to the sexual minority communities and others who have felt rejected by their church or religious communities, or by society in general, there is a high value placed on inclusiveness. Annual reports from churches include information on how the church is working toward further inclusivity (racial balance, accessibility, gender balance). Individual local churches may vary widely in the kinds of diversity recognized. Class and ethnic differences vary both within and among churches.

Robert Goss (2002) describes MCC as a “post-denominational church, in that it does not start with the principle of doctrinal adherence, but rather begins with doctrinal
diversity, allowing for a wide range of ecumenical interpretations of doctrine and a blending of a variety of worship practices” (p. 33).

The official Statement of Faith is based on the classic Christian creeds, open to wide variations in interpretation. Theological stances run the gamut. There is a Pentecostal contingent, a Unitarian minority, strong liturgical emphasis from Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran members, evangelical preaching from Baptist, Methodist, & other Protestant groups, social consciousness from United Church of Christ, and the Reform traditions, and Catholic activists, as well as others. Rev. Elder Troy Perry, the founder and moderator of MCC, has said the denomination preaches a “three-pronged gospel” of Christian salvation, Christian community, and Christian social action (Perry, 1990).

The diversity of backgrounds is both strength and challenge. It opens conversations around faith traditions and their influence on our expectations for worship, structure and personal behavior, as well as discussions around a myriad of theological questions. Nothing is taken for granted. This can be healthy and growth enhancing, as insights are gained into why some dogma or practice might be preferred over others.

MCC people do a lot of storytelling around sexual orientation struggles and “coming out” stories, a reiteration of how the individual came to understand and accept his/her own sexuality and what has happened as a result of disclosing this to others in various settings. Woundedness and rejection are universal themes, often with contemplation or attempts at suicide. This makes Christian community a doubly important need, both for spiritual growth and emotional/social healing. MCC churches are “safe space” for honesty and transparency. A real attempt is made to celebrate
differences and disagree agreeably. Social activism of various sorts is also characteristic of most churches and of the denomination. Protests, pray-ins, letter writing, and various other forms of direct action are frequent occurrences. Stronger members often see themselves as rebels against heteronormativity, the dominant culture’s means of enforcing obligatory heterosexuality.

MCC teaches that sexuality is a good gift from God, part of original blessin. (Genesis 1:31). As such, it is to be protected from exploitation, but also honored, enjoyed, and celebrated. Goss (2002) finds that MCC is “a church in the process of developing a sexual theology that could challenge the established churches” (p. 33).

Part of the diversity of the denomination is in the ways MCC faithful choose to express sexuality and form families of choice. Some choose to be celibate, some are partnered for life as couples in sexually exclusive relationships, some are in open relationships where recreational sex outside the primary couple is practiced, some are part of networks or clans, and others are in committed relationships with more than one other adult (Stuart, 1997, Weston, 1991).

The term most often used for families of more than two adults is polyamorous, meaning many loves, or polyfidelitous, meaning faithful within a group. There are various polyamorous relationships that have existed long-term within MCC. However, in spite of the fact that some of these are to be found among the leadership of the denomination, some have expressed privately that they do not feel that their relationships are validated, celebrated, nor honored. This thesis is an attempt to hear the stories of polyamorous people in order to be able to include their testimony in the discussion of the meaning of Holy Union.
The Question

This project seeks to answer the question: How can the lived experiences of adults with more than one life-partner inform the question of defining Holy Union within UFMCC?

Human sexuality is a multi-layered experience of biological sex, gender identity, gender roles, sexual orientation (also called object preference), sexual identity and sexual behavior. Each level has much diversity within the category, and the levels do not line up in consistent ways.

Figure 1: Sexual Diversity Wheel (Sears, 1997)

Body sex refers to physical body configuration. There is no measurement of bodies that consistently yields two categories. For example, there are 23 different chromosome patterns consistent with human life; not all bodies are XX or XY. Genes,
chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal genitals, external genitals, and brain sex exist in human bodies as continuums, not binaries. Biological sex is complex and often ambiguous. Sex is assigned at birth, by the attendants, on the basis of external genitals, but sometimes has to be reconsidered. Delivery room records have three boxes for “sex”: male, female, and ambiguous. Approximately 1 in every 2,000 babies is labeled intersex at birth. As many as 1 in 200 people have some body characteristic not consistent with assigned sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Gender identity is a person’s innate sense of identity as boy or girl. Babies as young as 18 months have a sense of their own gender identity; although children do not develop a sense of gender permanence until around age four. Transsexual persons have a gender identity that is different from their assigned sex. Gender roles are the culturally determined behaviors associated with men or women. Some cultures allow expression of more than two genders. Some persons in Western cultures choose to transgress the boundaries of masculine and feminine gender roles in various ways (Crooks & Baur, 2000).

Sexual orientation is a 20th century concept that labels a person according to whom or to what she/he is sexually attracted, for example homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. Sexual behavior is what a person does to express their sexuality, whether celibacy, auto-sexuality, or interactions with other bodies. Sexual identity is a person’s view of herself/himself as a sexual being, such as gay, straight, queer, (Crooks & Baur, 2000).

Each of the circles on the sexual diversity model (Sears, 1997) is a separate piece of paper, such that the categories may be aligned in any relationship to the other
categories. The combination of diversity within categories, and changing relationships of the categories to one another, produces a complex model. How various combinations of characteristics are valued varies widely from culture to culture. As more people become aware that both gender and sex are socially constructed concepts, the labels they choose to self-identify become increasingly complex and variable. (Crooks and Baur, 2002; Devor, 1989; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Feinberg, 1996; Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991; Mollenkott, 2001). Neologisms such as pansexual, omnisexual, gender queer, or statements such as “I’m not attracted to genders, I’m attracted to people” may be preferred to identifying as “bisexual.” There is a post-modern urge to deconstruct and defy categories. The questionnaire for this study is open-ended to allow each respondent to choose language that expresses each one’s own understanding of gender and orientation.

Love is an emotional bond between or among persons, which may or may not include sex or commitment. Relationships are a series of interactions involving two or more people, which may or may not include sex or love (Crooks & Baur, 2002).

Sex may be a physical sacrament of love (Kelsey & Kelsey, 1986), a way to express friendship, adult play, marital duty, reproductive technique, a way to give and receive pleasure or relieve sexual tension (Crooks & Baur, 2002), sacred worship (Kramer, 1997, Redmond, 1997; Stone, 1976), or transcendent, sacramental experience (Goss, 2002). Sex may express positive role fulfillment, creativity and experimentation, self-revelation, or deep intimacy, a shared sense of deep connection both to oneself and one’s partner, with reverence toward the body in the erotic experience. It may also be
impersonal, abusive, or violent (Malz, 1995). Sex may or may not include love or commitment to relationship.

Relationships, sex, and love may combine in many different ways. The more persons involved, the more complex the interactions may be. Definitions sometimes reveal the bias of the sponsoring organizations.

From Society for Human Sexuality website:

MONOGAMY– (mono=one; gamy=marriage) the practice or state of being married to only one person at a time. Sexual exclusivity is implied. [Also used to describe long-term committed relationships between same-sex couples and co-habitng, but unmarried, heterosexual couples. Originally it meant one marriage/sexual partner for a lifetime.]

POLYAMORY– (poly=many; amor=love) The practice, state, or ability of having multiple sexualove (sic) partners at the same time.

POLYFIDELITY– (poly=many; fidelis=faithful) The state or practice of sexual exclusivity among a group of three or more primary partners. A closed group marriage emphasizing equal primacy of all relationships.

SWINGING– Sport sex for couples. A form of non sexually exclusive monogamy in which two primary partners agree to have casual sex with other couples or singles as long as there is no emotional involvement.

PROMISCUOUS- (pro=forth; miscere=to mix) Engaging in casual sexual relations with many persons indiscriminately.
FAMILY- A group of adults and/or children bound together by ties of mutual commitment, primary relationships, intimacy and shared lives, and regarding themselves as a family.

JEALOUSY- Neurotic anxiety based on fear of losing control over a partner one regards as a possession.

COMPERSION- Warm happy feelings experienced when noticing ones loved ones enjoying loving relationships with others. The opposite of jealousy (Society for Human Sexuality, undated).

From LovingMore website:

Expanded Family: Where three or more people choose to live as a family unit. This usually involves a commitment between each of the partners and decisions are usually made by mutual consent.

Intimate Network: A term describing the social web that results from having sexual relations with friends and lovers of yours and your partners and perhaps their friends and lovers, etc.

Serial Monogamy: The most common style of relating in the US today. The belief that a person should only have one lover at a time. This belief is so strong that millions of people end perfectly good relationships in order to start another.

Sacred Sex: The belief that sex is a spiritual event. This can take many forms from simply honoring sexuality as such, to the practice of Tantra - a sexual yoga (Loving More, undated).
From Anapol, 1997:

**Primary relationship.** Lovers who are in a long-term, committed, marriage-type relationship are *primary partners*. Usually primary partners live together and share finances, parenting and decision making. Primary partners are not necessarily legally married, but they are bonded together as a family.

**Secondary relationship.** Secondary partners may also have a long-term, committed sexual Loving (sic) relationship. But usually they live separately, have separate finances and see themselves as close friends rather than immediate family. Secondary partners may take on roles in each other’s families similar to those of cousins, aunts and uncles in an extended family of blood relations.

**Tertiary relationship.** Lovers who spend time together only once in a while or for a brief time are *tertiary partners*. Their contact may be very intimate, but they are not an important part of each other’s day-to-day life.

**Open marriage or open relationship.** Nonexclusive relationships. The partners have agreed that each can independently have outside sexual Loving partners. A wide variety of ground rules and restrictions may apply.

**Triad.** Three sexual Loving (sic) partners who may all be secondary, all be primary, or two may be primary with a third secondary. It can be open or closed. A triad can be heterosexual or homosexual, but is often the choice of two same sex bisexuals and an opposite sex heterosexual (Anapol, 1997).

MCC leaders may see the question of non-monogamy as a moral issue or as a justice issue. God has not created us to fit neatly into boxes, but as unique manifestations
of the divine in the universe. Naming is powerful and self-naming is a right often denied to minority persons. This reality means that words describing relationships may vary among the participants, and in the end, stories will tell more than outsider descriptions.

The issue of what constitutes a family and what sorts of families the church should bless is not unique to MCC. On Dec. 12, 1998, at the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe, Densen Mafinyani, general secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches urged the WCC to accept African churches that tolerate polygamy. “Many of the church leaders are polygamous”, Mafinyani said. “This is not a problem for the local churches. These leaders are accepted in their churches, their followers accept the cultural dimension where the tribal headman had more than one wife. The local churches see nothing wrong with this (Special Reports WCC, 1998).”
THEORY

Introduction

MCC in 2003 is faced with the issue of defining its rite of Holy Union and deciding what kind of families it will allow to participate in this rite. The discussion takes place in the context of a church culture growing out of centuries of development of attitudes and beliefs regarding the place of sex in human relationships, and living arrangements allowed or approved by various societies. The diversity of religious backgrounds constituting MCC means that members will have attitudes and beliefs shaped by diverse theologies and religious sub-cultures.

From prehistory to modern times, societies have regulated sexual behavior and defined in various ways how families are constituted and what actions make these families valid. How a society structures itself is related to both its biological and theological beliefs.

MCC members who defend the current definition of Holy Union, which restricts the rite to couples, tend to view the question of what constitutes a family as a moral issue: What kind of sexual relationships does God bless? To address this issue requires an examination of the theology of sexuality and sexual ethics. Sexuality is a complex and controversial topic that has been understood differently by peoples in different times. This paper reviews some of the attitudes toward sexuality that influence today’s discussion. (See Sexuality, pp. 64-101) This section develops the idea that non-monogamous relationships can be holy.

The Rite of Holy Matrimony/Rite of Holy Union recognizes the legitimacy of certain family forms and confers God’s blessing on those thus joined (Bylaws, 1998). An
understanding of how human persons have joined together to create families is needed to help in the decision of which families are eligible to participate in Holy Unions. Definitions of “family” have changed and developed over time. A discussion of Biblical households, the changing views of the Western church as it evolved, and changing definitions of the purpose of marriage in Western society are the historical background out of which MCC members’ attitudes have been formed. (See The Family, p.102-120, and Marriage, pp. 121-138)

As a worldwide fellowship, MCC must be aware of contemporary family structures in cultures outside the U.S. Its bylaws should attempt to be inclusive of the diversity of marriage and family patterns and customs in all the cultures in which it has or hopes to have churches. Looking only at North American mainline cultures would give a narrow, xenophobic view of what marriage and family mean to the world’s people. If MCC is to be a “Universal Fellowship” it must be as inclusive and nonrestrictive in its policies as it can be and still maintain its identity as a Christian denomination. Therefore, a brief look at cultures that include complex family structures is needed. (See Polygamy, pp. 139-150)

The rights and privileges of marriage are given or withheld by a combination of social, religious, and legal sanctions. In the United States, legal marriage is granted only to heterosexual, supposedly monogamous couples. In reality, many people live outside this restricted estate in diverse family forms. One form that is beginning to define itself and seek legitimacy socially, is families with more than two partners included in the household unit. MCC, from its inception, has performed the Rite of Holy Union for same-sex couples in spite of the fact that these families are not recognized as valid by the
laws of the land. Now, another disrespected group, not legitimized by the state, looks to MCC for affirmation and inclusion. A look at the contemporary polyamory movement clarifies how these families have formed and how they function. (See Polyamory, pp. 151-176)

Lastly, it must be recognized that this is not merely an esoteric theoretical question. Real people, members and friends of MCC churches, are affected by the bylaws and their implications. Seeking to understand MCC polyamorous families and their needs is also relevant. The Ministry Event (pp. 177-247) attempts to give voice to MCC families of choice who meet neither current legal requirements for valid marriage, nor current definitions of those eligible for Holy Unions in MCC.
Sexuality

If the only defensible position for Christians is that sex belongs in monogamous long-term relationships, then MCC should not provide multiple partner households with a Rite of Holy Union. If other criteria can be used to judge the holiness of sexual relationships, then number of partners to be joined will not be a limiting factor. How has sex been regarded by the historical cultures that have shaped Western Christianity? How do contemporary theologians view the place of sex in human relationships?

PRE-HISTORY

In 1976, artist and art historian Merlin Stone published her theory of the theology (or thealogy) of prehistoric peoples in Europe and the Mediterranean lands. From archeological evidence and the most ancient writings available, Stone (1976) proposes that for thousands of years the primary deity was the Goddess. Numerous female sculptures have been unearthed all over Europe and the Middle East, some dating back as far as 25,000 BCE. Stone understands these to be goddess figures.

Pre-historic cultures were apparently matrilineal and matrilocal; women were the carriers of the family lineage, and families were organized around mothers. This is a logical outcome of the ancient biological belief that babies were made of menstrual blood, perhaps initiated by sexual intercourse. Greeks and Romans also believed that human life is made of a “coagulum” of menstrual blood (Walker, 1988, p. 300). Mothers were revered as the creators of new life. Certain African tribes still maintain that lineage is synonymous with blood, and only women can transmit tribal blood kinship to descendants. Ashanti women say, “I alone can transmit the blood…If my sex die in the
clan then that very clan becomes extinct, for be there one, or a thousand male members left, not one can transmit the blood” (Sanday, 1981, p. 30-31). The most ancient, original mother, who gave birth to the earth itself, came to be worshipped as the Divine Ancestress, or Mother Goddess (Stone, 1976).

Worship in caves, groves, or temples involved sacred sexual rites (Redmond, 1997). There is evidence from many ancient cultures that the high priestess of the Goddess took a male consort once each year. The priestess, embodiment of the Goddess, and her consort (sometimes called her son) enacted a sexual ritual, the hieros gamos, or sacred marriage. The male then became the ruler, or king, for a period of time before he was literally or ritually sacrificed. “The act of sex was considered to be sacred, so holy and precious that it was enacted within the house of the Creatress of heaven, earth and all life. As one of Her many aspects, the Goddess was revered as the patron deity of sexual love” (Stone, 1976, p.154). The hieros gamos was linked to the renewal of the earth in Spring. “Together, through a reenactment of the original sexual act that brought the universe into existence, they regenerated the world…sexual union with the goddess was a metaphor for the release of healing spiritual, psychological, and physical energy” (Redmond, 1997, pp. 83-84).

To serve as a sexual priestess was an honor. “Holy virgins,” unmarried women dedicated to the Goddess, enacted sexual rites of initiation and renewal in the temples (Redmond, 1997). Akkadian qadishtu, Hebrew qedeshot, literally translates as “sacred women” (Stone, 1976). To call these women “temple prostitutes,” as many Christian writers do, is to miss the awe with which sexual intercourse was regarded. There is a separate Hebrew word, zonah, for ordinary prostitutes.
Riane Eisler (1995) proposes that prehistoric myths and rites were also expressions of joy and gratitude for the Goddess’s gifts of love and pleasure, “particularly for that most intense of physical pleasures, the pleasure of sex” (p.59). The Sumerian hymns of the goddess Innana (c.3200 BCE) are overtly sexual, celebrating the pleasures of sex. The goddess invites the shepherd king to “plow my vulva, the horn, the Boat of Heaven.” The body of Innana represents the bounty of nature, love, life, and pleasure. For these ancient people, sex is a sacramental act of communion with nature and with one another. Eisler (1995) sees human sexuality and love, the strivings for connection or oneness, and spiritual striving for union with the divine, as stemming from the same human yearning for connection (p. 171).

This female-centered culture was overcome by a new ideology from the North. As the warlike Indo-European peoples swept across Europe, conquering everything in their path, they brought with them a jealous male deity and patriarchal structures (Stone, 1976). The Indo-European male God was portrayed as a storm god, ruling from high on a mountain, blazing with the light of fire or lightning. Hebrew ideas about God were shaped by this new vision of the conquering warrior God. Yahweh is described in similar terms (Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 5:4), suggesting that the Canaanite deities El and Asharah (or Astarte) were being replaced by the image of the Indo-European warrior god. Elohim (plural of El) becomes the generic word for God, while the goddess is suppressed. Stone (1976) contends that the concept of monotheism reflects the political ideology that places all power in a single dominant male person.

Patriarchal cultures trace lineage through fathers, in a patrilineal pattern. In order for men to know who their children are, it is necessary to control the sexuality of women.
(Crooks & Baur, 2002; Eisler, 1995, Lawrence, 1985; Stone, 1976). “Hebrew women had to be taught to accept the idea that for a woman to sleep with more than one man was evil...Thus premarital virginity and marital fidelity were proclaimed by Levite law as divinely essential for all Hebrew women, the antithesis of the attitudes toward female sexuality held in the religion of the Goddess” (Stone, 1976, p.182). Adultery becomes a property crime against the man who owns the woman (her father or husband) and only applies to married women. Liaisons with single women and recourse to ordinary prostitutes are not prohibited in the Hebrew Law (O’Connell, 1976). The prevailing marriage pattern is polygyny (one patriarch with several wives, concubines, and/or lovers).

Secular prostitutes (zonah) were accepted members of Israelite society (Genesis 38:14; Joshua 2:1ff; I Kings 3:16-27). Ilona Rashkow (2000), Professor of Judaic Studies at NYU Stony Brook, points out that there is no moral judgment in the stories of Tamar, Rahab, or the woman Samson visits in Gaza (Judges 16:1). This view is also taken in the book, *Harlot by the Side of the Road* (Kirsch, 1997), where the author points out that it is Judah who is blamed for not providing Tamar with the husband due her; Tamar is never castigated for playing the harlot. Nevertheless, Israelites were warned against prostituting their daughters (Leviticus 19:29), and priests were not allowed to marry prostitutes (Leviticus 21:7) (Rashkow, 2000).

Sacred prostitutes (qedesha), associated with idolatry, are attacked throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (2 Kings 23:4-14; Jeremiah 2:20; Ezekiel 23:37), and Israel as an unfaithful wife is a common metaphor (Rashkow, 2000). Deuteronomy 23:18-19 forbids both male and female Israelites to become sacred sex practitioners. The prophets issue
repeated warnings about what will happen to Israel if cult prostitution continues. Nonetheless, there is evidence that fertility rites were practiced in ancient Israel and that there were both *qedes* and *qudeshim* in both Israel and Judah during the monarchy, though often expelled from Judah (1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:47; 2 Kings 23:7; Hosea 4:14) (Rashkow, 2000).

Eisler (1995), Rashkow (2000), and Stone (1976), as well as other feminist theologians, see a sex-positive, Goddess-centered strain in the Hebrew Scriptures running parallel to, and in competition with, the dominant patriarchal point of view (Jeremiah 44:15-19).

In Genesis 1:27, human beings are said to be created "in the image of God, male and female." The entire creation is declared by God to be "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Matthew Fox (1983, 1991) teaches that the gift of sexuality is part of God's good creation, an aspect of human relating included in God's original blessing. Eros, for Fox (1983), includes celebration of all sensuality, play, and compassion. Fox also finds the "invention" of sexual reproduction “ushered in an unprecedented celebration of diversity…Novelty abounds as a result of sexual transfer. Individuation deepens and develops. The acceptance of variety and diversity and the celebration of both are key to our fitting into the universe” (1991, p. 46-47).

Genesis 2 relates a very anthropomorphic God molding the earth creature (*adam*) from the earth (*adamah*), then taking a side of it to make a suitable companion because, “it is not good for the human to be alone” (Genesis 2:18-24). The obvious delight of the two on meeting is unabashedly presented in Genesis 2:22-23. The end of the chapter says that for this reason a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they
become one flesh” (v.24). This reflects a matrilocal system (the man leaves his family for his wife’s) still in competition with patriarchal structures. The writer then declares, “the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." Phyllis Trible (1978) carefully exegetes this passage to conclude that, not only is sex not original sin, but it is a part of God’s blessed creation.

The Song of Songs, also called Canticles or Song of Solomon, in the Hebrew Scriptures, celebrates the pleasures of sexual love. Renita Weems (1997) points out the sensuousness of the imagery: taste (2:4; 4:11; 5:1), touch (7:6-9), smell (1:12-14; 4:16) and the sound of each other’s voice (p.370). Weems (1992) suggests that the book was written to assert the woman’s right to the lover, against the social pressures that sought to keep them apart. This was a couple that the patriarchal social norms of the time disapproved. Whether their differences were of class, ethnic background, or race, the poet’s message, according to Weems (1992), advocates for the woman’s right to initiate, enjoy, and long for the erotic. It upholds “sexual fulfillment, not mere procreation; uninhibited love, not bigoted emotions” (p.160).

Elizabeth Stuart (1997) believes that the lovers are illicit because they are unmarried. The responses of the family and the watchmen, who try to keep them apart, do not diminish their love. Love moves them to physical expression (sex). The pure pleasure of sex is also celebrated in Proverbs 5:18-19: "Rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you be intoxicated always by her love."

The story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) illustrates the struggle between the competing ideologies. The snake, always associated with the Goddess and Her worship
(Stone, 1975; Walker, 1988), is the villain in the story; the patriarchal God is in control, the woman is the cause of humanity’s fall from grace; sex is the origin of evil (Stone, 1975). For centuries the cultures called Christendom used this interpretation of the story as founding myth and accepted a hierarchical view as the God-given, unchangeable structure of the universe. The origin of the sexism that pervades modern cultures occurs here, in the ancient dominance of invading patriarchal cultures over female-centered Goddess-worshipping cultures. Control of female sexuality has been the overriding need that drives the formation of much sex-negative ethical thinking.

ANCIENT CULTURES

The Jewish point of view developed in this ancient Mediterranean world with its struggles between the patriarchy and the earlier culture. Raymond Lawrence, Jr. (1985) says that in Jewish history coitus has been consistently and unambiguously valued for the sheer joy and pleasure of it. The only one in ancient Israel who was required to be monogamous was the high priest in Jerusalem. Even God could be conceptualized as polygamous; both Ezekiel 23 and Jeremiah 31:32 describe God as the husband of two unfaithful wives. When King David orders Bathsheba to come to him, then covers her ensuing pregnancy by having her husband die in battle, it is not sexual sin that the prophet Nathan condemns; it is the use of power to take the “goods” of someone less powerful (II Samuel 12:7).

Fertility was vitally important to the economic survival of an ancient household. Israel’s family stories are full of infertility and the attempts to overcome it. Hagar is used as a surrogate mother for Sarah (Genesis 16 and 21); polygamy assures that all fertile women can become mothers; the "wisest person on earth" has 700 wives and 300...
concubines; and much of the law regarding sexual behavior is designed to insure large families (Leviticus 15:19ff) (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997). If intercourse is forbidden during a woman’s menstrual period and for seven days thereafter, it will be resumed on or about ovulation time, insuring the greatest likelihood of pregnancy (Crooks & Baur, 2002).

Having many children is highly valued, and barrenness is a disgrace, and evidence of God's disfavor (Genesis 30:1, 23; 1 Samuel 2:5; 2 Samuel 6:20-23; Psalm 127:3-5; 128:3-4). Sterility and the cutting off of progeny, leading to the demise of the family line, is the ultimate curse (Deuteronomy 28:18) (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997). The law requires a man to father children by his deceased brother's widow to provide heirs and guarantee that the land would stay in the family (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Virginity and celibacy in ancient Israel are viewed as a rebellion against the divine command, a rejection of creation itself (Lawrence, 1989).

In Israel's theological reflection, reality was viewed as a household wherein God was father and mother, husband, and go'el (redeemer), while Israel was the son, daughter, wife, debt servant, slave, resident alien, and orphan. The household became the theological lens for viewing and understanding the identity of God, Israel, creation, and the nations and the relationships among them. In this interpretation, in all questions of the moral life, humans are to view reality as a cosmic household in which God serves as parent and redeemer; to see all people, including the poor, as family members who are to be nurtured, protected, and loved as the self; and to understand creation as the gift of God to all human beings (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997, p.252).
In the New Testament world, the fundamental values of Mediterranean societies revolve around honor and shame. A man maintains honor insofar as he contributes to the status, power, and reputation of his kinship group. Aggressiveness, virility, sexual prowess, and the siring of sons are valued for men. Women are expected to preserve the family honor by guarding their own sexual purity. "Because they ultimately have the power that provides legitimate offspring, they must be protected from outsider males and therefore controlled. Women are the weak members of the family for whom sexuality is irresistible and sex drive indiscriminate"(Osiek & Balch, 1997, p.39).

The Greeks saw love between men as preferable to love between a man and a woman, because men were nobler and could be true "soul mates," whereas women were unintelligent and uninteresting creatures whose only redeeming quality was their ability to bear children. Women, slaves, and children were owned by men and used sexually at the will of free men. Women's quarters were separated from those of men architecturally and wives and daughters were kept secluded as much as possible to ensure their sexual purity (Osiek & Balch, 1997).

Roman categories of sexuality were "active" and "passive". Adult male citizens were expected to be active penetrators of women, slaves (of any gender), and boys. Strength and aggression were characteristics of men. Adult males who allowed themselves to be "used" as the passive partner in a sexual encounter were scorned as "soft, weak, androgynes" suffering from the "disease of femaleness" (theleian noson), rendering them unsuitable warriors (Osiek & Balch, 1997), hence the King James translation of malakos, whose basic meaning is “soft,” as "effeminate" (Helminiak, 1994).
The custom of separate dining was being challenged during New Testament times. In conservative households, men and women dined in separate areas, or men reclined to eat while women sat nearby and would be expected to leave for the after-dinner drinking and philosophical discussion. Only prostitutes or *hetaerae* would be allowed with the men on these occasions. But Roman women were more and more inclined to include themselves in dinners, sometimes even reclining to eat with the men. Baths, too, were being built where men and women were allowed to bathe together in the nude (Osiek & Balch, 1997).

Lawrence (1989) sees the era in which Christianity was born as a time of conflict between a syncretistic Greco-Roman civil religion that was essentially dualistic, seeing the body as the tomb of the exiled soul, and an Hebraic wholistic sense of body/mind/spirit as the creation and concern of God. Plato taught that the body (*soma*) is the tomb (*sema*) of the soul (*psyche*). The Hebrew Scriptures use the word *nephesh* (often translated as “soul”) to mean the entire self, the whole person, the innermost being as well as the body. There is no dualism in Jewish anthropology, but rather a psychosomatic unity. “In Jewish theology flesh is neither evil nor antithetical to the ‘higher’ parts of man. Flesh is rather the whole of man’s creaturely experience, physical and mental” (Lawrence, 1989).

For the Greco/Roman philosophers (especially the Stoics) sex was associated with the body and shared its low status. Socrates and Plato viewed all physical sexuality in any form as inferior to abstinence. Sex was part of the encumbrance the soul jettisons as it rises to the divine, or as divine power increases. This devaluing of sex led toward asceticism and sado-masochism motivated by contempt for the flesh (Lawrence, 1989).
When Jesus joins other rabbis arguing for limiting grounds for divorce, he begins to talk about men committing adultery against their wives. The disciples protest. His response is to outline the diversity of the sexual minority persons of his day.

Matthew 19:8 (NRSV) He [Jesus] said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” 10 His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” 11 But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs, who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

Jesus’ taxonomy of those to whom the usual rules of marriage do not apply includes: A. those who are born that way, B. those who have been made that way by others, and C. those who choose to identify themselves with this group, probably by avoiding marriage.

Childlessness, or more properly, lack of an heir, was the criterion for "eunuch" status. Even castrated eunuchs can have erections and perform intercourse; there are simply no sperm in the semen (Crooks & Baur, 2002). Greek and Roman men often castrated their young lovers so that they would retain their boyish looks (catamites). Jesus, as far as we know, never married and did not have any children. As such, he was a
social deviant, and is included in the third category of persons who became eunuchs for the sake of the kindom.7

"Jesus' refusal to settle down and marry was undoubtedly more socially deviant than the Greek and Roman practice of marrying and raising a family while having homosexual relationships on the side. By making this statement, Jesus identifies himself boldly with the eunuch, whom his society considered sexually deviant, Queer" (Kolakowski, 1997, p.44).

In today's understanding of sexual orientation, the gender of the preferred partner is the criterion by which we assign a label (Crooks & Baur, 2000). The same taxonomy Jesus used still works, however, for the sexual minority group called "homosexual." Most are probably born to be gay, some are driven to same-sex relating by abuse, some may choose to identify as "gay" or "lesbian" who could form solid long-term relationships with either sex as their primary relationship but choose to live as members of the queer community for personal or political reasons. Jesus doesn't seem to care. He merely acknowledges that the rules don't apply to everyone (Wilson, 1995).

Paul's preference for celibacy, and concession to marriage (if you “burn,”) is balanced by his advice to husbands and wives not to deny each other "conjugal rights." He allows for diversity of sexual gifts: "Each has a particular gift from God; one having one kind, another a different kind” (1 Corinthians 7:1-7, NRSV). Writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul seems to have been dealing with two distinctly different trends: the expectation that men would use prostitutes for the relief of sexual tension, and an asceticism that would equate sexual continence with spiritual advancement (I Corinthians 5-7).
Paul's discussion of sexuality contrasts significantly both with the concerns of the state--with Augustus' concern that all citizens marry and have children--and of some Corinthians who wanted to impose celibacy on all. Paul argues for options, for more than one way to live a holy life (Osiek and Balch, 1997, p.116).

According to Lawrence (1989), “The first Christians were all Jews, and the church’s sacred documents are Jewish. For the first 1500 years of its history, the church increasingly repudiated its Jewish roots and looked to Athens and Rome, so to speak, for its valorization of sexuality” (p.30). While it can be argued that Lawrence has over generalized in coming to this conclusion, it is clear that early Christianity grew as a variant of Judaism that rapidly accommodated to Greek and Roman philosophical and cultural notions. Fiorenza (1985) traces what she sees as the co-optation of an earlier, egalitarian Jesus movement by patriarchal models of the family adopted by the early church.

The forms and legal restrictions on Hebrew and early Christian households are not to be taken as models of correct moral relating, nor as prescriptions for all times and places, but as stories of the attempts of ancient peoples to live faithfully and responsibly within the social structures created by the needs for survival and identity in their times.

The Gnostics attempted to create a synthesis of the Judeo-Christian religion and Greco-Roman spirituality. They made sexual renunciation the centerpiece of Christian morality. Lawrence (1989) believes, “In the short term Gnosticism was defeated, but in the long term it continues to thrive in much of what is popularly known as Christian
spirituality” (p. 95). Gnostic dualism, viewing the body and sex as antithetical to spiritual growth, continues to influence modern American society’s attitudes.

PATRISTIC ERA

Much of the Christian tradition has regarded sex as a regrettable necessity for the production of Christian children. At first, expecting the immanent return of Jesus to bring immortality to believers, with no more need to produce future generations, Christians observed sexual continence, fasting, and vigils in anticipation of the transformation of life to come and as a sign of their shifting allegiance from the present world to the world to come.

In the fourth century, Jerome insisted that celibacy, even within marriage, was required for holiness. Augustine, in response, said that marriage produces three good effects: progeny, fidelity and sacrament. Children, avoiding concupiscence, and modeling the relationship between Christ and the church, were part of God’s original plan, but innocent sex in the Garden of Eden could not have included passion. Ejaculation and orgasm (“hot pleasure”) were sinful and passed the sin of Adam on to the children thus conceived. This doctrine of “original sin” required that children be baptized to become children of God (Ruether, 2000, p. 46).

Many movements that exalted sexual renunciation saw it as a leveling choice that overcame hierarchies of gender, class, and ethnic identity, as well as a means of standing against systems of social dominance…By contrast the ordained leadership of the church was mostly married. 1Timothy advises that priests and
bishops should be *patresfamilias*, and in the fourth century most priests and bishops were married and the fathers of children (Ruether, 2000, p. 46).

**MIDDLE AGES**

The Eastern Church ruled in 692 that deacons and priests who were already married before ordination must remain so, those who were single at the time of ordination must remain celibate. This controversy eventually led to the great schism of 1054. The argument for priestly celibacy was made on the basis of cultic purity. The priests of the Old Testament were to abstain from sex before offering ritual sacrifice; Christian priests conducted daily sacrifice and therefore must maintain a permanent state of ritual purity. This also severely restricted the roles of women in the church and led to the requirement that women be veiled and cover their hands when they received the Eucharist. Wives and children of priests were to be discarded, or even punished (Ruether, 2000).

The emphasis on sex as sin is reflected in the penitentials, manuals for priests naming appropriate penance for specific sins, written and used from the mid-6th century to the mid-12th century. Before the penitentials, there was much variation in what a particular priest might think was sinful and in how severely the same act was “punished” by one priest or another. 25% to 45% of the content of these penitentials dealt with sexual activities. Long periods of abstinence were often required, and any non-reproductive sex was condemned. Positions other than man-on-top were forbidden, sometimes because they were thought to be less likely to result in pregnancy and sometimes because they challenged the patriarchal right to be “on top” of all household matters (Lawrence, 1989, Weisner-Hanks, M, 2000).
In 1139 the 2nd Lateran Council imposed celibacy for priests and deacons. Married men expecting ordination were required to separate from their wives. According to John Boswell (1980), the century from 1050 to 1150 witnessed the most intense flowering of Christian homosexuality in the church’s history. A large body of gay literature from this period supports this contention. Lateran III in 1179 was the first ecumenical council to rule against homosexuality (Boswell, 1980). Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) in his *Summa Theologica* maintained that sexual organs were designed for procreation and any other use of them was against God’s will, heretical, and a “crime against nature.” This crime included masturbation, coitus interruptus (withdrawal), oral or anal sex, and homosexuality as wasteful of semen, and *luxuria*, an “excess of pleasure” (Jordan, 1997).

Throughout the “Dark Ages” Christian monks, nuns, and other mandatory celibates complained of being visited by seductive demons (males called incubi, females called succubae.) Succumbing to these demons produced the sinful results of nocturnal ejaculations or orgasms, almost as evil as the prohibited fornication (Lawrence, 1989). The modern understanding is that nocturnal orgasms are normal, natural, and universal. Not everyone remembers erotic dreams, but they are experienced regularly by adults and sometimes by children. Ultrasound technology shows even fetuses in the womb experience erections and smile when they have them (Crooks & Baur, 2002).

The celibacy rule for priests and deacons did not enjoy universal compliance. There was a tax paid to the bishop by priests for each illegitimate child. Many of the popes fathered children. Innocent VIII (1484-92) fathered three children, whom he
refused to disown; Alexander VI (1492-1503) sired six children; Paul III (1534-49) had a mistress and three children while he was a Cardinal (Lawrence, 1989).

REFORMATION

The Protestant Reformers regarded sex *within marriage* as an ethical good. The reformer’s emphasis on the Bible saw a return to the Jewish appreciation of the body and sex. Luther defended sex and marriage as better than celibacy. Even before his own marriage, he helped monastic priests and nuns escape the convent and find mates (Lawrence, 1989). He was contemptuous of vows of chastity, regarding them as “godless” and a “disservice to Christ.” “Nature does not cease to do its work when there is voluntary chastity…To put it bluntly, seed…if it does not flow into the flesh will flow into the nightshirt,” wrote Luther in 1522 (Lawrence, 1989, p.176). Nonetheless, statutes regulating sexual behavior were stricter in Protestant controlled areas than in Catholic cultures (Lawrence, 1989).

The Protestant Reformation and the accompanying Catholic renewal movements both sought new control over the sexual behavior of their constituents. City-run brothels, although created to provide for the sexual needs of single men, were visited by married men and vowed celibates as well. The civil authorities saw this as prevention of rape or seduction of “respectable” women. Bishops regularly collected fines from priests for children they sired through their illicit concubines. Both Catholic and Protestant factions called for strict enforcement of celibacy and/or marital chastity. Each side accused the other of gross misbehavior and sought enforcement of church laws by civil authorities.
and their new morals police. Others accused church authorities of all being “sodomites” eager to regulate other’s sexual behavior (Reuther, 2000).

Luther saw marriage as an ordinance of creation given in Paradise before the Fall. This was in contrast to the Augustinian view of the debasement of sex and the impossibility since the Fall of engaging in the sexual act without sin. In Luther’s view original sex would have seen the woman subject to the man with lust-free, delightful sex resulting in many children without pain. The celibate ideal was wrong, Luther said, because part of the design of God from the beginning was to unite men and women in the procreative union. Celibacy was also impossible because the universal male lust that resulted from the Fall could only be constrained by marriage. Luther did not see marriage as a sacrament, because it was an ordinance of nature, not of Christ (Ruether, 2000).

Luther’s point of view separated “secular” life (and the body) from “sacred” concerns. For the Reformers, all bodies were natural, finite, prone to sin, and distant from God. Marriage became a contract between two persons, with God as witness. Only baptism and Eucharist were accepted as sacraments ordained by Christ in Scripture (Reuther, 2000).

The prevailing Catholic view saw a dialogue between creation and redemption: Christ renewed the union of God with creation that had been broken in the Fall; the body could be made holy by rejecting sex; the virginal female body prefigures the resurrected spiritual body. Sex was the “forbidden fruit” to which Eve had succumbed, causing the fall from grace of all humanity, but Christ, as the God/man, the second Adam, reversed the effects of the Fall. Matter, sanctified in the appropriate ritual, could be the means of grace. Marriage could confer the grace to control sex, a necessary action for procreation.
of more Christian body/souls. Like ordination, the change that was created by the sacrament was permanent, an “indelible mark” (Reuther, 2000).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and others elevated human reason and brought on the Enlightenment with its challenge to authority, including church authority. Historical criticism arose as a way of interpreting the Bible using reason. One result was the privatization of sex. The accepted morality of sex only within marriage was not attacked, but it became a private matter, not a source for theological reflection.

MODERN HISTORY

At about the same time, a religious revival known as Pietism, the Evangelical movement, or the Great Awakening was occurring in Europe and the United States. There was a strong appeal to emotion as well as reason and to listening to the leading of the Holy Spirit. All aspects of life were held under scrutiny and anything “frivolous” was declared sinful (dancing, card playing, drinking, smoking, and so on).

Early Methodists were separated by gender and marital status. Wesley seems to have been conflicted about sex, viewing it sometimes as a distraction, but also asserting that it is not possible to avoid all pleasure without destroying the body. Wesley chastised Catholics for devaluing marriage and asserted its holiness, while at the same time counseling toward the suppression of sexual impulses (Lawrence, 1989).

Such thinkers as Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, and Freud have influenced western culture. Friedrich Engels wrote of monogamous marriage as an example of class oppression of women by men, spawned by the ownership ethic of capitalism (Kilbride, 1994). “The sexual revolution in the late 20th century was the fruition of their combined
challenge to the established forms of sexual valorization in the Western middle class, both Protestant and Roman Catholic” (Lawrence, 1989, p.222).

Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, two of the 20th century’s leading Protestant theologians, both challenged traditional Christian sexual ethics, not so much in their writings as in their lives. Both, sons of the Enlightenment, kept their sexual lives private, but lived a kind of liberation from the norm of monogamy. Barth lived for 40 years with two women, both of whom were his sexual partners, his wife Nelly who bore him five children, and his “secretary” Charlotte von Kirschbaum, or Lolly, who was his constant companion and co-author. Barth’s writings accent the creatureliness of humans whose place is always under heaven. He wrote, “The command of God requires no liberation from sex. Nor does it require any denial or repression of sex” (Church Dogmatics III/4, in Lawrence, 1989, p. 236).

Furthermore, according to Barth, human sexual relationships reflect the relationships of the Trinity. God lives in relationship; our maleness or femaleness and the relationships we form out of it are the image of God in us. Barth believed that the Hebrew requirement of marriage for everyone was still in effect for Christians. Liturgical weddings appalled him. He wanted marriage removed from both church and civil authority. Nonetheless, Barth wrote of monogamous marriage as a command of Jesus (Lawrence, 1989).

Paul Tillich and his wife Hannah had lovers outside their marriage. Hannah, who was bisexual, took both male and female lovers. They even participated in some swinging (wife-sharing). Most of this was kept secret until after the deaths of Tillich & Barth, neither of whom reflected theologically on their own lifestyles. Lawrence (1989) sees
them as harbingers of the sexual revolution to come: “Each in his own way demonstrated in practice a radical critique of the Western sacralization of monogamy which must be taken seriously” (p.241).

In the Roman Catholic tradition, even before Vatican II, Catholic scripture scholars began to publish new interpretations of biblical passages, using historical/critical methods. European moral theologians such as Josef Fuchs reminded Catholics that human nature exists in different time periods that demand different approaches to ethical thinking. Bernard Haring argued for Christian situation ethics that would understand both the biblical world and the modern world (O’Connell, 1976, 1978). Vatican II liturgical reform led to innovations such as the vernacular mass, the altar among the people, and more involvement for lay ministers. Moral theologians began to publish views that dissent from traditional Church teachings and demand a reassessment of how moral theology is done (O’Connell, 1976). Needless to say, all of this change was not without controversy.

The new approach precipitated discussions around revelation, authority, and the relationship of the magisterium (the Catholic church’s teaching authority, concentrated in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the pope) to the use of reason and modern scholarship in the work of interpretation (Brown, 1981). Moral theologians challenged the authority of the hierarchical teaching office on specific ethical issues where “one cannot obtain the type of certitude that excludes the possibility of error” (Curran, 1979).

In 1977, Anthony Kosnik led a committee of the Catholic Theological Society of America that published Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought,
proposing that Catholic sexual ethics stop centering on procreation, natural law and the physical contours of sexual acts, and focus instead on creative growth toward personal integration. Such growth and integration would be promoted by sexual expressions that are self-liberating, other-enriching, honest, faithful, socially responsible, life serving and joyous. These are the marks of a gospel ethic of love (Kosnik, Carroll, Cunningham, Modras, & Schulte, 1977).

Recognizing several levels of moral evaluation from abstract principle to concrete decision, the committee asserts, “The well-formed individual conscience responsive to principles, values, and guidelines remains the ultimate subjective source for evaluating the morality of particular sexual expressions” (Kosnik, Carroll, Cunningham, Modras, & Schulte, 1977, p.98). In its formulation of pastoral guidelines, the committee affirms that “where there is sincere affection, responsibility, and the germ of authentic human relationship—in other words, where there is love—God is surely present” (Kosnik, Carroll, Cunningham, Modras, & Schulte, 1977, p.218). Fr. Kosnik was removed from the faculty at Sts. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Orchard Lake. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) condemned the committee’s report, *Human Sexuality* (1977) on July 13, 1979.

In the same year (1979), the CDF began correspondence with Rev. Charles Curran, professor of moral theology at the Catholic University of America, regarding his dissenting views on the subject of contraception and other issues of sexuality. From Curran’s point of view the argument was about the place of dissent in Catholic moral teaching (Curran, 1986). In September of 1985, Fr. Curran received an “invitation” from
the Congregation to recant (McCormick, 1986). Refusing to do so, he was stripped of his “canonical mission,” his approval to teach as a Catholic theologian (McCormick, 1986b).

Richard McCormick, S.J. (1986b) writes in response: “Theology is a public enterprise…Theology is not a closed society of arcane theory-spinners. It is a reflection on the faith of the church” (p.429). Fr. Curran’s departure from Catholic University of America unleashed a torrent of discussion on American academic freedom and the authority of Rome over Catholic persons’ behavior (Curran & McCormick, 1986). Cardinal Ratzinger of the CDF defends the traditional morality with the argument that it is based, not on the evaluation of the individual, but upon the Revelation of God, and upon natural law, the “instructions for use” inscribed “objectively and indelibly” in man’s (sic) creation (Ratzinger, 1985).

Christine Gudorf (1986) calls the Catholic church to faithfulness to Vatican II by acceptance of certain basic assumptions and conclusions: 1) Human knowledge of God is always mediated by human persons. 2) God communicates with human beings through experience. 3) God’s love for human persons is for the whole person, for all aspects of human life, material as well as physical. 4) Human experience is complex. 5) The welfare of human beings must be the priority of Christians. 6) Calculation of consequences must include the effect on all actors and witnesses, including future generations. 7) Suffering and sacrifice are not moral goods; pleasure and convenience are not moral evils. Moral evil is harm done to human beings; moral good is that which contributes to human welfare. Sexuality is not flawed because it is pleasurable. 8) Women are ends, not means, moral agents, not objects. 9) No system of absolute moral laws can be legitimated on the basis of the life and teachings of Jesus. 10) Conscience must not be coerced.
Other Catholic voices arguing for a new look at issues of sexuality include John McNeill, former Jesuit, and apologist for the gay community, who accepted an order to remain silent on the issue for ten years, but was then expelled from the Society of Jesus when he refused to discontinue all ministry to gays. He is a founder of Dignity, a support group for gay and lesbian Catholics (McNeill, 1976, 1985, 1988, 1993). Robert F. Francoeur is another Jesuit who is also a sexologist and sex educator. He has written several reference books, as well as books on assisted reproduction, and *Hot and Cool Sex: Cultures in Conflict*, a description of a sexually open community near Los Angeles and a detailed theology and sociology of sexually open marriages. His latest book, *Sex, Love, and Marriage in the 21st Century*, is a collection of biographies of people of faith living in polyamorous situations (Francoeur, R.T; Cornog, M; and Perper, T; 1999).

Lawrence (1989) posits a new sex ethics based on Ricoeur’s (1964) concept of “carnal reciprocity,” a sex-positive ethics valuing sexual self-actualization over innocence, abstinence, and self-denial. Principles of this ethical paradigm include: 1. Commitment to mutuality 2. Political implications of any pair-bonding, including an awareness that no particular form is always preferable 3. A certain measure of fear and awe of the experience of sexuality itself. Carnal reciprocity regards sexual self-actualization as a good that needs no justification. Not only is genital expression valued, but also “the whole body and its polymorphous forms of gratification are to be affirmed” (Lawrence, 1989, p.249). Lawrence supports this view theologically by the Jewish and Christian teachings that the whole body is resurrected. Eating and drinking together were made the central act of early Christian gatherings. “In the Hebraic vision spirit enlivens the body—the whole body” (Lawrence, 1989, p. 249).
The Hebrew word often translated “soul” is *nephesh*, referring to the whole self, including the body. In Genesis 2, when God breathes into the human, it becomes a living *nephesh*, the breath of life being both spiritual and physical. We are enspirited bodies and embodied spirits (Mollenkott, 1992). Lawrence believes that Christianity has strayed from this biblical idea of wholeness, citing Pope Pius XII in 1958: “man is created, first and foremost, not for this world or for his life in time, but for heaven and eternity” (Lawrence, 1989, p. 250).

In contrast Lawrence (1989) believes, “To refuse sexual self-actualization is to deny a significant, even crucial, aspect of human creatureliness” (p. 250). Lawrence (1989) says that celibacy might be chosen as a temporary option comparable to fasting, but, in his view, never could be as holy as sexual expression. “We have no warrant to refuse categorically the pleasure of sex, and even much less so to refuse it and claim such refusal as a testament to special virtue” (Lawrence, 1989, p. 251).

Methodist James B. Nelson (1992) articulates an incarnational theology. Among the problems he sees stemming from inherited dualities (body/spirit, female/male) are the failure of the church to speak to the increasing pluralism of marital and family styles. He attributes that failure to fear of weakening already threatened institutions, and to discrepancies between official church teachings and actual sexual practices of church members. Nelson focuses on incarnation as embodiment, being made flesh, arguing that to apply this to Jesus alone fosters a docetic view that makes Jesus the exception and removes our own experience from participation in the ongoing revelation of God in the world. Rather, Nelson (1992) believes that:
The marvelous paradox is that Jesus empties himself of claims to be the exclusive embodiment of God, and in that self-emptying opens the continuing possibility for all other persons. The union of God and humanity in Jesus was a moral and personal union—a continuing possibility for all persons” (Nelson, 1992, p. 52).

Nelson (1992) hopes that this more inclusive view of incarnation will lead to our “bodying forth” more of God’s reality now, creating more justice and peace and joyous fulfillment of creaturely bodily life, helping us experience the resurrection of the body now. The human body is language; we do not just use words, we are words. “In Christ we are redefined as body-words of love, and such body-life in us is the radical sign of God’s love for the world and of the divine immediacy in the world” (Nelson, 1992, p. 52).

Carter Heyward (1984) uses the concept of “godding” in the world as the purpose of humans. “Whether or not we name ‘God,’ whether or not we are even aware of God, much less able to celebrate God, all creative participation in the making of love in the world is inspired by God…It is time for Christians to celebrate humanity and, in so doing, to bring God to life” (Heyward, 1984, p.190-191). Heyward (1984) honors the body as sacred and valuable, the ground of all holiness.

There is nothing higher, nothing more holy. It is nonsense, it is wrong, to contrast God with the body. Be it the individual human body, or the body of humanity itself, or indeed, the body of all that was created: the creation…If God is worth our bother and if the life of our brother Jesus means anything worth our knowing, it is that the body is godly, the body is holy, without qualification. Our hands are God’s hands in the world. Our
hearts are God’s heart in the world. God pulsating. God beating. God yearning and open and growing in history. Our suffering and our tears are God’s pain and trauma in history. Our laughter and our pleasure are God’s own joy in history. Our work and our commitments are God’s activity in this world. Our sexualities, our expressions of sexuality, our lovemaking in this world, is God’s own expressiveness, God’s own lovemaking, in history. When a human being reaches out to comfort, to touch, to bridge the gap separating each of us from everyone else, God comes to life in that act of reaching, of touching, of bridging. The act is love and God is love. And when we love, we god…If we are as fully human as we are able to be, and Jesus suggested we are able to be, then we are godders, we god—human beings/created bodies bringing God to life again, and again (Heyward, 1984, p. 140).

Heyward (1984) understands women and gay men as having a special place in a theology of incarnation, because they have been associated with the body and have come to the realization that our bodies are ourselves.

And it is as bodies that we share creative power…come to know ourselves, and one another and come into a power that moves among us, between us, within us, inspiring, encouraging us toward the realization of what may be best for all of us….mutual relation. Just relation. Relation on earth between and among human beings and other creatures—all of us living bodies. Relation that is God’s incarnation—the making in-carnate, em-bodying, of our power in relation; the making incarnate of love (Heyward, 1984, p. 198).
Episcopal Bishop John Spong (1988) argues that in proscribing all but married, heterosexual relationships, the church is not meeting the needs of its dissident children who, for a variety of reasons are not able or do not choose to live under those conditions. Spong (1988) poses the question, "What makes sex holy or unholy?" It clearly isn't a paper from the state, nor a ceremony performed in a church. Much exploitation goes on in many such sanctioned unions, while much spiritual growth and joy can be found in relationships outside the bounds. Gay and lesbian Christians and unmarried co-habiting heterosexuals challenge the church to help them determine what is moral and what is immoral in sexuality.

In the voice of lesbian Christian writer Kathy Rudy (1997):

As Christians, we are called to reveal ourselves to one another in order to become part of one another, in order--finally--to participate in the body of Christ. We want a church that offers guidelines for thinking about when sex is good and when it's bad and then celebrates with us and for us when we create and sustain sexual relationships that follow those moral parameters. The Christian tradition gives us a way to understand our gay lives and gay sex as good, not as something that needs to be sequestered in private space (p. 221).

Rudy (1997) sees the gay male community as a model for morality that includes more than just pair-bondings, but celebrates sex within "the community." She argues that sex within such communities is not anonymous, neither is it promiscuous since partners are chosen because they belong to that community, because they show signs that they participate in that world. It is relational because it functions as a way of including members into itself as an entity larger than themselves.
The sex that produces unitivity also produces a desire to be open, to include others. Once we feel the joy that accompanies the breaking down of our own spiritual and physical boundaries, we are able to feel more open about the prospect of sharing new life with and in others. Once the bonds of individualism are broken, we desire to bring others in. We may do so by conceiving children, or by understanding the new life in the union, itself, to be the thing that has been created (Rudy, 1997, p.205).

Elsa Tamiz (1982), liberation theologian, believes that God gives power to oppressed people and is with them because their efforts and way of life are directed to the concretization of love. Love in action is God in action. God shows himself (sic) as calling for the concretization of love and the transformation of nature to create a just world.

MCC’s Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson (1997) believes that the freedom to share one's body sexually is an intrinsic right, and the purpose need not be greater than the sheer, singular value of pleasure: "I still think that Christians could spend centuries recovering the intrinsic goodness of God's creation of the gift of sexuality and sexual pleasure without overdoing it" (Wilson, 1997, p. 31). It is repression that leads to obsession; we are only as sick as our secrets. W. H. Auden said, "As a rule, it is the pleasure-haters who were unjust." Wilson points out, "They were also, as a rule, Christian. Pleasure-hating is not a virtue, it is not moral excellence, and it shrivels and distorts the human spirit" (Wilson, 1997, p. 31).

If hospitality is the virtue of treating guests or strangers warmly, and the body is seen as a personal home, then sharing it with others is the practice of bodily hospitality:
If my body is my physical home, I am challenged to view my body in terms of "at-home-ment." My body as the "temple of my own being and of God's presence within me." To relate sexually is to invite another into my body/home/space. To treat others "warmly" in my sexual relating, to be hospitable, might begin to express the poles of value of safety, and freedom and celebration.

The Church, spiritual home for Christians, is Christ's body. Jesus, I believe, exercised and exercises bodily hospitality toward us. The image is powerful and unequivocal. We are participants, included, incarnated, and incorporated in Christ's body (Wilson, 1997, p. 32).

The body of Christ, the Church, must always be open to newcomers. Metropolitan Community Churches practice open communion hoping that even those who are doubtful and hesitant will come and find healing and welcome. This is a model of inclusivity that makes a theological statement about our God's willingness to accept and affirm and include all who come. An invitation to come to the table is an invitation to come home and know the love of God. As Wilson (1997) states, "By incarnating a Christ with permeable boundaries, we risk, I suppose, many things. But we affirm that Christ in us is clear and strong enough to withstand the fuzziness of fewer rules and barriers. Safety and freedom are twin issues that challenge our spiritual body" (p. 33).

Christ becomes one in spirit with not only the church as a collective, but also with each individual believer. Paul’s advice to Christian households in Ephesians 5:21-33 says that Christ is the head of the church and becomes “one flesh” with it just as a husband and wife become “one flesh.” He then describes the individuals in the church as
“members of Christ’s body.” Christ becomes “husband” to many “wives” (men, women, children, and others). Christ and the church become “one in spirit” as the church remembers itself and unites with Christ in a mystical union.

Rudy (1997) urges us to redefine the traditional goods of sex: unitivity and procreativity:

We must strive to recapture definitions of unitivity and procreativity to encompass those sexual practices that have united us with each other and with God...We are all trying to escape meaninglessness in our lives. We don't want to look back at our ties to other people as a waste of time. We want to escape the hurt that accompanies not belonging anywhere. Some of us do this with people of the same sex, others with opposite-sex persons. Some of us do this by having long-term, monogamous relationships, others by living in communities where love, support, and belonging exist in different patterns. In any case, the pertinent question is not which partner or pattern is the only ethical one, but rather which kinds of sexual interventions change our lives and make us part of one another, which acts unite us into one body, and which contexts fight meaninglessness...

We need to talk about what it means to be united in sex; we need to investigate methods of opening ourselves to receive the soul of another; we need to discern what spiritual gifts we need to keep ourselves vulnerable and open to the other; we need to think about when power operates inappropriately or unethically in a sexual encounter. We need to stop worrying about the difference between monogamy and promiscuity and identify what allows sex to be moral and good (Rudy, 1997, p. 212-213).
Wilson (1997) contends that lying breeds evil and Queer people have been encouraged to lie by the dominant culture. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" as a strategy (mandated in the military and practiced by many mainline churches) is an example of how this works out in practice. "You can be gay or lesbian, just don't act gay or tell us about it" means "We will accept you if you agree to lie to us about who you are and who you love." It's a frightening thing when lying becomes a requirement for the leadership of nations and/or churches. “What restores human moral agency is not the threat of punishment or guilt but being able to tell the truth and face the consequences (even the unjust ones) and reclaim our full human dignity” (Wilson, 1997, p. 29).

The life-giving freedom of liberation is more holy than the pain and duplicity of the closet. Denial of the rite of Holy Union for multiple partner families in MCC is likely to be interpreted as discomfort with claiming them and a desire to hide these families in an internal closet. It is no more holy for MCC to promote duplicity for its non-monogamous members than it is for other churches to tolerate, but not affirm gay and lesbian members.

Mary Hunt (2001), speaking as a Catholic feminist, complains that much of the work on sexual ethics has been done without reference to the widespread problem of male battering of women, the assumption that women are moral agents, and the claim that same-sex relationships and sexuality can be morally good. Hunt seeks to promote sex that is safe, pleasurable, community building, and conducive of justice, which she calls “just good sex.” Believing that “the right to sexual safety is something a good society will seek to guarantee,” Hunt defines safety as freedom from abuse and from sexually transmitted diseases. Safe sex is also un-coerced; it allows for procreative choice, freedom to choose
partners, and freedom to be sexual alone. After years of observing that traditional Catholic teachings have been oppressive to women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, Hunt (2001) says, “I now classify them as a form of violence, a kind of spiritual domestic violence in one’s religious home” (p. 166).

Protestant author James Nelson (1996) suggests that the sexual revolution in America was produced by affluence, the Pill, women in the workforce, destabilization of traditional values, and a new emphasis on self-fulfillment. In its wake, he says, the old morality no longer works. Nelson sees a "paradigmatic shift in the religious perceptions of human sexuality" evidenced by these seven signs:

1. There has been a shift from theologies of sexuality to sexual theologies. (By this he means a dialogical interaction of experience and revelation/tradition. Every theological perception contains some elements and perceptions conditioned by sexual experience, and every sexual experience is perceived and interpreted through religious lenses of some kind.)

2. There has been a shift from understanding sexuality as either incidental to or detrimental to the experience of God toward understanding sexuality as intrinsic to the divine-human experience. (If the belief of the Protestant reformers that companionship, not procreation, is central in God's design for sexuality is affirmed, then the human hunger for physical and emotional intimacy is of enormous spiritual significance. Sexuality is crucial to God's design that creatures do not dwell in isolation and loneliness but in communion and community. There is a new emphasis on incarnational theology that reminds us that the most
decisive experience of God is not in doctrine, creed or ideas but in the Word made flesh - and in the Word still becoming flesh.)

3. There has been a shift from understanding sexual sin as a matter of wrong sexual acts to understanding sexual sin as alienation from our intended sexuality. (Sin lies in the dualistic alienation by which the body becomes an object.)

4. There has been a shift from understanding salvation as anti-sexual to knowing that there is "sexual salvation." (God, the Cosmic Lover, graciously embraces not just a person's disembodied spirit but also the whole fleshly self. God intends increasing sexual wholeness to be part of our redemption. Sexual sanctification can mean growth in bodily self-acceptance, in the capacity for sensuousness, in the capacity for play, in the diffusion of the erotic throughout the body (rather than its genitalization) and in the embrace of the androgynous possibility.)

5. There has been a shift from an act-centered sexual ethics to a relational sexual ethics. (If sexuality is the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacities to love, if our destiny after the image of the Cosmic Lover is to be lovers in the richest, fullest sense of that good word, then how does sexual ethics figure into our spiritual destiny? What are our creative and fitting sexual responses to the divine loving? What are the appropriate sexual meanings that will embody the meanings of Word becoming flesh?)

6. There has been a shift from understanding the church as asexual to understanding it as a sexual community.

7. There has been a shift from understanding sexuality as a private issue to understanding it as a personal and public one (Nelson, 1996, p. 213-219).
Queer theologian Robert Goss (2002) describes his Jesuit training as it influenced his own sexuality and then develops a sexual theology that arises out of his own sexual practices as a non-monogamous gay man. He asks,

While the depth of pair-bonded relationships may mirror the depths of God’s infinite grace and commitment to us, does it preclude other conformations from mirroring other aspects of God’s love? Can polyamory reflect the breadth of God’s inclusive love while faithfulness in a committed pair-bonded relationship represents God’s faithful love? (p. 70-71).

Dr. John Muelendyk (2002), in an unpublished dissertation, argues for a postmodern method of discerning moral questions. “I see deconstruction as a basis for doing sexual ethics. I am convinced that sexual ethics will need to be done in sexual communities and articulated from a post-structural standpoint (beyond the language that holds them in place). Both heterosexual, as well as homosexual (and other) communities, will need to begin the work of listening to the stories of their members and begin formulating ethics that are sexually relevant to the specific life circumstances of their respective communities. Stories shared in community will be the test of a sexual ethic that will not budge” (p.208).

Theologians and ethicists of many faith traditions urge the Church to leave deontological rules and laws for the rule of love interpreted by conscience in each circumstance. If this were to be adopted, one could no longer say that all acts of sex outside heterosexual marriage open to procreation are sinful, or that monogamy is God’s plan for all people in all places. An incarnational, body-positive, sex-positive theology values sex as part of God’s original blessed creation. It limits sex only when it is likely to
result in bad outcomes, using such criteria as “safe, sane, consensual” or mutual, non-exploitive, joyful. Some of the suggested “goods” of sex include expanding, inclusive love (bodily hospitality), new definitions of procreativity, sacramental expressions of love, justice seeking, and opening to transcendence. None of these criteria automatically exclude non-monogamous relationships.

The church is challenged to expand its ministry to those who live sexually freer lives, to develop new ethical guidelines for the new realities of 21st century life in all its diversity, to respect moral decisions coming out of well-formed conscience, to encourage honesty and openness, and to listen to the voices of its sexual minority members in community. Opening the MCC rite of Holy Union to include non-monogamous unions of more than two persons is consistent with a body-positive, sex positive, Queer liberation theology.

But maybe it isn’t just non-monogamy that feels threatening. It is frequently asserted that: “the family is the building block of society.” The fear is that allowing more diverse family forms would threaten the very fabric of society. Is preserving the nuclear family, or its nearest equivalent, the only way to protect the social order? Is it the best way? What do the concepts of “family” and “marriage” mean? What is it that MCC is being asked to change?

The Family

Definitions of family and configurations of people designated as “family” units have varied in different historical periods. From Bible times to the present, the history of
families in Western society influences modern church members’ attitudes toward which families the church ought to bless.

BIBLICAL HOUSEHOLDS

The earliest households identified in the Bible are agrarian pioneers or pastoral nomads. At least 90% lived outside anything remotely resembling a "city." Villages were small, usually consisting of less than 100 people. Everyone was needed in the constant struggle to survive. Houses were actually stables and storage rooms on the ground level, with human living quarters above. Some dwellings are clustered, sharing common walls, attesting to extended family arrangements. Families consisted of all living persons, with the exception of married females, who were descended from a person still living, plus distant kin, whose own family groups may have met disaster through disease or economic failure. Military captives, transients (sojourners), and workers indentured from other families, may also have been included in the compound family. The identity of any family unit was inseparable from its land, the basis of its survival. There was a collective, group-oriented mind-set, with the welfare of the individual inseparable from that of the living group; self-worth was measured by one's contribution to the household survival. (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997)

The physical work required for subsistence agriculture would have taken up all available daylight hours virtually year-round. Women spent more than ten hours per day caring for small children, gardens, and animals, producing textiles, and preparing food for consumption and preservation. Men cleared new fields, plowed, hewed out cisterns, built homes and constructed terraces (Joshua 17:18). At age five or six, children would have
tasks of gathering fuel, caring for younger children, picking and watering garden vegetables, and assisting in food preparation. Child labor was integral to family survival. Average life span for men was 40 years, for women 30 years. Since the family was the center of production rather than of consumption, its most valuable possessions were its children. Marriage was a legal and social contract between two families for the promotion of the status of each, and for the production of legitimate offspring to whom property could be transferred (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997).

The choice of partner for an unmarried woman was a matter of concern for the entire household to which she belonged, and for the one to which she was to be transferred. That it is the woman's economic value that is being protected is clear from the laws governing bride-price, rape and seduction: in earliest times the patriarch has the final say and is paid for his loss (Exodus 22:15-16, Deut. 22:29, Genesis 34:12, 1 Samuel 18:25); in later times the aggressor must pay a fee and may never divorce his victim (Deuteronomy 22:28-29).

One possible reason for the Bible's frequent prohibitions of marrying outside one's own family group is the need to have expertise in the specific needs of the geographic locale in order to survive (Exodus 34:16, Genesis 24:3, 27:46). The concept of "shared blood" was also a way to secure trust and assure willingness to engage in mutual aid. Religious rites surrounding birthing, harvest, and funerals bound together related families and created a sense of common heritage and destiny. Droughts, disease, raids, and inter-household struggles over property rights could threaten the stability of the household. (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997).
Family events were celebrated with the entire village, and much of the household religion consisted of the veneration of ancestors and celebration of agricultural seasons. Household members included the dead ancestors of the past, those living in the present, and those yet to be born. The solidarity of the Israelite and family was strengthened and made more comprehensive by its inclusion of members from the wide sweep of the generations of its existence. (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997).

Slaves were also part of ancient households. A widow or divorced woman whose family would not or could not take her back had little choice but to sell herself into slavery or to become a prostitute. Children might be sold as payment for a debt or to gain income for an impoverished household. Wartime captives also became slaves. The laws regarding debt-slaves show development over time, such that by second temple times, enslavement of fellow Israelites is abolished (2 Chronicles 28:8-15). Male slaves were circumcised, thus rendering them part of the community of Israel (Genesis 17:12-13).

The major building projects of Solomon (temple, palace, and fortification of the major cities) put additional strain on households. Taxation by the state and confiscation of land by outsiders posed a threat to continued ownership of the inherited plot of land. In 1 Samuel 8:10-18 (NRSV) the prophet warns the people of the deleterious effects of transferring power from household heads to a king.

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his
ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the
equipment of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and
cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive
orchards and give them to his courtiers. 15 He will take one-tenth of your grain
and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 16 He will take
your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put
them to his work. 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his
slaves. 18 And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have
chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

Centralization of worship was attempted, but resisted by people whose ancestors
were buried on the land and thought to be still available to help them. Attempts were
made to strengthen the nuclear family bonds while undermining the kinship networks.
Thus adultery becomes punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:22); second marriages are
regulated (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) and exemption from the draft is provided for newlyweds
(Deuteronomy 24:5).

As debts to the monarchy and to wealthy landowners increased, households sold members and assets, including land, to survive, resulting in the
expanding wealth of the royal house and the elite upper class…The overall design
of the monarchy was to shift citizens' allegiance and resources away from kinship
structures and responsibilities, especially represented in the households and clans,
to the king's household in particular and the royal state in general (Perdue,
The breakup of households increased the underclass of day laborers, living hand to mouth. Runaway slaves and resident aliens, no longer protected by increasingly desperate landholders, also became itinerants. David's following was largely made up of these fugitives, many of them on the run from creditors (1 Samuel 22:2). Even as the extended family household disintegrated as the normative arrangement in Israel, other forms of chosen families emerged modeled on it. The "sons of the prophets" were spiritual "brothers" who lived in compounds as economically interdependent family units under the direction of the prophet, sometimes called "father" (2 Kings 2:12, 13:14; 4:1-7, 38-41; 6:1-7; 1 Samuel 10:12). Craft guilds were also called families (mispahah) and were often led by a "father" (1 Chronicles 2:55; 4:14, 21).

The exile broke up families, clans, tribes, and the nation. After the return from exile, the "father's house" (bet 'ab) was never reestablished as the norm. Many marriage contracts have been unearthed from this time period, indicating that marriage was a contract between the husband and the family to which the bride belonged. There is a "consistent view of marriage as a contract. The witnesses are human, not divine. It is assumed that either party can terminate the arrangement at will, without necessarily entailing moral culpability. Marriage is a pragmatic instrument for securing rights to property and inheritance" (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997).

Jewish documents from the Persian and Roman periods regard divorce as a routine, unexceptional development. The contracts would be rendered null and void by adultery on the part of the wife, but there is no prohibition of extramarital intercourse by the husband. Ezra demanded that all who would worship Yahweh must divorce their foreign wives. They were to be sent away "with their children" (Ezra 9-10). The Hebrew
Bible mentions two reasons for which a man might divorce his wife: if she did something "improper" or if he "hates" her (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Both criteria were and are hotly debated as to meaning. There is no mention of the possibility of divorce of a husband by a wife. The Mishnah allowed five wives for wealthy men, and eighteen for kings. Poor men married only once, out of economic necessity (Perdue, Blenkinsopp, Collins & Meyers, 1997).

It is difficult to find an example of a nuclear family similar to the one envisioned by those who tout "Biblical family values" in the Bible. Virginia Mollenkott has identified forty different family configurations mentioned or implied in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, including some that are apparently headed by same-sex couples (Mollenkott, 1992).

While marriage was normative for Jews and actually required by divine law, the form of marriage is never specified. The Torah neither requires monogamy nor prohibits polygamy. Marriage among the Jews was a secular event, a contract between individuals and families, with no cultic implications. Weddings were not religious ceremonies. The first authority in Jewish history to call for a ban on polygamy was Rabbi Gershom ben Judah of Worms in 1040 C.E. This ban, an attempt to limit persecution, applied only to German and French Jews. Only in modern Israel was the ban extended to Sephardic Jews, and even then concessions were made for immigrants from polygamous cultures (Lawrence, 1989). The Mishna (circa 200 CE) records longstanding oral tradition interpreting the Torah. The Talmud is commentary and interpretation of the Mishna. These documents are sacred text for the Jews. The Mishna and the Talmud both explicitly recognize the prevalence of polygamy. The Babylonian Talmud allows a man to have
four wives, and he is required to have sexual intercourse with each at least once a month. This may be one of the origins of similar teachings in Islam (Lawrence, 1989).

Rosemary Radford Ruether (2000) in *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* traces the attitudes of the mainline church toward families from Jesus’ time on. She posits a tension between the earliest followers of Jesus who were proponents of a new kind of chosen family, and the cultural norms of the time. There is no concept of the isolated nuclear family in the Greek, Roman, or Jewish worlds of the first century (Reuther, 2000).

Two related concepts that provided the paradigm for thinking about relationships in the ancient world were “household” (*familia*) and “kin” (*domus* or house) The household is a central residence for production, consumption, and service, headed by a “*paterfamilias*,” the male head-of-household. Kin are networks of people related by blood and marriage (the house of so and so). These entities intersected, but were not the same.

A Roman household includes the paterfamilias, his slaves, debtors, and children (even grown ones, unless given autonomy.) The wife of the paterfamilias would be considered part of her father’s “house” unless she had been freed to have authority over her own property (*sui iuris*) even though she resides in her husband’s *familia*. For the male citizen, marriage to a person without Roman citizenship was illegal, and their offspring, being illegitimate, could not inherit property. Slaves were unable to contract legal marriages, so the children of slaves (or former slaves) and their masters or master’s sons were also illegitimate and could not be considered part of the master’s house (*domus*), his kin network (lineage). Members of the Roman upper class married and
divorced frequently, reflecting their shifting alliances and the quest for legitimate male heirs, and might adopt a son from an allied household (Reuther, 2000).

Slaves lived in a back room of the master’s house and were subject to sexual demands at any time from the master and his sons and friends (Bradley, 1984). The free poor might live in “apartments” that were only sleeping rooms, and tend to hygiene needs on the street and in public baths. Most sought to ally themselves with a household to take advantage of the eating and workshop facilities provided there. Poor families could not afford to raise many children; most of their offspring were left out to die or be picked up by slave traders (Ruether, 2000).

According to Ruether (2000), the synoptic Gospels present the Jesus movement as a gathering of mostly marginal men and women out of their families and occupations into a counter-cultural community. This community is seen as a new eschatological family that negates the natural family. No one is worthy to be a disciple who prefers his family to Jesus (Luke 14:26) (Reuther, 2000).

Jesus shows a “shocking disregard for traditional family responsibilities” (Ruether 2000) when he tells a prospective disciple to “Follow me and let the dead bury the dead”(Matthew 8:21-22). The call to discipleship of James and John is to abandon their father in the boat and follow Jesus (Matthew 4:21-22). “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law and a man’s foes will be in his own household” (Matthew 10:35-36). When Jesus’ mother and brothers come to fetch him home because they think he has gone over the edge, Jesus ignores them and says, “Who are my mother and brothers and
sisters?…Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31-35).

Jesus and his followers are hosted by a variety of households. One favorite place is the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, living in “Martha’s house”. Among those who “provided for him out of their own means” is Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, a prestigious person in the royal household (Luke 8:1-3). Jesus dines with the Pharisees and also with the tax collectors, seen as “sinners” by the former. In Nazareth, Jesus is called “the son of Mary” (Mark 6:1-3), a standard way of indicating illegitimacy in a patrilineal culture where legitimate sons are always named as the sons of the father, not the mother (Reuther, 2000).

In the early Christian mission, Reuther (2000) says, the sense of the church as a “new family” continues in new forms. In this new family the members are united by their relation to Christ as their redeemer, through whom God is their father, and by their expectation of fulfilled redemption in a coming messianic age. This new family breaks down old kinship relations and separations (Reuther, 2000).

The subversion of family allegiance and hierarchical order by Christian conversion, particularly when the convert was a subjugated person in the family—that is, a wife, youth, or slave—invoked great hostility toward Christianity in the gentile world, which typically saw it as undermining the order of the family and of the state. It suggested a new freedom of women, young people, and slaves to disobey their husbands, fathers, and masters and make their own choices about their lives (Reuther, 2000). That marriage was profoundly devalued in light of the eschatological challenge seems
certain…marriage, being inextricably tied to patriarchy, was subject to the radical critique of Jesus and the earliest Christian communities (Lawrence, 1989).

THE CHURCH

As Paul’s influence increased, Christianity increasingly rejected marriage in favor of celibacy. This freed women from family obligations to become traveling evangelists.

The mid-second-century church saw a battle between those who endorsed a counter-cultural, eschatological Christianity subversive of the family and those who sought to reintegrate Christianity into patriarchal family and social patterns…the conflict would gradually be mediated by the definition of celibacy as an internal, “higher” choice of Christian perfection for a spiritual elite of men and women, ranked above a normatively married laity” (Ruether, 2000). In 285 CE Emperor Diocletian forbade bigamy in the provinces and in 393 CE Emperor Theodosius voiced opposition to Jewish polygamy. Asceticism became the ideal in the church to the extent that some argued that to become a Christian one had to give up sex, meat, and wine (Lawrence, 1989).

The edicts prescribing a celibate clergy were largely ignored. From the ninth to the eleventh centuries most priests continued to marry and have children, often making their sons heirs of church property and offices. Single celibacy was considered an unrealistic constraint to impose on ordinary priests, since women provided the domestic labor on which households depended (Ruether, 2000).

During the Carolingian reform movement, Boniface and others proposed the teaching of indissoluble monogamy. This meant that a man could marry only once regardless of the conduct of his wife. Western Christian history from the eighth century
on was filled with wrangles between churchmen and nobles over marriage and divorce (Ruether, 2000).

What constituted a marriage was also contested. There were few church rituals around marriage, even though it had been declared a sacrament. Mutual consent was the criterion for a binding marriage. This opened the way for young lovers to elope over the protests of their families. Nobles continued to have affairs and keep concubines, along with the one legal wife who could produce legitimate children. All other children were bastards. Unwanted women and children were often consigned to family monasteries. “Only at the end of the first millennium did the church finally assume administrative authority over marriage and bring the marriage ceremony proper into the church building” (Lawrence, 1989).

In the eleventh century, reforms included the absolute proscription of clerical marriages, and lay control over church property. This was to deal with clergy dynasties created by passing on church land and offices to heirs. The first Lateran Council (1139) defined the sacrament of ordination as an impediment to marriage, making all clergy marriages invalid. Bastardy was proclaimed an impediment to ordination (Ruether, 2000). Mystical writings of the time illustrate the sublimation of all sexual desires. Sexual language is used to describe spiritual experience (Kelley, 1995).

In the 14th century a movement arose called Brethren of the Free Spirit, who flourished for over a century in Germany, France and the Low Countries. They rejected the authority of the church and practiced free love, nudity and group sex, and remained unmarried. They dressed in monk’s robes, preaching, begging, and interrupting church services. They treated men and women equally (Lawrence, 1989, p. 164).
In Augsburg in the 1530s control of marriages and morals was wrested from the control of confessors and church courts to be given to civil authorities. Morals police closely scrutinized city dwellers, and homes were invaded searching for hidden sexual vices. Town councils assumed the role of inquisitors, seeking all the details in order to mete out appropriate punishments (Ruether, 2000).

Protestants instituted the church wedding as a statement of vows spoken before a minister and congregation. For the medieval church the validity of marriage had been tied to the words of consent spoken by the couple and the subsequent consummation. The marriage could take place in the south door of the church or in the home, and might be followed by a mass, though this was not necessary for the marriage to be valid. Most of the events we associate with a wedding were family traditions that the Protestants saw as encouraging sinful waste, gluttony, drunkenness, and lascivious dancing. Since the insubordination of Eve was thought to be the cause of evil in the world, a woman’s subordination to her husband was required, lest evil be allowed to reign (Reuther, 2000).

The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic renewal movements accused each other of sexual laxity. When the pope refused to grant Henry VIII a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, Luther recommended that Henry take Anne as a second wife if he had to have her. Luther was opposed to divorce, but not to multiple wives (Lawrence, 1989).

Calvin leaned more in the direction of controlling sexual behavior and was influential in his view of marriage as designed for companionship. He was leery of too much enjoyment of sex as a threat to good order. His requirement for strict monogamy colored Protestant thinking for centuries (Lawrence, 1989).
The Anabaptist movement sought to create covenanted church communities totally separate from society. Some sought to restore Old Testament patriarchal polygamy and endogamous unions of church members only (Huntson, 1992). (Note the implied definition of extended family as church members.) The Anabaptist’s separatism led to persecution by both Protestants and Catholics struggling over control of territory. Many polygamous communes were formed in Germany. In 1534 John of Leyden, a man with 16 wives, seized control of Munster. He was defeated by the combined efforts of Protestant and Roman Catholic princes and executed. Some modern scholars see Anabaptist polygamy as a response to gender imbalance in the community, others as a radical challenge to the established order based on more personal theological grounds (Lawrence, 1989).

The desacramentalizing of marriage in the view of the reformers, led the way to the possibility of divorce. For Luther, divorce could be granted for the impotence of the husband, a wife’s refusal to have sex, adultery, and desertion, but he was not eager to invoke these faults. Luther wrote: “I confess, indeed, I cannot forbid anyone who wishes to marry several wives, nor is that against Holy Scripture; however, I do not want that custom introduced among Christians, among whom it is proper to pass up even things which are permissible, to avoid scandal and to live respectably, which Paul everywhere enjoins” (Kilbride, 1994). Nonetheless, in the case of William of Hesse, whose wife did not give him sexual satisfaction, Luther recommended bigamy rather than divorce. The reformers found their justification for divorce and polygamy in the Bible. As they read it, Jesus had allowed divorce for adultery, and the example of the patriarchs justified marriage to more than one woman as a possibility blessed by God (Ruether, 2000).
For Catholics, the counsel of Trent (1545-1563) reaffirmed that marriage was a sacrament and as such was indissoluble. Trent also tightened the requirements for celibacy among priests and nuns by establishing seminaries and cloisters (Reuther, 2000). For the first time, marriage required a church ceremony and participation by a priest, and polygamy was declared anathema, probably in direct response to Luther (Kilbride, 1994).

In broad terms, the Hebrew Scripture’s large, complex, polygamous households gave way to the Roman patriarchal family model based on patronage with its interaction between household and kin groups. Jesus elevated chosen family over biological family and his followers at first were a community of equals. With the expected immanent return of Jesus, there was no need for families to produce heirs. Celibacy was to be preferred over family life to clear time and energy for evangelism. As the church grew it structured itself after the Roman family system. Celibacy became the holiest lifestyle; marriage became a sacrament to create Christian families. Protestants secularized marriage, but instituted the church wedding.

In the midst of these historical trends, there were always alternative family structures, often based on theological understandings, existing alongside the “traditional” family. Although persecuted by the dominant church, these groups were not totally destroyed, but their dissident practice of family became part of the plurality of notions of what constitutes a family. After the Enlightenment loosened the control of the church over all family life, the possibilities became even more diverse.
NEW FAMILY FORMS

The Victorian Era saw many changes in definitions of family and in the ideal family image. Huge rooms shared by the lord, the lady, their children, kin, mistresses, illegitimate children, servants, clients and friends in English castles, gave way to private bedrooms, servants’ quarters, nurseries, bathrooms, and detached housing for upper and middle-class nuclear families. Tending to bodily needs for elimination, sex, sleep, bathing, and birthing became private activities. Children became dependants, carefully nurtured and protected, rather than workers, part of the family’s assets (Reuther, 2000).

Revivals of various sorts swept the U.S. Most members of reform societies were women and young adults whose focus tended to be on opposing sexual license and intemperate drinking. Revivalists like Charles Finney thought that the church could bring in the Millennium if only it would conform to strict morality and piety. The Quakers began to challenge the social hierarchy itself, with its rule of men over women, white over black, and rich over poor. The Grimke sisters, on their 1830’s antislavery tour, boldly proclaimed that “both slavery and the power of men over women were contrary to God’s original and ideal order for society, in which all were created equal and no one group was given sovereignty over another” (Reuther, 2000).

The Mormons revived patriarchal polygyny as a way of producing many children to inhabit heaven. It was revealed to Joseph Smith, en-route to Utah with his people fleeing persecution in New York, Illinois, & Missouri, that God had re-opened permission to marry more than one woman. Mormon polygyny ranged from a second wife, married out of sympathy for her widowed status, to families with 20 or more wives. Mormons believe that there are souls in the pre-life who want and need to be born. The
Hebrew Scripture example is cited to make it clear that sometimes Jehovah approves. Before Utah was granted statehood, its laws had to prohibit plural marriages. A new revelation banned polygynous marriages from the church. “There are a few die-hard Mormons who refused to accept the late revelation barring polygyny. These groups remain polygynous and get harassed by local law enforcement officers. The men are periodically jailed and their multiple families put on welfare. Religious liberty does not extend to reorganization of the family” (Busch, 1990, p. 282).

Other utopians experimented with new forms of family. Some early religious groups formed communal living arrangements, often with celibacy or limited sexuality for reproduction only. During the 1700’s the Moravians immigrated to Pennsylvania and organized into “choirs” instead of families. Married couples lived apart, in a men’s choir or a woman’s choir, and were allowed one hour a week of privacy. Those who left did so to gain control over their children (Busch, 1990, p. 279-280).

The Shakers were founded in 1800 by “Mother Ann” Lee. By 1822 nearly 4,000 were living in sex-segregated, celibate housing, children separated from parents, all reorganized into “families” of 30-150. Total obedience was required to reach a group, rather than an individual, “unified heart” (Graff, 1999).

Sexual pluralists believed that *restraining* sex caused sin. The goal was to love all, equally and transparently, holding nothing back for self or partner. John Humphrey Noyes, who believed that humans could perfect themselves, founded the Oneida Commune in the 1830s. Their structure was communist; as in the early church, all things were to be shared: all possessions, all relationships. Monogamy was banned. Noyes said, “In a holy community, there is no more reason why sexual intercourse should be
restricted by law, than why eating and drinking should be.” He believed that marriage provokes to secret adultery, ties unmatched natures, gives scanty and monotonous care to sexual appetite, and leads to “egotism for two.” In Noyes “complex marriage” every man and woman in the community was considered married to every other partner in heterosexual marriage. Commitment to the community legitimized sex within the group (Graff, 1999).

In the early days of the Oneida Community pregnancy was avoided by “coitus reservadus,” apparently retrograde ejaculation. Post-menopausal women were assigned to teach this technique of ejaculation into the bladder to young men. When they were more skilled, they were allowed to go to the younger women. Any man or woman could request to sleep with any other adult member of the community on a given night. A committee of older women negotiated who could be with whom to assure mutual consent. Monogamy was strictly prohibited to the extent that if a couple became too exclusive, one would be sent to another location (Busch, 1990).

After ten years of striving for no new children in the community, the Oneidans began to practice a kind of selective breeding where most of the women and some of the men were approved as parents. Babies lived with their mothers for 15 months, and then were raised in the communal nursery. “Most children seem to have prospered with about 100 parents and 50 siblings” (Busch, 1990).

The commune became a tourist attraction. Rumors about the sexual life of the Perfectionists eventually led to an investigation by the Sheriff sometime in the 1880s. John Humphrey Noyes promptly left for Canada; within two years the commune disintegrated. The strongest pressure apparently came from mothers who wanted to raise
their own babies. The Oneida commune incorporated its collective assets as Oneida Silversmiths, and disbanded its complex marriage. As the last of the participants aged, he decided to destroy the records of the commune (Busch, 1990).

Josiah Warren’s colony, Modern Times, taught “free love” as the right of women and men to divorce and remarry in order to form love relations based on free choice, not economic necessity or social coercion (Wunderlich, 1992).

Marx, Engels, and other socialists wanted to replace the selfishness of individual love with the utopian love of all for all. Marriage and family would wither away with the state. A wife was just a legitimate prostitute who sold herself into slavery for life. Stalin attacked Soviet social chaos by reinstating marriage and family as pillars of the Soviet collective, and mothers as heroes of the state (Graff, 1999).

The Victorian ideal family, with husband going out into the “evil world” to support the family, while delicate wives stayed home to raise the precious children and supervise the household was, in fact, only possible for a limited population of upper-class white families. Poor women in factories and black women in the South continued to do backbreaking work and struggle for subsistence for their families. Nonetheless, the Victorian model of nuclear families, living separate from relatives in private homes, has continued to represent the “traditional” family defended by conservative Christians (Ruether, 2000).

Regarding monogamy, Lawrence (1989) states, “The popular notion that sexual expression should be limited absolutely to the bounds of a single bonded pair has no unequivocal historical, philosophical, ethical, or theological support…Open marriages in their various forms cannot be ruled out in principle.” (p. 262). Lawrence (1989) warns of
the dangers of closed pairs becoming “parasitic relationships,” and sees as one of the dilemmas of the human condition that “any committed pair must choose either a measure of depression from too tight a bond, or a measure of anxiety from one that is too loose” (p. 262).

An historically informed view of families would understand that family structures have changed over time, and the changes have, it seems, always been controversial. Still, one might ask, why perform a marriage rite for alternative families? Why a Rite of Holy Matrimony/Rite of Holy Union for anyone? What purposes has marriage served in the past, and why continue to offer the rite?

Marriage

WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR?

E. J. Graff (1999) states, “Marriage and the family have been in violent flux throughout history, the rules constantly shifting to fit each culture and class, each era and economy…marriage has always been a battleground, owned and defined first by one group and then another” (p. xi). Graff looks at six answers to the title question, What is Marriage For? and traces the history of each as seen by biblical writers, Catholic theologians, Protestant reformers, nineteenth century utopians, and modern citizens. Each chapter considers one of these purposes for marriage: Money, Sex, Babies, Kin, Order, and Heart. Graff makes her case each time for same-sex marriage. Many of her arguments can also be applied to other “alternative” marriage forms, such as plural marriages.
MARRIAGE FOR MONEY

According to Graff (1999), marriage has always been a key way of organizing a society’s economy. A Roman father-in-law could take back his daughter, and deprive his son-in-law’s estate of her dowry, if said son-in-law did something he disliked. For most cultures through most of history, husband and wife have been interlocking jobs. If a wife died it was important to replace her as soon as possible. Maids, young women saving up for their own dowry, did housework. “Only in the 19th century was Mother demoted to housemaid, while Father was banished from the house” (Graff, 1999, p. 12).

In most places, slaves could not marry, and often paupers with no property to protect or hand down did not marry. Since women were owned by men, Graff (1999) says, “How could any system of property law possibly allow property itself to make contracts, to promise to honor and support someone else, to give away rights to their bodies (especially to someone other than the owner), to take charge of children the law considered someone else’s chattel?” (p. 17).

Until the twelfth century, canon law did not allow slaves to marry. In the American South slaves married by “jumping the broom,” laying one’s blanket next to another’s blanket, or having a preacher pronounce them married “until death or distance do you part” (sale was always a possibility). These bonds were not enforceable in the owners’ courts.

So did slaves marry? If marriage is a bond recognized by the rulers’ law, then no, they did not; but if marriage is a bond that two people and their community count as binding, then yes, they certainly did. Slaves were thus
married and unmarried at the same time and on the same land, depending on whose social map was superimposed (Graff, 1999, p. 19).

In much the same way, couples who have holy unions are married in the sight of the MCC church, but not in the eyes of the state. Vermont’s civil union laws create legally bound couples in Vermont, but not at this point in other states. Several states have rushed to enact “Defense of Marriage” acts (so-called baby DOMAs) defining marriage as a contract between one man and one woman. So many gay or lesbian couples today are also “married, but not married.”

According to Graff, because marriage was such a critical way of arranging the economy, parents with wealth battled for centuries to keep control of their children’s marriages. As the ability to earn one’s own way and even to change one’s social standing through one’s own efforts became the norm, parents’ ownership of children was questioned. “As it began to fit the economic ideas of its day, marriage for love—long the dubious privilege of the poor, nearly a guarantee of penury, a weird refusal to see that one could love wherever duty lay—started to become its own holy ideal all across the West” (Graff, 1999, p. 26).

The new middle-class belief became that love should come before marriage, and sex merely in exchange for a good estate was venal. Historically, censuses recorded the occupations, not of individuals, but of families. “In 1765 Lord Blackstone, who consolidated and passed on British common law, famously extended the biblical idea that a husband and wife become ‘one flesh’ into the precept that ‘In law husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person’” (Graff, 1999, p. 27).
In the 1850s the British census began to name the occupations of individual family members and introduced a new category: housewife. A 19th century unmarried woman had more financial rights—the ability to earn, buy, sell, own, contract, sue and be sued—than did a married woman. The first attempts to protect married women’s property were justified not by feminism but by the need to protect women from inept, venal, or deserting husbands. One 1844 New York legislative committee insisted that allowing married women to control their own property would lead “to infidelity in the marriage bed, a high rate of divorce, and increased female criminality” (Graff, 1999, p. 30). Anti-reformers claimed that proposed changes were “contrary to not only the law of the land, but to the law of God” and such proposals “set at defiance the experience of every country in Christendom and the common sense of mankind” (Graff, 1999, pp. 30-32).

Today in America, nuclear family units are expected to be economically independent. How finances are handled within the family is a private decision. Marriage for money, in the absence of love, is frowned upon. An increasing number of family units are unwed couples with or without children. It may indeed be economically advantageous to create a family without marrying and incurring the infamous “marriage penalty” in federal taxes.

Marriage is restricted by law to heterosexual couples (Crooks and Baur, 2002). Both church and political policies try to create a wall of separation between church and state, yet pastors continue to sign marriage licenses issued by the state. If the church performs its own rites to bless marriages, they need not conform to legal descriptions. Holy Unions between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples ineligible for legal marriage occur every day in MCC and other progressive churches. If combining Holy
Matrimony (legal marriages) and Holy Union (church blessings) into one rite demonstrates that MCC considers both equally valid in the site of God and the church, then it would seem MCC could define eligibility for Holy Union any way it chooses. Wouldn’t it be better to define it on theological grounds rather than simply imitating secular marriage?

MARRIAGE FOR SEX

Graff’s (1999) second category is sex: For many people in the U.S., marriage is what makes sex legitimate. Sex outside marriage is bad: sex inside marriage is at least OK. Our culture is still sex-negative: we use “dirty” to describe media with sexual content (dirty joke, dirty book, dirty pictures); a “mores” charge always involves sex, as though other crimes are not immoral (Crooks & Baur, 2002). Graff (1999) says that sex brings up moral questions because it involves human bodies, spirits, and hopes. It can be a powerful force for joy or for chaos, either strengthening or destroying us with sensations and desires that threaten to erase the rest of our own or others’ lives.

Graff (1999) describes three philosophies in the West with regard to the purpose of sex and marriage: refraining, reproducing, refreshing. Christianity’s early attitudes were born out of the secular culture of Rome and the religious culture of Judaism. “Asked what justifies sex, Rome would answer procreation and power; Judaism would answer procreation and praise” (Graff, 1999, p. 55). The upper class Roman male patriarch had the right to sex with anyone of a lower class: women, children, slaves, and clients. He held ownership of the bodies of all those associated with his household, and could raise the resulting babies or abandon them to die, as he chose. Slave children he considered
beautiful, whether his own bastards or not, could be sold to be reared as specialists in particular sexual practices and then bought back by himself or other powerful men. Legal wives, daughters of patriarchs, and young male citizens were the only ones protected from the whims of the “head of household.” Ruling class citizens were required to marry by their late teens, and would never abdicate power by allowing themselves to be used as sex objects. Partners were deemed appropriate according to class (Graff, 1999).

Jewish custom viewed marriage as an obligation, and sex within marriage as a mitzvah (good deed), especially blessed on the Sabbath. Producing children was so strong an obligation that for many centuries, Jewish men had to marry again, with or without divorcing, if wife number one did not deliver offspring within ten years.

Even though the rabbis discussed the man’s purchase of his wife’s virginity, or rather, of her untouched womb, as if he were buying a head of cattle; even though he could divorce her for any reason at all; even though her adultery was a permanent blot and punished in the extreme while his was bad only if it marred another man’s sexual property—despite all this, rabbinical tracts went into great detail about his obligation to put her pleasure before his. Her womb might be some man’s property, but as a sexual being she was her own person (Graff, 1999, p.57).

For both Romans and Jews procreation was a social duty, with personal pleasure as a bonus. Graff (1999) believes that when Jesus’ new followers took celibacy up as a communal ideal they meant to stop birth and death entirely, bringing on the millennium (Graff, 1999, p. 57). In this early Christian view, marriage promoted a corrupt secular world. Christian celibacy appealed to some women as a way to avoid an arranged
marriage and the restrictive social role of “wife.” “All this celibacy was considered shockingly antisocial by the Romans and sinful by the Jews” (Graff, 1999, p. 58).

As the expected return of Christ delayed, and as Christianity moved from a fringe cult to an imperial religion, church fathers needed to rethink the place of sex and marriage in the church. Augustine redefined celibacy as normal and natural. “No longer was celibacy just a rebellion against nature, a way to mock the social order, to insist that even the meek, the poor, the outsider, the eunuch still mattered in God’s eyes. Now sex…was the unnatural act” (Graff, 1999, p. 59-60). Even if you were married, sexual pleasure was a venial sin. Jerome wrote, “An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife.”

In recent years the pope has said that “married couples do no wrong when they engage in marital relations without the intent to reproduce, so long as they do so with due deliberation and in sober moderation.” Michael Kelley (1995) comments that he has difficulty imagining all those Catholic couples having moderate and deliberate orgasms.

Few of today’s young people view marriage as a license for sex. Sex for pleasure, for bonding, for intimacy, for love, as experimentation, often occurs before, during, and after legal marriage or without any intent to marry. A church that condemns all sex outside marriage is allowing secular authorities to decide what is moral. A church that preaches a liberating sexual gospel need not worry about limiting marriage to two persons to control sexual license. Indeed, blessing polyfidelitous unions might limit promiscuity.
MARRIAGE FOR BABIES

The theme of refraining from sex as much as possible was tempered by another justification for married sex: reproduction.

“Much of medieval European peasant society took it for granted that courting young men and women would go walking all night, so long as the pair kept company only with each other—and so long as the couple married once she was pregnant, which is why roughly a third of brides were pregnant on their wedding day” (Graff, 1999, p. 61).

The church licensed prostitutes’ guilds and collected regular dispensation fees for their trade, assuming prostitution to be the only way to stop male lust from overwhelming honorable mothers. Priests took concubines so often that by the late Middle Ages there was a Church fee schedule for priests’ concubines and legitimation fees for their children (Graff, 1999).

If reproduction is the only legitimate use of sex, then contraception is a grave sin. Augustine viewed contraception this way: “I dare to say that either the wife is in a fashion the harlot of her husband or he is an adulterer with his own wife.” Any non-reproductive sex, or sex in other than man-on-top position (thought to favor conception), was a grave sin; killing potential babies was homicide (Graff, 1999).

Luther wanted girls to be married at fifteen and boys at eighteen to prevent premarital sex. Protestants insisted that marriage was a secular ceremony, not a sacrament. Luther agreed with Augustine that women were created to bear children and avoiding pregnancy was sin. In the 1549 Anglican Prayer Book marriage is for “mutual society, help, and comfort”, because being good to each other in day-to-day life is
pleasing to God. Thus the challenge of married life was not a barrier to holiness, but a means to holiness and a way to contain lust.

Protestants prosecuted the “anticipatory” sex formerly accepted between engagement and wedding. The Church of England encouraged the British Parliament to levy the death penalty for adultery, gaol for fornication, and branding the forehead of brothel-keepers with a B. For the Puritans, “solitary living” was against the law, since solitude encouraged evil. Any sex outside marriage merited the death penalty. Marital sex was a duty, part of keeping order in society (Graff, 1999).

Refreshing is another model for the purpose of marital sex. The Rabbis believed God had created human beings as flesh from the beginning, creating and intending both sexual pleasure and procreativity. Rabbis were required to have wives and children. A husband’s most unshakable duty was his wife’s sexual pleasure; he wasn’t allowed to take a vow of celibacy that lasted more than a week. So long as a couple had a few children, contraception was good to preserve the wife’s health or the couple’s happiness. The Jews specifically rejected the asceticism promoted in medieval Europe. Any married sex act was kosher, so long as it was not against the woman’s will; what mattered was the couple’s intimacy, the affection that could be refreshed by sex. Refusing to enjoy the gifts of God was sinful. As economic conditions changed and marriage stopped being about shared work, it began to be about a shared inner life, and so did sex (Graff, 1999).

The Victorian “free-love” movement reacted to realities of married sex in that era (forced intercourse and frequent pregnancy). Free-love advocates argued for contraception, consensual sex based on affection, sex to refresh the spirit, and mutual pleasure. Rebelling against the refraining ideal, Victorians began to promote sex without
babies, sex as intimate sacrament. Battles over contraception were long and hot. Legalization could change the very meaning of marriage from procreative duty to a love/sex option. “If sex is justified by your inner life—whether the high spiritual standard of love or the low pragmatic standard of willingness—then no one else can testify about mine” (Graff, 1999, p. 86).

A typical medieval catechism taught that marriage is “A sacrament instituted in order to have children legitimately and to raise them in the fear of God” (Graff, 1999, p.69-70). Later laws defined marriage as “a civil contract whereby a man is joined to a woman for the procreation of legitimate children” (Graff, 1999, p. 85). The Roman idea that “family” meant everyone under one roof, biologically related or not, lasted until the eighteenth century’s end. The nuclear family has so recently become the standard household unit that U.S. demographers can’t accurately track it before 1940. High levels of illegitimacy caused colonial judges and state legislators to invent “common law marriage.” Widely accepted during the 19th century, and then outlawed by most states in the twentieth, it still exists in 13 states today (Graff, 1999).

Graff (1999) cites two reasons to allow alternative family formation. If children have two parents involved in their care, the toddler “separation distress” phase starts later and doesn’t last as long. “If the children have more than two adults to whom they’re close, such as aunts, granddads, or nannies, “separation distress” comes even later and is even shorter in duration. Having more “psychological” parents, in other words, is very helpful: the additional adult’s sex or biological relationship is not necessarily what makes the difference.” Graff(1999) argues,
From Mennonites to survivalists, a pluralist society allows people to raise their children in freedom...Given Western democracies’ bedrock belief in pluralism, family choice will not go away. The question then is: how will society deal with it? Will we try to define it under the rug, leaving an unsightly lump? Or will we legally recognize the families that actually exist—and truly protect those children? … Marriage’s very public nature—the gifts and celebrations of its ceremonies, the hurdles of its divorce laws, the formal involvement of extended families—does help couples stay together when their relationship is tough (Graff, 1999, p. 142).

Given effective contraception and new reproductive technologies, sex and parenting have been irrevocably separated, whether the church likes it or not. The new reality is that families are formed in many ways. Providing the benefits of marriage for diverse families that already exist creates nothing new. Nothing new will be created if MCC changes its definition of Holy Union to encompass diverse family forms.

MARRIAGE FOR KIN

Graff’s (1999) fourth reason for marriage is kin. In the U. S. from the early 1800’s into the early 1900’s it was illegal for white people to marry a person of another race. These miscegenation laws make sense if the purpose of marriage is to keep women’s wombs within the “clan.” Intermarriage was frightening because it implied social equality. Many court cases tried to determine race. Definitions changed: at one point there was a battle over whether the darker-skinned, newly immigrant Italians were black or white. Common anti-integration sentiments in the 60’s included, “Would you want
your daughter to marry one?” True feelings about equality often emerge when kinship is at issue. Miscegenation laws fell when challenged as a violation of the “full faith and credit” requirement between states, but socially it had already become clear that race was a social construct not easily defined biologically and there was a growing acceptance of interracial couples, as love became the qualification for marriage (Graff, 1999).

Officially the possibility of polygamy within Judaism endured until ~1300 C.E. The Romans were appalled by Jewish polygamy, in part because Roman men felt free to make heirs via adoption. Yet the Romans excelled at serial polygamy (divorce and remarriage) and the unofficial polygamy of concubines, slaves, and other sexual partners (Graff, 1999).

For Germanic and Frankish clans the necessity of male heirs, combined with high infant mortality, meant that a plurality of wives and concubines was expected of wealthy, powerful men.

Christianity’s most controversial marriage innovation was the idea that marriage was an either/or proposition. You were married or not; there were no more grades of marriage, no more wives of different ranks…Adultery no longer meant invading another man’s sexual property, but straying from your own…frankly opposed to seeing women treated like meat, the Church insisted on monogamy as an acknowledgment that their inner lives were as valuable as their husbands’ (Graff, 1999, p. 174).

For the Mormons, Graff (1999) says, “You weren’t making love, you were making kin” (p.174) who would be your family in eternity. Consolidated theocratic and kin power shut out outsiders and knit in insiders. Men became officially superior
patriarchs; the individual was subordinated to the group. Constant procreation was elevated above personal desire, and making kin over personal love. This was contrary to capitalism’s urbanizing trend toward smaller and more intimate families (Graff, 1999).

In the American South, young white plantation owners or heirs could go to New Orleans’ annual octoroon debutante balls, where they could choose a young woman and then haggle with her mother over the exact terms of the concubinage contract. The feudal idea of father/lord/master encouraged slave owners to rape/seduce/coerce female slaves (Graff, 1999).

Mormon polygamy and Southern *de facto* polygamy led to the Morrill Act, signed by President Lincoln in 1862 outlawing polygamy in the American territories. In 1882 Congress passed the Edmunds Act criminalizing a man’s *cohabitation* with more than one woman. In 1887 Congress annulled the Mormons’ articles of incorporation, confiscated their assets, and imposed test oaths on Utah citizens, leading to almost 1300 criminal prosecutions (Graff, 1999).

The state has been attempting to control and preserve the social order by restricting marriage to the “right people” and punishing multiple-partner relationships. Nonetheless these relationships have always existed and continue to exist, even when illegal.

MARRIAGE FOR ORDER

In Graff’s (1999) analysis, order is the next reason for marriage: “To marry, in the public sense, means to expect the world to treat your life as shared—to announce that your sexual partner has first claim on you and your efforts” (p. 192). Graff (1999) asks:
are you married when you commit to your partner(s) and your commitment is then recognized by family/church/state? Or does the authority pronounce you married, register your marriage, and grant you the rights and obligations of marriage? Does the wedding make the marriage, or is it a celebration of what has already occurred?

Roman marriage depended on intent. If a couple lived together with the intention of being married, then married they were, but if they did not intend marriage, their living together was meaningless. Augustine, who intended a legal future marriage to someone else, was therefore free to live with his concubine. Jewish belief is that the couple create the marriage themselves by their vows (Graff, 1999).

John Boswell, in his controversial book, *Same-sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, (1994) claims that Eastern Christian liturgies, some as early as fourth century C.E., for two men or two women creating a “spiritual brotherhood,” were comparable to heterosexual marriages. These same-sex unions were at most times forbidden to monks and nuns, who were not to engage in “particular friendship”. The earliest Greek liturgical manuscript, housed in the Vatican library as Barberini 336, contains four ceremonies for sacramental union: one for heterosexual betrothal, two separate ceremonies (called “prayers”) for heterosexual marriage, and a similar “prayer” for uniting two men (Boswell, 1994).

When the Roman Catholic Church declared marriage to be a sacrament, this made marriage a spiritual reality created by the free and equal consent of the individuals involved. Consent once given could never be revoked.

Theologians decided that a marriage was made and permanently sealed at the moment the pair knowingly and willingly said, “I marry you,” even if they...
said their vows in absolute secrecy, with no witnesses; or even if they never actually consummated their union. Words made the marriage—not family agreements or contracts, and not sex (Graff, 1999, p. 196).

Gradually canon law included the banns (wedding-to-be announced three weeks in a row); vows must be said before priest and people, either in front of or inside a church. Still, in the eyes of the people, it was the sex act that made the marriage, not the priest. Up to half of European adults in the sixteenth century were officially unmarried, many of them cohabiting as husband and wife, believing that they, and not the church, had the right to say they were married (Graff, 1999).

Protestants believed marriage was a secular status conferred by an outside authority, not a sacrament. In 1525 Zurich began to require “at least two pious, honorable, and incontestable witnesses to the vows.” In 1537 priests living with concubines had to marry or separate. In 1563 the (Catholic) Council of Trent declared that only marriages performed publicly by the parish priest were valid. French revolutionaries instituted civil marriage and registration. The State was in control, not you, not God. The Anglicans kept the idea that private vows constitute the sacrament that creates a marriage (Graff, 1999).

In 1753 Britain passed basic regulations: licensing, public and daylight ceremonies, registries signed and dated by spouses and witnesses, parental consent up to age 21. Anything else was to be annulled and punished. Quakers and Jews were exempt from some requirements. Nineteenth century American courts decided that private marriage was a necessity, not a scandal, and invented the concept of common-law marriage. Behavior made a marriage, not vows, not registration; if a couple said they
were married, then they were. Cohabitation became the only requirement for marriage (Graff, 1999).

The Victorian era saw conflict between the official opinion that “publicly bestowed marriage was the only kind of marriage,” and the advocates of “free love” with the idea that the heart made its own marriages, that any law enforcing or policing it was a spiritual travesty. Free-love advocates believed that marriage law enforced sin by keeping spouses legally bound once they disliked each other, turning women into helpless maidservants and men into tyrants (Graff, 1999). If mutual consent is the sacrament, “what the law calls fornication, when it is the union of mutual love, may be the holiest action two human beings can engage in” (Nichols & Gove, 1854). Since marriage should not begin without love, it should cease when love is gone, free-lovers thought. Wives should be able to say, “no” when their husbands wanted sex; marriages should dissolve when affection failed; husbands and wives should be equal in private and in law; and no imprimatur should be needed for sexual relations beside the heart and God (Graff, 1999).

Free-lovers were persecuted and jailed by the more powerful and “saintly” Victorians, but their values have persisted into today’s culture. As Graff asserts,

Our society has begun moving back to the old and honorable idea that marriage is something made by the couple, not by any outside authority—and has integrated some radically modern ideas about sexual equality and individualism…If the inner life is what makes a marriage who could have the hubris to judge the quality and commitment of mine (as a lesbian)? When the state has been sweeping away all shackles on marriage except the heart’s bond, how can it, in justice, refuse to recognize ours? (Graff, 1999, p. 208).
Graff argues for state recognition of same-sex marriages, but the same logic applies to MCC’s alternative polyamorous families. If the inner life is what makes a marriage, can MCC judge the quality and commitment of polyamorous units as a class to deny them Holy Union?

MARRIAGE FOR LOVE

Graff’s (1999) last category is heart. Graff (1999) concedes that pre-modern folks could and did feel love, ranging from companionable affection to passionate desire, and even sometimes felt it for their spouses. But, Graff (1999) says, this is something new: love as marriage’s public philosophy, displacing everything from finances to babies.

One way of answering the question, “What is marriage for?” is to look at what grounds for divorce are acceptable. If marriage is for sex, then impotence or circumstances that prevent sex dissolves the marriage. In the Catholic marriage sacrament, consent, once given, whether by words or by having sex changes your soul’s status forever, merging the partners into one, and thus it could never be undone. For Protestant reformers, marriage was a relationship for companionship, and living up to one’s vows was what made marriage holy. If you violate your contract, you shatter the marriage. Loss of affection is not a problem; committing a sexual sin is. If marriage is an oasis of sexual righteousness, only sexual misbehavior cancels the marriage.

Protestant teaching that a crime against the marriage undoes the marriage, led to a new social understanding—that since marriage was for affection, incompatibility of various kinds should dissolve it. As former priests, now married, the reformers started to see marriage with its daily challenges as a spiritual act pleasing to God. The Industrial
Rev. Frances Mayes, MCC Holy Union

Revolution changed the economy in which two workers were dependent on each other for life—love is left as the main justification for marriage. In earlier times the parents chose; the couple had veto power. In the Industrial age you chose your own mate, but parents had veto power (Graff, 1999).

We can get a better perspective on today’s marriage debates by remembering that although each apparently revolutionary proposal to change the marriage rules has shocked the conservatives of any given era, when such proposals surface in public debate the underlying economic and social changes have already happened…Western marriage today is a home for the heart: entering, furnishing, and exiting that home is your business alone. Today’s marriage—from whatever angle you look—is justified by the happiness of the pair (Graff, 1999, pp. 250-251).

As the structures of families have changed over time to meet changing needs, so the institution of marriage has changed to reflect the realities of changed families. Today, in American culture, love is considered prerequisite to marriage and the best reason to stick with a troubled marriage. If marriage rites celebrate already existing families and add social glue to encourage longevity, existing polyamorous families deserve to have their love and commitment honored and celebrated, too.

All of this discussion so far has followed the development of Christian families in Western, and specifically American culture. But MCC is a global fellowship, not an American church with foreign missions. At least that is the intention. The recent reorganization divides the world into eight regions, all of them international, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural (mccchurch.org). Non-Western cultures have experienced
different paths of development and different ways of structuring families. A gospel of liberation, community, and social action must be relevant to the cultures in which it ministers.

Polygamy

When Christian missionaries first began to make African converts, they insisted that a prerequisite to baptism for polygamous men was to choose one wife and send the others away. This meant that the less favored women were denied any economic, social, or emotional benefits of marriage. Many of them were forced to become prostitutes to support themselves and their children. This was a subject of intense debate in the 1970’s and today many churches in Africa are not forcing polygamous marriages to be dissolved. African Anglican Archbishop David Gitari contends that polygamy, as ideally practiced, is more Christian than divorce and remarriage as far as the abandoned wives and children are concerned. In 1988, the Anglican Communion at Lambeth agreed that African polygamists did not have to divorce their wives in order to be baptized (Anglican News service, 1988).

For anthropologists, polygamy refers to a form of legal or socially sanctioned marriage. Marriage between two people is called monogamy; one man and two or more women is polygyny; one woman and two or more men is polyandry; two or more men and two or more women is called cenogamy or group marriage. Monogamy is the most common of marital types, but various forms of plural marriage are recognized or even preferred in many cultures.
When one looks at societies, rather than individuals, polygyny is the most common marital structure. In a study of the Ethnographic Atlas, Murdock analyzed marital structure in 1,157 societies. Monogamy was the only permitted form of marriage in 14.5% of cultures, polyandry was the norm in only seven cultures (0.6%), and polygyny was practiced in 84.8% of the world’s non-industrialized cultures (Murdock, 1967). Even in polygamous societies, the majority of marriages will be monogamous due to sex-ratio constraints, but polygyny is the common ideal.

The Ethnographic Atlas does not include modern industrialized societies, which are overwhelmingly ideally monogamous, but many citizens practice what has been called “serial monogamy.” This can be seen as an alternative way to practice polygamy. A person has more than one spouse over time, but only one at a time. Indeed it is sometimes referred to as “serial polygamy” (Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995).

Polygyny is most prevalent in Muslim countries and in more traditional and agrarian cultures. For example, among the Bedouin of Israel and Mediterranean Jews living in Yemen, 10-25% of men have more than one wife. These are the wealthiest men with the most status and most have only two wives (Ginat, 1997). The Quran allows up to four wives in certain cases: “If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four: but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one.” (4:3) Modern Muslims may interpret this as a call to monogamy since, they conclude, no man can treat multiple wives fairly and equally. But most Muslim societies allow men with financial means to marry up to four women. Since Islam frowns on any adult remaining unmarried or celibate for more
than four months, this is a practical solution for societies in which women outnumber men because of war, uneven mortality rates, or any other reason.

Attempts have been made to modify the marriage laws in some Muslim countries. In the 1970’s then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat pushed through a law to require men to notify their wives before a divorce, popular dissent led Hosni Mubarak to rescind it when he became president. So men in Egypt may have more than one wife in different households without informing either of them (Stack, Sunday, Sept 20, 1998).

There is an economic advantage to living in a polygamous household, and in parts of Africa where polygyny is practiced, it is often a senior wife who encourages her husband to marry again. Wives bring their own labor and that of their children into the equation, so that the household income is greater. In modern industrialized countries, children are consumers and monogamy is the norm, but in agricultural societies, where the family is the unit of production, polygyny is more common. About 90% of pre-agricultural societies practice polygyny, even though the contribution of women may be less in cultures where hunting, fishing, and herding are the means of survival. In modern consumer societies, the economic advantage would continue to exist if more wage earners were sharing expenses. Reasons for polygamy that have been cited include economy, social status, tradition, biosocial factors, political connections, lineage advantages, and sexual access, especially where intercourse is forbidden during pregnancy and lactation, which could last from two to six years (Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995, pp. 120-121). Young African brides, whether Christians or Muslims or otherwise, might prefer to marry a married man who has already proved himself to be a responsible
husband. Many African wives urge their husbands to get a second wife so that they do not feel lonely (Muslimin web page).

Mormon polygyny, although formally ended by church officials in 1890, still persists in the Western U.S, especially in some isolated towns in Utah. The reasons are not economic, but religious. Children are signs of God’s favor and a requirement for God’s blessing. Men marry young women and tend to remarry when the youngest wife is past childbearing age. Some Mormon women believe that having co-wives enables them to have a career and a family without short-changing either (Muslimin web page). It is estimated that about fifty thousand people in the Rocky Mountain states live in polygamous homes (Kilbride, 1994, p.73). The Colorado branch of the American Civil Liberties Union has petitioned its parent organization “to make legal recognition of polygamy a national cause like gay and lesbian rights” (Johnson, April 9, 1991, p. 129).

Because the Bible never condemns polygamy, no Jewish theologian opposed it publicly until the tenth century, when a rabbi named Gershom outlawed polygamy in Eastern Europe for 1,000 years. This was in response to persecution by Christians, so that they would not also hold this against the Jews. That prohibition applied only to Ashkenazi Jews and expired in 1987. Sephardic (Mediterranean) Jews have never outlawed polygamy, and continue to practice it. When the modern state of Israel was established in 1949, polygamy was outlawed, however those who already had several wives could bring them. In cases where a wife is not able to bear children or is mentally ill, the rabbis can give a husband the right to marry a second woman without divorcing the first wife (Stack, Sunday, Sept 20, 1998).
Muslim Israeli Bedouin continue to make clandestine marriages to several wives in order to build up the family power base, in spite of the prohibition of legal polygamy. A commonly used ruse is to legally divorce the first wife, but continue to live with and support her while contracting a second marriage and so on. The main structural difference between Bedouin marriages and the American pattern of marriage and divorce seems to be that no one gets deserted along the way. Women and children continue to belong to the family when other wives are added (Stack, Sunday, Sept 20, 1998).

In some cultures men tend to marry sisters, with the feeling that they will be able to get along and avoid jealousy better than non-related co-wives. In these cultures the entire family usually lives in one large household. In other places each wife has her own home and the common husband visits each in rotation. The result is less interaction between co-wives and half-siblings that might be seen as competitors for time and attention, and also results in periods of father absence. Ingoldsby (1995) concludes: “In summary, polygyny has flourished everywhere except in Christian Europe and North America, and it brings advantages to the wives as well as to the husband… It remains popular in places even when not economically advantageous and has mechanisms for dealing with family conflict” (p. 124).

Polyandry is rare compared to other marriage forms, but entire cultures have found it suitable for their particular circumstances. In some cases both men and women may take multiple spouses producing a group marriage situation called polygynandry. Everyone may have multiple spouses, but the spouses of each may not know the spouses of the other. This differs from cenogamy in which a group of women and men are all married to each other. The Toda of southern India have a complex kinship system in
which, when a woman marries a man, she is automatically married to all his brothers. Practitioners of this form of fraternal marriage show little evidence of jealousy. A social father is chosen for each child, but actual paternity is not an issue. Female infanticide is practiced, thus the male/female ratio is kept high, allowing or even requiring polyandry. If a Toda dies unmarried, he/she is ritually married to a cross-cousin so that there will be no singles in the Toda afterlife. A Toda man may also have a consort from outside his own group. Typically he pays her husbands for permission to see her. A ceremony is held and visits are scheduled. A Toda household revolves around care of the sacred buffalo, a task forbidden to women. Toda women have little to do, as even cooking, which involves milk, is reserved for males (Ingoldsby, 1995).

Tibetans historically practiced polyandry and infanticide as a strategy to keep the birth rate down in a poor environment where subdivided plots for progeny would have been too small for survival. The Nyinba of Nepal and other Himalayan cultures still use polyandry as a response to harsh environments. The Pahari justify polyandry with a Hindu story of five divine brothers married to one woman, but monogamy and polygyny are also allowed depending on the financial status of each family (Ingoldsby, 1995).

In Sri Lanka’s Kandyan culture, sexuality is not restricted and not considered to be a defining characteristic of marriage. "Women define their polyandrous marriages not in terms of shared sexuality but in terms of shared food. A husband is someone for whom a wife cooks rice, and although a man’s extramarital affairs are tolerated, society would not accept his eating in public with a mistress” (Ingoldsby, 1995). Polyandry has distinct economic advantages for these small-scale agricultural societies. It keeps the farm in one piece. It allows one of the husbands to be away from the farm working for months to
years at a time without disrupting the family. It also provides economic security for the wife when one of her husbands dies.

In South Asian countries, a wife has a fixed residence which she shares with her husbands, who tend to be close relatives (brothers or cousins); in Nigeria each husband has his own residence, and the wife travels among them. The Abisi have a complicated system of polygynandrous marriage. A young woman marries three men, from three different clans, on the same day. She lives with husband number one, chosen by her family, for a year and is then free to move in with her self-selected “love marriage” partner. The parents also select the third “home marriage” partner. A fourth, or “grass marriage” may be entered later, usually for economic reasons. Women may live with whichever husband they desire at any given time. Men also practice this pattern. The plural marriages of each sex are separate. “The system also seems to be designed for dealing with the legitimization of sexual attraction to more than one person and could be seen as more healthy than the monogamy-with-adultery pattern common in modern Western society” (Ingoldsby, 1995, p. 129).

Some far northern cultures, such as the Reindeer Chukchee, have a custom of sexual hospitality in which up to ten couples unite. The men in such a marriage are called “companions in wives.” The couples live separately at some geographical distance from each other. When a man is traveling he is welcomed into the home of another in-group couple and is expected to sleep with the wife (Ingoldsby, 1995).

Polygamy has been a successful strategy in many societies for dealing with the complexities of human civilization and intimacy. Each culture must find a balance in handling the issues of economy, status, sexual exclusivity and variety, chastity, parental
power, paternity, kin networks, politics, jealousy, religion, and related concerns. Depending on the relative importance of these considerations, men and women have been very creative in dealing with marital structure. The Abisi, for instance, settled on four different marriages for each person, so as to meet the needs of kin organization (first marriage), romance (love marriage), parental authority (home marriage), and economic security (grass marriage). In contrast, modern Western culture generally ignores the first and third considerations and tries to combine the fourth (economics) with the highly valued second (romance) (Ingoldsby, 1995).

Philip Kilbride (1994), professor of anthropology at Bryn Mawr college, Pennsylvania, has written an apologetic for polygamy in American society out of his experiences in East Africa and in the African American community. He proposes polygamy as one solution to the problems of the contemporary family, especially the children. Problems sited by Kilbride (1994) include the feminization of poverty, which leads directly to poverty among children. Women earn less than men at every level and are concentrated in low-paying jobs. The dual labor market dictates that both spouses in a family work to make ends meet. Women’s standard of living deteriorates after divorce, whereas men’s rises. Families with children now represent at least one-third of the homeless population and are the fastest growing segment of people now living on American streets. Furthermore Kilbride (1994) sites the lack of involvement of fathers: 27 percent of all American children are now born out of wedlock; but 67 percent of African American children are born out of wedlock (Kilbride, 1994).

Other factors cited by contemporary writers include statistics that report one out of every twenty young black males dies before reaching the age of 21; for those between
20 and 35 years of age, homicide is the leading cause of death. Many other young black males are unemployed, incarcerated, or incapacitated by drugs. Many young black females become single mothers before the age of 20 and are themselves in need of providers. This shortage of available black men has created a phenomenon in the black community known as “man sharing,” wherein a legally married man may actually have several family units who may be unaware of each other (Muslimin web site).

Kilbride (1994) suggests that the family should be diversified to contribute to family stability, enhance the presence of males in the family, and help address the workload problems that small families (including single parents) may have.

Our ‘entrenchment’ in the nuclear family form is not the solution to family disruption. Instead, we should seek ways to build on communitarian and extended family structures as alternatives to our high divorce rate…Unfortunately, the viewpoint of monogamy as an absolute good without exception is more a part of the problem than a solution (Kilbride, 1994, p. 12).

Studies of alternative non-nuclear families formed in the 1960’s report much variation in form. “All in all, the results are very encouraging and suggest that counter-cultural or non-conventional family arrangements per se do not have undesirable effects on the children” (Kilbride, 1994, p. 20). Kilbride (1994) believes that normalizing such families would be good for the children. “From a child’s perspective his or her experience would be enhanced if the relationship were legalized or made normative through some kind of legitimate marital concept…plural marriage might be a reasonable solution to some of the hurt and damage children appear to be undergoing” (Kilbride, 1994, p. 21).
Studies of children raised by lesbian or gay parents show that these children are essentially no different from other children in terms of self-esteem, gender-related problems, gender roles, sexual orientation, and general development (Hoeffer, B. (1981; Green, 1992; McNeill, Rienzi, & Kposowa, 1998; Patterson, 1997; Patterson & Reddig, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Citing the many ways African societies practice plural marriages, Kilbride (1994) concludes that in polygamous families children have less chance to disrupt the marriage, there is more social support if a member dies or leaves, and children living in larger families have the opportunity to learn social skills with more people. Euro-American explorer Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton believed that polygamy would help to keep families stable, lessen the need for prostitutes, and help the single wife with her many household chores (Kilbride, 1994). The Oneida community’s complex marriage stemmed from a disbelief in private ownership, regarding traditional marriage as a form of ownership of bodies by husbands and wives.

Advantages to polygamy cited by Kilbride (1994) include sharing the workload, having protection from outsiders, helping to care for other family members when they or their children are sick, preventing childlessness. Disadvantages include conflict over insufficient resources. Some Africans object to the term man-sharing as used to describe the covert polygyny in African American communities, feeling that it puts emphasis on sexuality, whereas in Africa polygyny is more about responsibility and family relationships than about sex. “One needs to move beyond the sexual arena to discuss the subject of man-sharing; it is very Western to link sex with polygamy and to see it as potentially unethical in terms of sexual morality” (Kilbride, 1994, p.97). According to
Kilbride (1994), the problem associated with man-sharing as currently practiced is its secrecy, which is an issue of honesty and trust. Destigmatizing man-sharing would support fathers, who, with the approval of their spouse, could be made available to single mothers.

Kilbride (1994) lists groups who would benefit from a plural marriage option: 1. Families who currently practice plural marriage, such as Mormons; 2. Those who practice man-sharing if plural relationships already in place were made legitimate; 3. Career women who seek an extended or expanded family of choice, but who do not want a traditional marriage; 4. Elderly women who face a shortage of elderly men; 5. Bisexual men and women who wish to maintain several intimate relationships simultaneously, and 6. Social groups in which there is an imbalance of the sex ratio (Polyandry may be necessary for China where selective abortion and female infanticide have created a surplus of males); 7. Asian refugees who come to the U.S. with multiple wives and families, now forced by government policy to abandon all but one if discovered; and 8. Children suffering from the disruption of divorce and blended family ambiguities. “Children would be better served if family augmentation rather than only separation and dissolution were seen as options” (Kilbride, 1994, p. 118).

Kilbride (1994) goes on to describe situations in which he sees polygamy as a solution to problems of infertility, infidelity, economic hardship, single parenthood and divorce. “Sexual relations may or may not be involved. In fact...polygamy is more about family concerns than about sex” (Kilbride, 1994, p. 122). Kilbride (1994) believes that our churches and synagogues have contributed to much suffering by those people now
stigmatized or excluded from sanctioned family participation by virtue of their involvement in so-called sinful family life-styles.

Bishop Henry Okullu (Church of the Province of Kenya, Anglican derived) names polygyny as the single largest pastoral problem in western Kenya. The policy of excluding plural wives and their children from Christian Baptism and forcing men to choose only one wife to be eligible for baptism, he says, keeps many people out of church. Father Michael C. Kirwen (Roman Catholic) believes that the prohibition of the levirate marriage as practiced in Kenya and Tanzania, based on European societal realities is maladaptive. He cites Catholic marriage policy in Africa as a grave pastoral problem, an unending source of anxiety and frustration to clergy and laity alike (Kilbride, 1994).

Clearly, polygamy is not a quaint arrangement from the past, but continues to be a viable option in many cultures designed to meet local conditions. As a worldwide fellowship MCC should not use narrow, North American definitions in bylaws intended to serve its multicultural, multinational regions. If for no other reason than that these marriages exist legally and/or within culturally accepted bounds, MCC bylaws should be adaptable enough to recognize and honor these families.

While anthropologists and sociologists argue cogently for redefining the socially accepted and legal definitions of marriage and family, the reality is that in most of the world, queer “families of choice” exist and function outside the social norms and often outside the law.
Polyamory

STRUCTURES

Kath Weston (1991) describes how gay people create “families of choice” which differ from social networks in that they include symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material or emotional assistance, and other signs of enduring solidarity. These families might include some friends, former lovers, long-term partners, children, and/or blood relatives. They have fluid boundaries and varied membership. While this presents a challenge to anthropologists seeking to map family structures, the people involved could easily name who is part of the family, who are “in-laws,” and who are friends. These families typically exhibit no defined cycles of expansion and contraction, no patterns of dispersal, and no replicable units (Weston, 1991).

At the 1987 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, speakers repeatedly invoked love as the necessary and sufficient criterion for defining kinship. “Love makes a family—nothing more, nothing less.” Weston (1991) says, “Grounding kinship in love de-emphasized distinctions between erotic and non-erotic relations while bringing friends, lovers, and children together under a single concept (p. 107).” Families of choice include people who love each other, whether sexual together or not. Family isn’t about sex, it’s about loving relationships.

Relationships or families with more than two adults are very complex. Adding a new person multiplies relationship possibilities. Imagine a group of three adults. Their genders may be same or different. If they are all equal partners, but do not share group sex, they are actually three couples (A+B, B+C, C+A). In this case there are nine relationship parameters because each individual also relates to each other couple.
They could be a relationship Vee, in which the central person has two lovers who may be close friends, housemates, co-parents, or some other quasi-relative role, but not lovers.

They could be a ménage a tois or group marriage in which all three relate sexually and practically in complex interactions.
They could be a primary couple with a secondary lover relating to either or both of them.

![Figure 5: Primary couple with a secondary](image)

They could all be secondary or casual lovers, meeting occasionally for social or sexual rendezvous.

![Figure 6: Secondary or casual lovers](image)

Any of these configurations could also be open to new partners, either as a group or as individuals within the group.

![Figure 7: Open Vee relationship (one possibility)](image)
Outside relationships may be restricted in various ways, such as no emotional commitment, certain activities forbidden (typically genital intercourse), no bringing lovers home, complete or limited information shared, or any other agreed-upon rules. Sometimes definitions within a couple differ such that one may regard extramarital physical “play” excluding intercourse as sexual, while the other may not. So within the same group, person A claims to be monogamous, person B claims a polyamorous identity, and person C may regard him/her self as a casual “player”.

Figure 8: Different views of the same relationship

Two heterosexual couples forming a foursome might relate only heterosexually across the original pairs, or might also relate bisexually, or in any combination.

Figure 9: Foursomes
Add secondary (long-term, non-residential) or tertiary (occasional) lovers and the map becomes almost too complex to draw in two dimensions. A cluster of these relationships linked together forms an intimate network. If everyone knows everyone else, it may become a tribe. If anyone is not honest about their sexual practices, it can be a public health nightmare. Often tribes have strict rules about what is allowed or forbidden. Violating the rules can lead to expulsion (Baldwin, 1993).

Polyamory is a relatively new word derived from Latin *poly*=more than one, and *amor*=love. Some use the word to describe any sexual lovestyle outside of celibacy or monogamy (as it is commonly used to mean one lover at a time). Others prefer “non-monogamy” as the overarching term and use “polyamory” or just “poly” to refer to relationships with more than one other person that include emotional involvement (love) and may or may not include sex. In this more limited view “poly” would not include swinging, an arrangement of sexual sharing usually among two or more married heterosexual couples or long-term same-sex couples. Swingers generally avoid emotional involvements and may have rules limiting frequency, location, and content of the interactions.

Polyamory would also differ from those open relationships in which outside sexual play is allowed, but emotional involvement forbidden. It might include polyfidelity, a lovestyle that creates a closed poly family of more than two adults who have sexual contact only with the members of the group. People may consider themselves to be polyamorous even if they do not currently have any partners, regarding it as an orientation. Others may use the word only to refer to families or a lifestyle practice, rather than a description of individuals. Poly families may or may not include children.
Those that do, commonly regard all the partners as co-parents, although it would be possible to hide secondary lovers from the children. Since most poly arrangements are made by people who regard openness and honesty as very important values, it is likely that they would include children in the company of those who know. Because of the social stigma, and sometimes-legal constraints imposed, this honesty may not extend to persons outside the family. In other words, polyamorous people are at least as likely to be “in the closet” as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

Deborah Anapol, a self-described “polygamous” woman in 1985, before the term polyamorous became available, asks some foundational questions: “Might we be seeking to expand our committed relationships through this love-network, and not merely hedonists who are unable to make commitments? Might there be a higher level of integration and relationship being born while monogamy and marriage and family are seeming to disintegrate? Might the urge to bond with many like-minded beings on many levels--including the sexual--be an expression of humanity’s growing spiritual awareness?” In learning to accept herself as a “polygamous” person Anapol (1985) came to these conclusions: Loving another person doesn’t mean you stop loving the first. The real difficulty of polygamy is the time it takes to relate to more people deeply, but it also frees time from internal (domestic) and external (economic) functions.

Anapol (1985) credits “polygamy” with giving her stability and excitement, security and freedom, intimacy and inclusiveness, depth and diversity, and freeing her from false dichotomies. Anapol (1985) says if we really want to save the family we must expand its boundaries. She questions why divorce should be the inevitable result of adultery? In a larger group, an individual may leave temporarily or permanently without
destroying the family. Parents can get time off. Dependency is spread among several adults lessening the burden on any one person. Anapol (1985) concludes that a multi-partner model for family and sexual relationships is not only consistent with the values of a humane, sustainable culture, but that to create alternatives to monogamy (or serial monogamy) as legitimate options is a critical path task. Anapol (1985) has discovered that many people are forming relationships that go beyond the couple, but that they are reluctant to talk about it because they are wary of the loss of respect and credibility both from the alternative community and for the alternative community.

This dynamic is observable within MCC, as polyamorous families are fearful both of losing the respect of others in their new local churches, a respect long sought and acquired only through long, challenging processes, and of bringing “scandal” on their beloved church community by admitting to non-monogamy. Rev. Perry, UFMCC founder and moderator-for-life, says that including multiple-partner families in the bylaw description of Holy Union would be seen as, “very naive politically by a majority of our membership as well as our many friends outside of our movement and would be viewed then as a cult, by many” (personal email).

The other side of the argument, that the bylaws should be changed, asserts that political expediency at the expense of disowning the moral choices of our own community is too big a price to pay. Selected quotations from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. may be cited: “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere,” “Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust,” and “The means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek” (Equal Partners in Faith, 2003).
IS NON-MONOGAMY NATURAL?

One of the arguments against polyamory is that it is somehow “unnatural.” In *The Myth of Monogamy* (Barash & Lipton, 2001) the authors argue from a biological and anthropological viewpoint that monogamy is unnatural for both animals and humans. David Barash, zoologist and psychologist, and Judith Lipton, psychiatrist, examining new data from DNA analysis of many species, conclude that monogamy is very unusual in nature. Most birds and animals that are “socially monogamous,” mating for life, nonetheless produce offspring from more than one male.

“If a female mammal becomes inseminated because of an out-of-pair-bond copulation, she is no less the mother of the offspring produced; but the deceived mate—who may nonetheless provide food, defense, baby-sitting, and so forth—is very much less the father! So it is anticipated that, for most living things, not only will males be more eager for EPCs [extra-pair copulations], but they will also be more intolerant of the same behavior by their mates. The stage is therefore set for the double standard” (Barash & Lipton, p. 152).

While it is clear that it is not possible to examine humans without their cultural environment, Barash & Lipton (2001) state, “the evidence is overwhelming that monogamy is no more natural to human beings than it is to other living things” (p. 141). There is a biological advantage for a man producing children from more than one woman (spreading his genes around).

Species where males are significantly larger than females are inclined to polygyny (males must compete with each other for females) whereas species where size is not a differentiating factor may be monogamous (or nearly so). Human males are about 15%
taller and heavier, as a group, than human females. Monogamy has been reported for 10-15 percent of all primate species, as compared to three percent for mammals generally, but newer observational studies indicate that only nine species of primates live in exclusive two-adult groups throughout their geographical range; others appear to be monogamous under certain conditions only. “There is no reason to think that human beings represent a mammal group that is unusually predisposed to monogamy” (Barash & Lipton, p. 146).

Of 185 human societies surveyed by anthropologist C.S. Ford and psychologist Frank Beach, only 29 (fewer than 16 percent) formally restricted their members to monogamy. Moreover, of these 29, less than one-third wholly disapproved of both premarital and extramarital sex. In 83 percent of the societies examined, males were allowed multiple mateships—that is polygyny or socially approved concubines, rather than monogamy—if they could afford it (Ford and Beach, 1951). The renowned anthropologist G. P. Murdoch, in his classic study Social Structure (1949), found that of 238 different human societies around the globe, monogamy was enforced as the only acceptable marriage system in a mere 43.

Among human beings, about 75 percent of societies permit male infidelity, whereas only about ten percent permit female infidelity. “Human beings use mate-guarding, frequent copulations, and also a hefty dose of social prescription—religious injunctions, cultural conditioning, legal restraints, eunuchs, chastity belts, female circumcision, and so forth—in efforts to impose their will (typically, the desires of powerful men) on everyone else’s inclination” (Barash & Lipton, p. 170).

Sociologically, lifetime monogamy also seems to be rare and difficult.
Whatever our natural inclinations, there is no doubt that human beings are biologically and psychologically capable of having sex with more than one person, often in fairly rapid succession. The evidence is also overwhelming that many people are capable not only of ‘making love to’ but also of loving more than one person at the same time (Barash & Lipton, p. 190).

Barash & Lipton (2001) end their argument with a defense of monogamy, stating that there is very little connection, if any, between what is natural and what is good. “In the course of a loving marriage, two people have the opportunity to hone and shape their shared experiences such that one’s partner does in fact become a rather precisely fitting key, uniquely adapted to the other’s lock, and vice versa” (Barash & Lipton, p.191). They call a good monogamous marriage an everyday miracle. It is clear that any arguments from “nature” will need to be carefully reconsidered in light of the fact that for most species, monogamy is not a natural behavior.

Jealousy is an issue that is often mentioned as a possible impediment when the subject of polyamory is broached. Poly guidebooks give attention to jealousy, often giving it whole chapters. Dr. Deborah Anapol (1997, Polyamory, the New Love Without Limits) begins her chapter on jealousy with a quotation from Thomas Moore (Care of the Soul): “The only way out of jealousy is through it. We may have to let jealousy have its way with us, and do its job of reorienting fundamental values. Its pain comes, at least in part, from opening up to unexplored territory and letting go of old familiar truths in the face of unknown and threatening possibilities.” Anapol contrasts jealousy with unconditional love and claims that it is both innate and learned.
If we recognize polyamory as a path for psychological and spiritual growth, then jealousy is gatekeeper on this path, for none can pass who refuse to confront this powerful force. Jealousy will continue to teach us all along the way, letting us know whenever it arises, we have another lesson to learn (Anapol, 1977, pp. 49-50).

Anapol (1997) says that we learn from our culture to view our lovers as territory or possessions which can be owned like property and which we have a right to control. In contrast, Anapol cites the behavior of our nearest primate relatives, the bonobo chimpanzees. Bonobos use sex as a sort of greeting and blessing and welcome to the event at hand, dispersal ritual, or to diffuse potential conflicts. They are indiscriminate and have few limits. They will have sex with close relatives, complete strangers, same-sex or other-sex partners, or solo. There is no violence in bonobo society (Small, 1992).

No human culture is as lax as bonobos. Humans learn to restrain sexual urges to avoid social sanctions. Unbridled promiscuous sexuality would certainly lead to an unacceptable rise in sexually transmitted infections. This reinforces the idea that restraining sex is a human cultural phenomenon, not something obviously preferred by “nature.” In the 1960’s, sexual rebels used as a slogan, “Make love, not war.” This expresses a belief that physical violence might decrease in inverse proportion to an increase in love and its physical expression.
FEMINIST ANALYSIS

In 1991 Mary Hunt wrote a feminist analysis of friendship among women as a better model for human relationships than heterosexual marriage. In Hunt’s view, the capitalist economy emphasizes fierce competition, so that love, like capital, is limited. If one person gains more, another always loses. In society’s view it is therefore wrong to develop intimate relationships with persons other than one’s partner.

Ideologies that support possessiveness on the ground of scarcity lead to behaviors that are supportive of addicted controlling of people as well as material goods. Compulsory monogamy, the structure of traditional marriage, is particularly suited to capitalism because it requires ownership of and monopoly control over the spouse’s sexual and emotional resources. Hunt’s solutions include economic equality for women and men, and work toward a multiplicity of “new and more mature forms of marriage and of sexual and nonsexual friendships. We need new forms of marriage in which primary relationships of all kinds—heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, monogamous, non-monogamous—may be publicly celebrated” (Hunt, 1991). Kilbride (1994) calls for destigmatizing extra-marital relationships to help prevent the harm done to children by divorce. “The present state of affairs not only contributes to shame, guilt, helplessness, and unhappiness, but also perpetuates a system of dishonesty—all of which we pass on to our children” (p. 51).

We have learned to expect that if our mate is interested in someone else, we may be replaced. Love is viewed as a limited resource in which any piece given to another is taken from someone else. Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt (The Ethical Slut, 1997) encourage us to unpack the emotion of jealousy to see what is behind it. It may be an
expression of insecurity, fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, feeling left out, feeling not good enough, or feeling inadequate. Anapol (1997) suggests that the primary issue is fear of losing your love object. This is based on the assumption that falling in love with someone new means falling out of love with your current partner.

Jealousy has a spiritual component. It indicates a crisis of faith because it is part of conditional love. If you can only love when you feel certain your love will be returned, you become vulnerable to jealousy (Anapol, 1997). Each of these authors (Dossie & Liszt, 1997, Anapol, 1997) goes on to discuss ways of dealing with jealousy to enhance the relationship and/or personal growth and to avoid acting out in destructive ways. Anapol (1997) names the opposite of jealousy, “compersion,” a feeling of delight in a beloved’s love for another.

Honesty is highly valued among polyamorous people. In Lesbian Polyfidelity, author Celeste West (1996) says that polyfidelity is “honest politics of the heart.” This is what makes it different from cheating or adultery. According to West (1996), a vow of monogamy is hypocritical, in that one pretends to know the future and guarantee a lifetime of exclusive love, while knowing all along that monogamy is rarely practiced for a lifetime. Thus the myth of monogamy encourages self-deception, denial, isolation and feelings of onerous duty and shame. Lying and keeping secrets are symptoms of a sick relationship. “Polyfidelity asks us to look very consciously at core value judgments, to develop an ethical system based on positive self-disclosure and integrity”(West, 1996, p. 73).

Lying damages relationships by an erosion of social trust. Betrayal feels devastating because a pledge of security has been broken. Lying damages in many ways,
by consuming energy in “damage control” each step of which requires more lies and more effort to conceal, by presenting a false persona that hides the real person and damages self-esteem, by polluting the climate of integrity which supports the social trust, and by depriving others of the benefits of knowing one’s own true self. West points out that patriarchal culture encourages everyone to lie. “Men are expected to lie about and conceal feelings. Women are expected to lie with our very bodies: to dye, to diet, to distort – as long as we are physically faithful to a man” (West, 1996, p. 76).

Anapol (1997) lists six guidelines for responsible relationships:

1. Consensus decision-making. Here the author establishes the primacy of communication of wants, limits, terms and conditions freely agreed to by all partners before beginning a poly relationship.

2. Honesty. Trustworthiness, dependability and full disclosure are parts of being responsible. “Being scrupulously honest with yourself and your partners is especially important in polyamory because honest communication is the best way of handling the fears and jealousies which inevitably arise from time to time…Sustainable intimacy absolutely requires total honesty.” (Anapol, 1997, p. 14)

3. Mutual caring. The relationship needs to enhance and support everyone involved. This also means attention to issues of birth control and avoiding sexually transmitted diseases.

4. Commitment. This is defined as a lifelong intention to support each other in whatever ways seem appropriate. “Meaningful sex creates a lifelong bond—lovers cannot be discarded like yesterday’s garbage.”(Anapol, 1997, p. 17)
5. Integrity. Keeping commitments is linked to knowing all parts of yourself and not withholding information.

6. Respect for boundaries. While it is important for primary partners to learn how to blend together as a unit, it is also essential to honor each person’s need to be an individual and to value the unique qualities and contributions each person brings to the relationship (Anapol, 1997).

Episcopal priest Carter Heyward (1989) also emphasizes honesty and faithfulness to commitments. This requires faith in the honesty of the other so that people relate on the basis of who each really is, not on a created image of the self or other person. Monogamy can foster fidelity if it is chosen with the intention of building and sustaining trust, but it can also be used to shield spouses from their real feelings, fears, and yearnings and prevent growth in a relationship. An unexamined, static commitment to monogamy can be used either to destroy fidelity or to preserve it (Heyward, 1989). Both monogamy and polyamory can be faithful and helpful or faithless and harmful. It isn’t the form of the relationship that makes it moral, but the way we treat one another within our relationships.

BENEFITS

Blessings or benefits of polyamory parallel those discussed for polygamy. An expansion of both quantity and quality of love is commonly claimed. Deborah Anapol (1997) says that multiple partners help you become a more conscious person. According to Anapol (1997), lessons learned in this relationship style include loving oneself, tolerance for diversity, speaking from the heart and communicating clearly, learning to
trust an internal sense of rightness, and thinking for oneself. These are earmarks of a
emotionally and spiritually mature person (Anapol, 1997).

Ellen Halpern (1999) asks: “If love is so wonderful, what’s so scary about
MORE?” Why is it that we are so stingy with our own and each other’s love? Why do we
call it cheating when someone we love loves someone else, too?” Halpern (1999)
suggests that Americans operate with a myth of the perfect partner. We have been led to
believe that the ideal relationship is one in which one finds one’s soul mate and forms a
permanent, exclusive partnership in which everyone’s needs are fully met. This puts
tremendous strain on dyads to be “perfect.” When the relationship no longer seems
perfect, it has “failed,” so we leave it and look for another. Our cultural assumption is
that a desire to have outside emotional or sexual experiences is an indication that the
primary relationship is inadequate and “dying” (Halpern, 1999).

Fears of loss and abandonment begin in childhood with sibling rivalry. It can be
difficult to admit that there is no guarantee that our life partner will stay with us forever;
relationships often note that liaisons with others often enhance and improve the couple’s
relationship with each other. If we re- assess the belief that we must stop loving one
partner before we love another, we find that there is plenty to go around” (p. 164).

Halpern (1999), Anapol (1997), Easton & Liszt (1997), and West (1996) all name
benefits to children. There is the possibility that the child will form a variety of stable
attachments and there will be more adults to supervise, support and play with the child.
The adults can share parenting and experience less stress and less burnout. Children have
more role models, more playmates, and more love from several co-parents. Multiple adult
intentional families may indeed be more stable than couples. One person leaving the family does not mean the child will now live with a single parent. Multiple wage earners can provide an economic cushion that may enable parents to resist the pressure to relocate, so unnecessary geographic separation does not lead to marital break-up.

Along with the economic benefits of sharing housing and expenses, Anapol (1997) points out that a small group of loving and well-coordinated partners can divide up tasks that would overwhelm one or two people. This would apply whether or not there are children in the family. Also, polyamory can help men and women break out of dysfunctional sex roles and achieve more equal, sexually gratifying and respectful relationships (Anapol, 1997). Finally, “polyamory can help create a world of peace and abundance where all of humanity recognizes itself as one family” (Anapol, 1997, p.152). An exclusively monogamous culture enshrines jealousy and possessiveness, creating social and moral barriers to forming stable alternative families. The nuclear family is valued as an “us” that must be guarded from intruders while everyone else is “them” (Anapol, 1997).

Because the family is the basic building block of the culture, the nature of the family has major implications for society as a whole. Polyamory breaks down cultural patterns of control, as well as ownership and property rights between persons, and by replacing them with a family milieu of unconditional love, trust and respect, provides an avenue to the creation of a more just and peaceful world. Changing the size, structure and emotional context of the family changes the personalities of the children developing in these families. By making the boundaries of the family more flexible and more permeable
to the outside world, the stage is set for a new world-view in which kinship with all of humanity is recognized (Anapol, 1997).

Catholic feminist Mary Hunt (2001) believes that “just good sex” is conducive to justice itself, the notion that “power-in-relation” moves us toward “right relationship, with self, others, creation, God.” Hunt asserts that,

Insofar as sexual relationships are just, they reflect and enhance power sharing. Male battering of women, heterosexism, homo-hatred, and oppressive reproductive health policies all contravene justice. Likewise, fierce and tender friendships, the celebration of love in its various forms, and accessible choices about procreation can make sex another ‘renewable moral energy’ source (p. 172).

Just good sex will, Hunt says, free us from the couples trap. She neither recommends nor rules out multiple relationships, but notes that conditions of consent and happiness are difficult to sustain in such situations. For Hunt, part of procreativity is the new network of relationships that emerge from all love relationships. (Hunt, 2001).

Easton and Liszt (1997) also talk about polyamory, or in their colorful term “ethical sluthood” as a spiritual choice. They contrast monism (belief that there is one right way) and dualism (different = opposite) with pluralism that insists on seeing, and valuing, everything that is. Each person’s life is important – so there can be as many ways to be sexual as there are to be human, and all of them valid. There are lots of ways to relate, to love, to express gender, to form families, to be in the world, to be human (Easton & Liszt, 1997). This open-ended philosophy of pluralism “can become a path to transcendence, a freeing of the mind and spirit as well as the body, a way of being in the world that allows expanded awareness, spiritual growth and – not incidentally – really
good sex” (p. 267). Easton and Liszt (1997) end their book (*The Ethical Slut*) with what sounds very much like a statement of faith:

We believe that monogamy will continue to thrive, that new forms of families are evolving now, that family and social structures that have growing room will continue to stretch and adapt. Our vision of utopia has free love as the foundation of our beliefs about reality, about possibility, about staying in the moment and planning the future…We free our animal selves by opening our intellects to awareness of our bodies, and when we are no longer stuck in our intellects we become more like spirit: intuitive, experiencing the joy of life for the simple sake of experiencing, in communion with ourselves, with each other, and beyond.

We want everyone to be free to express love in every possible way. We want to create a world where everyone has plenty of what they need: of community, of connection, of touch and sex and love. We want our children to be raised in an expanded family, a connected village within urban alienation, where there are enough adults who love them and each other, so that there is plenty of love and attention and nurturance, more than enough to go around. We want a world where the sick and aging are cared for by people who love them, where resources are shared by people who care about each other.

We dream of a world where no one is driven by desires they have no hope of fulfilling, where no one suffers from shame for their desires, or embarrassment about their dreams…We dream of a world where nobody gets to vote on your life choices, or who you choose to love, or how you choose to express that love,
except yourself and your lovers. We dream of a time and a place where we will all be free to publicly declare our love, for whoever we love, however we love them (Easton and Liszt, p. 268-269).

CHALLENGES

There are difficulties in polyamorous relationships, just as in any other relationship style. Easton and Liszt (1997) talk about real-world limits, namely time, space, possessions, and the “tyranny of hydraulics,” or biological limitations. Celeste West (1996) says that polyfidelity “is no less than leaving the grid of time for the circle of love” (p. 197). The Ancient Taoist Cult of Idleness fostered a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity studying nature, eating when hungry, drinking when dry, and visiting all night when the opportunity presented. Taoists focused on the art of living well and savored the now, in all its sensuality. West (1996) believes that Americans would do well to learn from the Taoists as a remedy for the hectic, workaholic, consumer madness that characterizes our society. “Creative Eros gives us the energy to pursue change.” (West, 1996, p. 203) Although West does not use these particular words, hers is an appreciation of the importance of kairos time as well as the limitations of chronos time.

More sexual activity means more potential risk for sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. One need not assume that polyamorists have more partners than serial monogamists; that is more a matter of timing than of numbers. Persons in a closed triad for example may have only two partners for a lifetime, whereas serial monogamists may marry four or five times or more. Open relationships do need to be more careful to use safer sex techniques than relationships in which genital sexual activities are limited to
those within the family group, assuming that all family members are healthy and keep the family rules. Some families consider themselves “fluid bonded” within the group, but open to outside sex with barrier protection (condoms, Saran wrap, dental dams). Accidental pregnancy is not an issue in same-sex families; those with a heterosexual or bisexual member need to carefully negotiate contraceptive use.

Social stigma can have a negative impact on polyamorous families. Ironically, people who value honesty and full disclosure within their relationships may feel the need to hide “extra” partners from employers, biological family, and/or church groups. The term used in the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities for nondisclosure is being “in the closet” or “closeted.” Not only does this result in a lack of social support, it challenges integrity as such individuals may feel they are “living a lie.” Weston (1991) says that coming out creates a sense of wholeness by establishing congruence between interior experience and external presentation, bringing the hidden to light, and transforming a private into a social reality. “The closet symbolizes isolation, the individual without society, a stranger even to self” (Weston, 1991, p. 50).

Kathleen Ritter, professor of counseling at California State University and psychotherapist, and Craig O’Neill, Catholic priest and spiritual director (1992), characterize coming out as a spiritual journey following a path from rigidity toward openness, from disconnectedness toward interrelatedness, from self-centeredness toward generativity, and from literal toward symbolic. People on this journey come to view events of pain and suffering as messengers to the self about the self’s path toward mystical communion with the Creator (O’Neill & Ritter, 1992, p. 207-218). O’Neill & Ritter (1992) believe that any relationship that reflects love reflects the source of love, which is God. God is present in
pain and suffering through Jesus Christ, continually crucified and offering the opportunity to transform anguish into new life (p. 212). In order to preserve the integrity of their being, transformed gay men and lesbians must learn to view themselves and their orientation in terms of both/and rather than either/or thinking (O’Neil & Ritter, 1992).

As West (1996) points out, “Polyfidelity very rarely receives affirmation in our society. We, in fact, are usually treated as shameful beings to even consider such a venture, not to mention live it openly” (p. 288). In West’s analysis, all shame is tied to the terror of being rejected and deserted. It is important to “accept the essence of your shining original face, your core acceptability” (p. 289). Jesus ties self-love to the ability to love others: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This acceptance, according to West (1996) opens the way for grace to conquer shame, and reconciliation to bridge gulfs of estrangement.

Karen McClintock (2001) faults the church for talking about sex rules without actually talking about sex. This causes the church to be seen as a place of hypocrisy because it has been silent and complacent about the indiscretions of its leaders while shaming those who choose faithfulness without the legality of marriage. The rules are not applied equally. This is one of the characteristics of a family steeped in shame (McClintock, 2001, p.90). Shame is given when unspoken rules are broken. In shame-bound systems the “children” are not told clearly what is expected of them, but they are a constant disappointment (McClintock, 2001). The “no talking about sex” rule, prevalent in families, operates in congregations with an underlying layer of permission for gossip, cover-ups, and blame. Shame creates feelings of isolation from congregations and from God. Even silent disapproval is felt at a deep, intuitive level (McClintock, 2001).
A shame-based culture punishes people by naming them deviant, belittling them, and silencing them. Words like slut, hussy, sinner, pervert, deviant, promiscuous, queer, unpardonable, and the like brand people as shameful and unworthy of God’s love. While most Christians are willing to admit that all people are sinners, the church’s use of the word has been selective. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered teens find themselves caught between a permissive sexual culture and repressive religious culture (McClintock, 2001). Gay young men are seven times more likely than heterosexual males to attempt suicide, frequently because of physical and verbal abuse, rejection, and low self-esteem (Crooks & Bauer, 2002; Remafedi, 1994).

McClintock (2001) says the church inflicts shame by teaching perfection, self-denial, idealism, gender domination, unworthiness, and condemnation. McClintock (2001) calls the church to healing by speaking the truth, welcoming strangers, acknowledging wounds, creating safe space, humor, welcoming change, and naming and stopping shaming, abusive, or compulsive behaviors. Reuther challenges theologians to reimagine family as a redemptive form of covenanted community, engaged in processes of mutual love and service that we might again be able to call sacramental (Reuther, 2000).

Anita Hill and Leo Treadway call for breaking the conspiracy of silence, which, they claim, shrouds lesbian and gay existence. Hill and Treadway call this need central to liberation theology for lesbian and gay people. “The key lies in hearing the stories of gay and lesbian life and faith experience and responding to the needs raised by them” (Hill & Treadway, 1990, p. 243). They remind readers that simply hearing the stories is not enough; advocacy and solidarity with those who suffer the pain of injustice is necessary (Hill & Treadway, 1990).
MCC pastor Rev. Andy Braunston (1997) speaks specifically to queer churches. Building on the statement of Rosemary Reuther (1985) that it is clear from the history of promise and betrayal in male liberation movements that women cannot trust their liberation to male liberators, Braunston says, “Queer agendas for the church will never be delivered by straight people, no matter how well-meaning. Straight churches will never let us in on our own terms: we will always have to compromise, behave properly, or play down this or that aspect of ourselves” (Stuart, Braunston, Edwards, McMahon & Morrison, 1997, p.100). Braunston is especially concerned with the duplicity required by closets, claiming that liberation can never come whilst closets exist, because a closet is a space of oppression. “God calls us out of the oppression to which many churches condemn us” to be a powerful sign to the rest of our LGBT community. This requires that queer churches not behave as “house slaves” not wanting to cause a fuss, but act in solidarity with others who have left or been expelled to the wilderness and not create carbon copies of what we left behind (Stuart, Braunston, Edwards, McMahon & Morrison, 1997).

That the need to be “out” and unashamed applies to polyamorous families of any orientation is attested to by the writers. Anapol (1997) calls polyamorous people the last sexual minority to come out of hiding and polyamory still so socially unacceptable that there is not even a widely understood name for it.

It’s natural to be reluctant to admit to yourself and others that what you want is something that’s widely held to be immoral and indecent—not to mention impossible! But trying to repress, lie about, rationalize or otherwise deny your polyamorous nature can be very damaging to yourself, your loved ones and your fellow polys (Anapol, 1997, p. 85).
Marts (2000), in an autobiography, talks about the freedom of being honest with her primary lover about her desire for a non-monogamous relationship:

What freedom, after years of struggling unsuccessfully to stay monogamous, finally to say, ‘This is what I am. I am capable of loving more than one person at the same time, and I want to find ways to act on my desires that honor and respect all of my partners.’ What a joy finally to know, with all my many ways of knowing, that sex is a sacrament, a holy act. What a homecoming, to worship an immanent Goddess who tells me ‘all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals (Marts 2000, p. 127).

Laurel Dykstra claims the power of following Jesus compels her out of closets. “My tradition says that G* is love, and I take great delight in the knowledge that, despite what churches may tell me, G*dl/love is forever pushing me and pulling me out of the closet and onto the street” (Dykstra, 2000, p. 88).

SUMMARY

Despite centuries of sex-negative teachings, the church has the necessary background to allow blessing of multiple-partner relationships. In its Jewish roots, in its sacred texts, in its varied historical practices, in its renewal of body-positive, sex-positive theologies of sexuality, in its emerging sexual theologies, the church can find adequate rationale for blessing non-monogamous unions.

Definitions of marriage and family vary tremendously in history and in cultures around the world today. The church must find a way to include, bless, and guide these diverse families. One historically recent and geographically limited ideal, the nuclear family,
should not be privileged above all other forms. Polygamy works in the social, cultural, and economic milieu of much of the world’s population. Even as Anglican and Protestant churches struggle to incorporate African polygamy, and American and European cultures struggle with homosexual unions, MCC is faced with the reality of its own polyamorous families. It does itself no favors by fearfully conforming to a dying form in the hopes that some of its families will gain the rights and privileges of legal marriage. It is positioned to take leadership in designing rites that meet the needs of today’s diverse family structures.

Healthy integration of spirituality and sexuality demands a close look at what MCC families really look like. Only then can a liberating theology based on experience be proposed. If, as Presbyterian minister Chris Glaser (1998) says, coming out is spiritual work, and if the sexual minorities communities have special gifts to offer the church (Countryman & Ritley, 2001), then it is time to hear the stories of the minority within a minority that is polyamorous families within MCC churches.
MINISTRY EVENT

The ministry event was an attempt to hear and communicate the stories of polyamorous MCC families. Data were collected using face-to-face private interviews by the researcher whenever possible. One interview was done by phone. Interviews were tape-recorded. The convenience sample was recruited at an MCC regional gathering and by way of several MCC email groups. Each interview began with a brief explanation of the study and permission to tape or use in this paper only. A short written survey was given after the interview to collect demographic data and ascertain the level of anonymity desired. (See Appendix C) The questions were kept as open-ended and neutral as possible. (See Appendix B) The interviewees language was picked up and used whenever possible. For example, if someone used a word to describe her/his relationships, such as “arrangement”, “family,” or “partners,” that word was used in subsequent questions. People who did not identify as Christians were asked about their “spiritual experience” or “faith group,” rather than their “church.”

Twelve interviews were conducted in a hotel room or in the homes of the people interviewed in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Portland, Oregon, USA; San Francisco, California, USA; and Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA between the dates of October 19, 2002 and January 4, 2003. One phone interview was conducted from the author’s home with the respondent’s conversation taped and mailed to the interviewer. All interviews began with recorded verbal consent to tape and use the information for this paper. (See Appendix A) The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.
The Sample

The total number of people interviewed (N) is 14. Eleven indicate female as their gender, with one adding butch. Three people wrote male as their gender, with one adding FtM (female to male transsexual). Three of the partners referred to are also FtM, and one describes herself as “male and female, not transsexual.” One woman says, “I would say I was transgender as a child. I had a college friend who was also transgender. We were the only college kids who, through the women’s movement, came to accept being women.”

Ages of the subjects range from 37 to 72 years old, with a mean age of 46 years and a median of 51 years. They live in Ohio, Oregon, California, and Texas. Among the group of respondents two have Doctor of Ministry degrees and two have Masters of Divinity degrees; seven have other Master’s; one is a Licensed Practical Nurse, one has a GED, and one is a college student.

Socio-economic status is indicated by occupation: four clergy persons, five other professionals, one businesswoman, two in technical jobs, and one laborer. Three subjects are retired, one from business, one from the military, and one from a technical job. Some people listed more than one occupation.

Eight women list their sexual orientation as lesbian, one as mostly lesbian. One person identifies as a dyke, one as queer, and one as bisexual. Two are gay males. One lesbian comments, “We joke around, but I swear I think we're gay men sometimes. Not by just what we do, it just feels that way.”

Data are presented in the words of the interviewees, as transcribed. They are in spoken American English, so the grammar differs from standard written forms. To maintain confidentiality, names have been changed where needed. Some interviewees
specifically requested the use of their real names, and those requests have been honored in some cases. Locations may also be altered where necessary for privacy.

The complexity of explaining sexual orientation, even when labels are self-chosen, is illustrated by this story:

The most interesting thing as a lesbian has been that one of my other lovers is a guy. That was a big surprise. I just never had a successful adult relationship, with a sexual component, with a guy. High school and all of that stuff doesn't really count, because you're teenagers and you don't know what you're doing. So when I turned about forty, I started going, ‘hmm.’ I started looking at my reasons for why I was never in love with a man. Essentially I figured out I was kind of afraid of men. And I didn't really want to be. [I asked myself] why was I afraid of men? And I really started looking at that myself. And my bottom line was that my mother transferred her fears into me at such an early age that it just kind of came with the package and I had never really looked at that.

I mean she absolutely brainwashed me that--you know all men in the world are not to be trusted, except your dad, so stay away from boys. And that was it. I mean that was stuck in there. So it was living itself out in my life. You know? I just was never comfortable with men. How could you be? I was programmed that they weren't to be trusted. And so I started kind of opening up that Pandora's Box of my mother's stuff and figured out that actually I had quite a bit of pent up curiosity about men sexually.
And I have a lover named Cathy who is absolutely committed to being bisexual. She refuses to move to the right or to the left or off the middle of the fence. And she's very happy right there. So she was the perfect person for me to talk to about: I have all this pent up curiosity about men sexually, but I'm also kind of afraid of them because I don't know what I'm doing, and would it be possible for us to arrange something where both of us could play with a guy together. You know? And that way she could be my sort of safety net, the known person. And that worked out really well.

Another friend of ours, a woman, had been friends with this woman for like thirty years and she had this husband and they were definitely poly and open. It was all negotiated up front. I just never want to get into a thing where I would be sexual with somebody who was not up front and negotiated permission with their spouse. So this was the kind of thing where the husband had a very open and up front relationship [with his wife].

So I got permission from the wife to borrow the husband, basically…I mean I'm under no illusions that I could go to a local bar and pick up a guy and he'd be anything like this guy. He has a degree in women's studies for one thing. [He is] very female centered. He is a pagan and that's actually part of his charm, is that he's very in touch with his own body. He's absolutely not threatened. In fact he worships femininity in a way that most men don't. So he was just this wonderful choice. And he was very flattered that I wanted to do this exploration and that I would want him to be the test subject. He was certainly willing to do that.
And for a straight guy, when you look at it the other way, two women approach you and say, ‘we'd both like to have sex with you [pause] at the same time. Okay, come on. You know? Isn't this every straight guy's fantasy? So we had quite a few rendezvous. That was when I was forty-one, we started doing that. And the nice thing is that as I've gotten more comfortable [with men], I've gotten together with him on my own. And Cathy has developed a relationship with him on her own, which is really working. And sometimes the three of us get together. So that's a really nice component of my life.

This woman states that she finds it a little sad that her spouse is “a complete lesbian” who expresses no interest in a liaison with this man. “I’d sort of love to share everything with her…just wanting to share all the different aspects of my life.”

Several subjects identify with more than one religious group. Religious backgrounds include three Roman Catholic, three Baptist, two Episcopal, two Methodist, and one each Disciples, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregational, Mormon, Voodoo, Agnostic, and none. Current religious groups include eight who list their church as MCC, two as Roman Catholic, one as Holy Names community (a Roman Catholic women’s religious order), two as simply Christian, one as Ecofeminist Christianity and one as Born Again Christian. Other religious affiliations include Unitarian or none, Jewish, Pagan, Taoist, Wicca, Voodoo, Buddhism and one who lists her current religious group as feminist. This study does not address religious change directly, but it is interesting to note that none of the subjects listed the same group(s) in answer to the questions: “In what faith tradition were you raised?” and “With what religious group do you currently identify?” It is possible that “faith tradition” and “religious group” are not equivalent
terms for these people. Sometimes the change is from a specific denomination to a more
general “Christian” or “MCC,” but there is always a change in the way an individual lists
his/her religious identity. This could indicate that all of the subjects have thought about
their spiritual needs and re-evaluated the choice of group affiliation. It may also simply
indicate the lack of denominational loyalty characteristic of the late 20th/early 21st
centuries.

Responses to the question of anonymity ranged from, “Please use our real names.
We are not ashamed of anything we do. The more people come out of the closet about
this, the sooner people will understand and accept us.” to “You’d better keep this strictly
confidential; I still want a career in this Fellowship.” Other comments were, “Everyone
already knows about us,” “They [the partners] would shoot me if they knew I was telling
you this,” and “I took two partners to [Rev. Elder] Troy’s Christmas party. I don’t have
anything to hide.”

Written terms for relationships show a diversity of language, sometimes
contingent on the situation. The most common words listed are partner(s), lover(s),
friend(s), girlfriend(s), family, and household. Other words for partners are friend and
lover, fiancé, play partners, “I might say fuck buddies if I’m talking to men,” primary
partner in an open relationship, my Xs and Os (ex-lovers and occasional lovers), wife,
spouse, my girl, housemate, my partner’s lover. Other terms listed for relationships
include family of choice, the arrangement, the team, the crew, and extended tribe.
Relationship Styles

The relationships represented take many forms. One couple interviewed were part of a group of four until two of the partners died. One threesome consists of two partners who live together and a third who lives separately, but is considered a primary partner. One family is a group of four women who live together “in community,” three of whom describe themselves as spokes in a wheel that has the fourth as its center. One triad is a long-term couple with a secondary partner, who “lives in two places,” sometimes with the primary couple and sometimes with biological family. One primary couple has a secondary partner who relates intimately to only one of them and a tertiary partner who lives in a city on the other side of the country.

Two of the central couples with other partners have been together for 23 years; one couple with a child have an eleven-year relationship; another couple, together for twelve years, have a third partner who moved into their family five years ago. One family of four has been together 23, 16, and seven years. More recently formed groups have been together for three or four years. Relationships within the two intimate networks are too complex to assign longevity. As one person says of an ex-lover, “We were friends, and then we were lovers, and then we were friends again. We still have family relationships with people we aren’t lovers with anymore. We support each other, and we go out to dinner together, and we’re all part of each other’s lives.”

Three people had been married heterosexually; one was widowed, two were divorced. Three couples have had Holy Union wedding ceremonies, and either added partners later, or had open relationships from the beginning. Some relationships were closed at times and open at other times. One is a polyfidelitous (closed) triad.
One interviewee describes herself as single and non-monogamous. She is part of an intimate network, or leather clan, in which a group of people in various kinds of open relationships all relate in a complicated network of “play partners.” “Scenes” in the leather community may include two or more partners and play parties may involve a number of different scenes going on at the same time. This woman says, “Sex is adult play, and you know, adults just don’t play enough.”

Another three people, in a different state, are also part of an intimate network. Two of them are planning a Holy Union ceremony that will include their “Xs and Os” [ex-lovers and occasional lovers]. “We’re all still friends. We still see each other. Once in a while we even have sex. They are still very much a part of our lives and we want them to share in some way in our wedding.” One other member of that intimate network describes herself as single with sexual relationships with three others. Two of her partners are men, one of whom is married, and the third partner is one of the women planning the Holy Union. People in this network socialize together in various combinations, and provide emotional and practical support in times of crisis. They function as a sort of inter-related extended family or a group of close friends including some with diverse combinations of sexual friendships.

One family includes a five-year-old child they are raising together; one family has a nine year old who resides with them “sometimes.” Two of the women had adult children from previous marriages and one family describes nieces and nephews and grandchildren as part of their “extended family.” There was no specific question regarding children, so there may be other children involved in these non-monogamous families. The questionnaire from which this data is drawn is found in Appendix C, p. 257
The Stories

COMING OUT

With two exceptions all of the respondents described knowing from childhood that they were “different,” that is, gender-role variant or attracted to the “wrong” people, and finding a label for the difference in adolescence. One woman describes coming out to herself at age 40, after a lot of denial. Another woman describes coming out as lesbian at age 29 after one marriage and two other heterosexual relationships:

I grew up in the desert… and I wanted to raise myself--raise myself that's a Freudian slip—raise my son somewhere where it was not so bland and boring and uncultured. And I was a budding actress. I moved to Ashland, Oregon, got pretty quickly involved in the feminist community there, particularly the National Organization for Women. And then there was another group there that was a primary production women's group, that was primarily lesbian. And I was enamored with someone I met there. Up to that point, I really hadn't had any experiences with women. It was nice.

She has been with her current lesbian primary partner for twelve years and lists her orientation as “lesbian.”

Coming out poly presented similar challenges to these informants as coming out as sexual minority persons (gay, lesbian, or trans). Many of them express pain as a result of rejection or of the fear of rejection that keeps them closeted. For one woman, her experience of herself as having a poly orientation began in adolescence.
Let's see, growing up in a very sort of evangelical, well it was in the Evangelical Baptist Church, but bordering on fundamentalist. Certainly not a very liberal church. So lots of preaching about, ‘even though we know there isn't a hierarchy of sin, homosexuals are the worst.’ That sort of thing. And being a child, I mean you don't really have a framework of life to evaluate any of that. It just goes in and sits there until you figure out you're gay and then all of that crap is telling you that you're worthless and, you know, horrible. And, you know, you start to hate yourself. So anyway I was starting to deal with all of that in high school.

I was trying to be a very good girl. I had a boyfriend but I wasn't sleeping with him because I was a good girl. And, you know, that was working pretty well for me. My boyfriend was a little frustrated sexually. One of the ways I figured out I was different in terms of the poly issue is that he slept with my best girlfriend and I did not get pissed off about that at all. I thought, ‘well I wasn't going to [sleep with him], so why should I be upset that she did.’ I did get very pissed off at him because he treated her like crap afterwards. You know? I mean this was all part of like: he felt guilty, and so then he treated her badly and blah, blah, blah, blah. You know? And so anyway I pretty much, you know, whacked him upside the head and said, ‘you know, you're a jerk.’ But it wasn't for the standard reason of: you slept with her. It was that I was morally outraged that he was treating her badly afterwards. And that clued me in really quickly… I found out very quickly that you don't talk about the differences about poly stuff. You just don't even speak about it out loud because I mean people were horrified:
'what do you mean you don't care that he slept with her.' I realized okay, just shut up about that. Put it aside; don't speak to anyone about it. And so that really didn't--it didn't come up in conversation with anyone else. I mean I was more aware [that] I was definitely different in terms of jealousy issues and that sort of thing.

But it didn't come up as conversation until 1983 when I went to grad school and I saw the movie The Big Chill. And this is a movie where there's a deal about this woman loans her husband to a friend. You know, because she wants to have a baby. And it was absolutely the first time I'd ever seen anything even remotely related to a poly issue on screen. And internally I was going: Yes! There's something to connect with. So that movie sort of--friends that I went to [the movie] with opened the conversation. But they still, of course, assured me that I was crazy not to be jealous; that was not the way things were done. So it took a while longer before I found a community that supported it.

The gay issue, you know that was something that just took a long time to organize itself. I have a graduate degree from Wheaton and I also had a lover when I was at Wheaton, which was totally against the rules. They assure you that, of course, none of the students at Wheaton are homosexual or practicing homosexuals because they sign a thing that they won't be. That's their way that they can say, 'nope, nobody's a practicing homosexual because they promised that they won't be.' Well I promised, and I was; so there you go.
One pastor, expressing both personal uncertainty and fear of repercussions said,

You know who I am anyway. But if I'm gonna be in a book I'd rather be a little bit disguised. Just--I just--you never know the repercussions…well first there is my own fear. There is a real fear. I still have this reluctance to come out about it… I don't know how much of that is my own stuff and how much of it is cultural. And I still haven't figured that out yet…you might be able to say I'm an MCC pastor, but you'd better not put my name in…because I might still want to have a career in this fellowship.

One woman said,

My closest friends are not non-monogamous and they don't have--they're not very supportive. Well part of that's probably because of how hurt I was by the experience with [a former third partner who had left the triad]. And so they were taking care of me and that's probably more of where it comes from. It's not that they're not liberal enough or don't have liberal attitudes. They don't care if people want to be non-monogamous. But they’re not always supportive of this relationship. They’re probably just more protective of me. So sometimes I don't talk about it as much as I’d like to. You know, it's a pretty horrible experience to have your friends reject you.

The hypocritical nature of rejection is highlighted by this speaker:

And there's been the challenge of being in MCC, being clergy, and having all the expectations for what we're supposed to be like, their non-acceptance of us,
people thinking that I'm doing something terrible and sinful. And I'm not doing anything that other people are not doing. And the fact that we're not monogamous couples makes us different. You know, not that they’re not doing it too. Most of the time it's serial monogamy or open relationships. It's not a long-term polyamorous relationship. Or it's a monogamous commitment that's not that healthy because they lose themselves in each other. So it's a challenge to be outside the norm. That's been the hardest thing, just trying to figure out our own roadmap and then deal with the fact that we're never going to be accepted in society.

One member of the foursome says,

We're as happy as anyone else. We're as--you know we have the same problems as everyone else. We have more flexibility about not laying all your expectations on one person. We’d like acceptance and affirmation. And we have been together a long time. The fact that we're together so long shows the quality of love that's there. It is love. We are all life-partners living in community…

Or somebody's introducing you: well Frodo [long pause] and her [pause] family are here today…You know there's a certain pause while they're searching through all the words and rejecting them. You know? Yeah, my family. It's a normal word: family. That's who we are. And not to have people always be focused on that one [sexual] part of our relationship. It's just [justice-seeking] relationships, community, love, and commitment. It's partnership; it's family in every sense of the word. And a lot of times people think it's about sex, and it's
not. It's not not about that, but it's about all the other things, too, about all the love.

Another voice:

And of course I know that before that discussion, those meetings, started about the bylaws, we were kind of the freak show in the Fellowship [UFMCC]. That's my words. We know that some clergy and some lay individuals in the fellowship had problems with our situation. And you know we thought, ‘well, how hypocritical.’ You know, when so many of the men were--you know, they behave like tomcats. But I'm aware that there is some kind of conversation going on about this and I'm not sure where it's going to lead.

Another pastor:

And then when I moved to pastor the MCC in Honolulu, we were technically not monogamous. I mean in theory we weren’t, but that is the teeniest queer community on a tiny little island. And so we didn't really see anybody else while we were there because it just wouldn't fit, because everybody would've known. And it was during the height of the military “don’t ask, don’t tell” investigation. And it was very uncomfortable because while we saw the difference between supporting marriages and supporting people who [want] people to have the option to choose, as opposed to monogamy as the only model, people categorized us in the only model they knew, which is monogamy… If what you're saying doesn't match that mold, they change what you say to match their ideas.
So that was kind of difficult. And then we went to—we moved to San Francisco. Every flavor, you know. So for some reason I'm a lot more comfortable here.

Rev. Justin Tanis:

It's a little hard, being on headquarters staff. It was several years ago and we came to the staff party for the first time. Troy has a custom of taking the staff every year to this nice restaurant for a Christmas party. The staff could bring your significant other or date or whatever. And we had three people in our relationship. So I asked if I could actually bring two people because I'm in a relationship with two people… So we all went and there were a couple of people there who were really not aware because I'm fairly private about my relationships. So I hadn't talked a lot about it at work, so they were really surprised. One person, I think, was very judgmental and the rest were like, oh, cool.

Partners have felt unwelcome in MCC, too. One woman reported:

She went to a conference—I guess it was our District Conference and asked Troy [Perry] point blank, are you going to accept multiple-partnered relationships having Holy Unions? You know, when is that going to happen? And he point blank said, “It's not.” He used the very flimsy reasoning, at least she thought it was invalid reasoning, that ‘oh well my partner Phillip would kill me if I brought home somebody else.’ Like that was supposed to be an example of a multiple-partnered relationship! That's the whole point; if he would kill him, then you shouldn't do it. You know? It's gotta be something that you would all sit
down and talk about. And the thing is…it's something that you all agree upon.
That's the point. This isn't just bringing home somebody and seeing if it would
work and keeping him as long as your partner doesn't kill you. You know? And
that's not how we got together anyway. We agreed, we all agreed to be
together…So that feels bad; I feel like the Grand Poobah would say that-- which
didn't help her relationship with the denomination.”

A pastor:

He [a partner] doesn’t go to church with me. The other piece of it is sort of
to realize partly that people are against you. He heard that. At one of the forums at
one of the districts about the resolution--you know, should holy unions be allowed
for multiple people thing--somebody was pounding away on her Bible about it:
‘God ordained one man and one woman and we have to be as close as we can to
the biblical model, blah, blah, blah, blah.’ And the person in charge of the
meeting got up and she said, ‘Here at MCC we don't use the Bible as a weapon.
Would you please put that down?’ And she sat down. She put her Bible down
and stopped thumping and actually said what she had to say. Not that it’s the only
thing we talk about, but maybe we should be more explicit in terms of teaching.
Okay, it's gonna be hard to find a monogamous couple in the Bible. Where
actually would you find them? Where are you looking? You know? It's really
lead me to think about the way we teach kids in Sunday School about Jacob,
Rachel, and Leah--and then condemn anybody who follows them. We taught the
kids in Sunday School about them and the kids in Sunday School grew up and
wanted to do that. So I mean it lead me to be more explicit about my relationships and to be really clear with people when I talk about it with them. Always being faithful to the Bible is much more complex than we've ever been lead to believe. It may be about affirming the variety of relationships that are in the Bible. And I mean people get totally shocked when you say that, but go back and read it. You know, it's actually pretty clear.

One denominational leader said,

Sometimes it's our own fear of what it means to be a fellowship that keeps some of those conversations from happening. That's unfortunate because frankly the number of people that I know are in those kinds of relationships are much higher than are publicly out about it. They live it, but they don’t talk about it. So it's just unfortunate.

Rev. Elder Perry, in personal email response said,

During my presentation at District Conference the question came up of whether we should change our by-laws concerning the Rite of Holy Union/Marriage should just be for a couple as it states. I told the group that I agreed with this based on not any theological reason, but the politics of trying to get the right of gays and lesbians to marry legally in this country. I explained that I felt in this present climate it would be a step backwards, politically, for the UFMCC to change that. I also told them that I've been requested by a triad to
perform a Holy Union and I explained to them I could not do that based on our bylaws.

Be well assured that I'm very aware that all relationships in our denomination are not monogamous...It is an overused word that has no meaning with reality today. I do believe, however, that if UFMCC changed this bylaw we would then be viewed as very naive politically by a majority of our membership as well as our many friends outside of our movement and would be viewed then as a cult, by many. Know that my mind can be changed if the spirit moves.

COMMUNICATION

Honesty and communication skills are emphasized in the taped interviews. These speakers agree with the literature that claims these skills are necessary components of polyamorous relationships.

As one respondent says,

It should never be started without some really good conversations with everyone. No one should say, ‘this is where I am and this is what I’m going to do,’ because the other person just goes along and the blaming starts and the relationship goes to pot. And suddenly there's victims to be tended to. So just make sure that everyone agrees. And, you know, not because we said, ‘this is how it is.’ It really was that the person who was in the middle really didn’t want the relationship in the first place. So they were trying to see if they could keep their partner by agreeing to [include] another one. That didn't work. You know that’s what I’ve seen. But the most important thing is honesty, because whenever
there is loss from emergency or accident or break-up, someone gets hurt. And I thought, ‘I don’t want that to happen.’ So that's always been my advice: ‘unless you know that everyone agrees about the structure of the relationship, don’t do it.’

One woman explains: I try to be loving and familial in the sense of being a helpful and honest and true and good friend, whether they're an ex-lover or a current lover, it doesn't matter.

Honest disclosure is important to this long-term couple:

We don’t try to own each other. We have twenty-three years longevity because of that fact. We respect each other and we’re open with each other. And if we have an affair with others, we talk about it. We don't know the people, who does what or whatever, but we always have made a point of making sure the person that we're about to get involved with knows that there's a prior commitment that we have to honor…Jim said when he was out of town or if he was down in Florida with his folks, he says, ‘I don't want to be tied down’ or ‘I don’t like being restricted.’ But we were always honest from the beginning: okay this is what we can do; this is what we can't do.

An older woman says:

Well some of the challenges—okay, sometimes we have to walk on eggshells. “[One partner], like her mother, can be a little bit--she can feel--she can take offense when no offense was meant. And you know she can get her nose
out of joint. [Another family member] can get her nose out of joint. And I've just sort of learned to go along with the punches. Once in a blue moon, I'll blow my stack. [A partner] certainly can blow her stack. The challenge is Julie and Peg didn't get along at all. They finally worked out some kind of truce and [now] they're getting along better than they did. But there's always some friction between them. They each bitch to me separately about the other. I know from long, bitter experience, to keep my mouth shut. I do not tell fairy tales. This is when my short-term memory loss really is an advantage. I forget. I'm not gonna remember anything accurately anyhow, so I just let it go.

Another person said:

You have to look out for yourself but also for the people you're involved with. You can get hurt around the issue very much. And I think our history does that. Culturally we're used to having hurts that involve another person, one other person. So maybe you cope with them or you break up, so you have had more experience coping with single relationships. But when multiple relationships come together, it's not just three. It's kind of like having twins. You know it's not just another person. It's not just twice as complicated; it's multiple more than that. There's more people affected in multiples, you know. So I think it's just so important to be really clear about your behavior and the choices that you make, regardless of how you feel. I mean that you have to do that. You should do that in a relationship with just one person. But it becomes even more important in a relationship that involves multiple people.
[Interviewer: So it would be a violation if any of the other people didn't know about the other partners?]

Not if that was in your agreement. If you--if Bobby and Wendy agree that they didn’t need to talk about every other person they're with, with each other, then that would be alright. But if one person doesn’t agree to it and three people do, it still can't be done that way. It has to be consensus. I mean to me there's not any other way to do it. You're actually being compromised enough so that everybody can agree on something. So it may mean that there are some people who are gonna get less than what they want and some are gonna get more of what they want, but somehow there has to be agreement and maybe consensus. And I think to some degree it's too idealistic. I mean to some degree non-monogamy is such an idealistic idea. So it's not easy to come to agreement. But when you think about, it's not that easily attained in a long-term couple either. We just get more practice. And the luck of the draw helps us. And we work hard. But it's even harder [with more than one partner] especially being lesbians as well. And there's a lot of negative stuff out there that really tries to make us fail. But if people don't make the decisions that affect everybody together and always act on that agreement, then it's not gonna work. I think it would be necessary for monogamy, too. For two people who break up there’s that whole thing about someone else. I think people would expect that there is someone else. I've never done that. I felt so self-righteous. I don't mean to, it's just that I've grown up making those decisions for myself. I've never fallen in love with another person as I'm walking out the door with the person I was with. I've just never done that. I've never done
that to myself, much less do it to someone else. But it's not how I would choose and how I've chosen in my life to be. You know I’ve always been honest in my emotional relationships because I don't think it's good to hide things. It's not good for me. I guess I'm just being judgmental about other people who do it. People do whatever they want to do, but I've always needed time in between relationships to figure out what I learned, to figure out how I feel, to grow and--you know get myself together and whatever else I need before I'm even open to fall in love with someone else. And I think, unfortunately, now monogamy leads to serial monogamy a lot. People just--they get bored or whatever and they move on to the next relationship. That's wrong.

[Interviewer: So it's important to you that when relationships end, you process that and figure out what happened?]}

I think it's really important. I mean, obviously stuff happens when you meet people. But if I met somebody I would still not get involved with them right away until I was—until I felt ready to be involved with anybody else. And if they're not there when I'm ready, then that's just how it is. I'm not a fate person really, but timing really is important. I think that, to me, goes back to the whole thing where you really have to know yourself well enough to know that you really are a person who wants to be non-monogamous, not related to the people you're with. It's related to who you are.

[Interviewer: Non-monogamy is more of an orientation than a behavior?]}

Absolutely. It's part of who I am. And it may not be exactly the way Wendy is or someone else is, and that's okay, it doesn't have to be all the same. But it has to
be there to begin with. That spark has to be there, as far as I'm concerned, or you're not gonna make it. If you're doing it for somebody else, to keep your partner or something, it doesn't work. And that happens a lot--all the time.”

As part of her coming out story, describing the first time she “stood tall and proud” in a social action which was televised, one woman said:

And I felt for the first time I was able to do that, and I decided I was never gonna lie again about who I am, who I love, who I worship. Just all of that. And then thinking about that later and wondering what gave her that kind of courage, recognizing the risk she took to stand up for her people, was because that's what Jesus did, just stand up for his people. He had all that trouble with the religious leaders, the Pharisees and all, but in the end he just stood up for his people.

Another comment on communication:

It's a big challenge to communicate well. Society trains us to be with one person and to be jealous of other people being with that one person and to be--feel like we're being hurt if the other person's with somebody and, you know, all of those things. We're trained that way from babyhood, so that if you're out of that mold, if you're not in that box it's very, very hard because there aren't models for what we do. My brother says, ‘well my sister's gone Mormon on me’ and laughs. You know when he first found out. My brother's very accepting. But the Mormon model isn't this because there's that patriarchal overlay. It's very, very
strong in that culture. And they're subservient to the men. There's not a model. There aren't good models for feminists in egalitarian relationships.”

Another person says:

Two of us can get together and talk about the other person, to try to help them, not just gossip. To say--you know Noreen and I could say, ‘well you know Alice is working way too hard, what can we do? Do you see her doing this? You know we need to help her do this, that, and the other. You know, why is she acting like that?’ And of course Alice and I could do that about Noreen too. That helps. That helps to get the two of you to work on the relationship with the third person.”

Another comments:

We've learned, I think, more about give and take than a relationship that is not multiple partners. We've learned to be more honest, I think, with each other. The unconditional love is absolutely vital; we can't do this without it.

Another woman says:

Part of the really lovely part about Jas and I getting together in this sort of situation later in life, [is that] we know each other, we know ourselves. So we're able to communicate--you know, ‘this is me’ and she's able to communicate, ‘this is me.’ We can know each other on a much deeper level, I think. And she's never been driven by fear that if her lover is sexual with someone else that they will
leave her. And that I think is a primary driving force for a lot of [non-poly] couples.

This is one of the ways that monogamy works for a lot of people; it's a fear-driven commitment. ‘Okay, I'm gonna commit to you and not look at anybody else and we're gonna have this perfect relationship. This will be our dream relationship, ta da, ta da, and everything that goes along with that. And that way I don't have to be afraid that you're going to leave me for someone else.’ You know there's this commitment, ‘I'm gonna stick with you and I'm gonna do these things in order to keep at bay my fear that you will leave me because you find someone else sexually attractive.’

And Jas and I have never been driven by that. And that's one thing we don’t have to worry about. I certainly have fears that relationships will change or end for other reasons. You know? But someone having sex with someone else has never been a reason.

JEALOUSY

According to the literature, jealousy is a potential problem. Responses to the question on jealousy sort into two groups. Some respondents deny ever feeling jealous, others talk extensively about how they deal with jealousy. Often jealousy is not about sexual issues within the group, nor about outside partners, but it is acknowledged around other issues, such as biological family priorities, time and attention paid to work or career, or money and class issues.
One partner in a threesome said:

She has her other family, her biological family, meaning her parents, her child and her brother, and they live in another town...and she really is focused on them. At least right now, I would say that family is her priority. Which is hard. It's hard for us, I think, to realize that. I understand her child being her priority but it is hard actually, to share her with her mother and father and brother... so we haven't--she hasn't been--she just hasn't been around. And it's real hard to keep a relationship going. I mean nobody's made any decisions in any way. But I think she's just not gonna--she just hasn't been there...it has to do with family things...

So because of those kind of family ties--you know it lets us see that's her number one priority. And it's hard on us and yet I understand, I really do. It's like, yes, I know her child is a priority. But it kind of hurts in a way. It's like gee, I wish--you know I wish we could've helped raise [the child] a little more... in my heart, I think it's more--it's more like circumstances have affected our relationship more than internal difficulties. You know? I think—yeah, it's like you can't grow when you can't see each other.

One partner said:

Initially, you know, we have these ideals about not being jealous. [Inaudible] It's been hard, I think, because at any given time I would be putting more energy into one person than the others. And so--I mean I think the jealousy is more around time than anything else. Or, you know, it was very hard for Pat when Zora came along. It was hard for her to be not the latest relationship, I
think, because in a new relationship you put more time and energy into a new relationship. So now that we're not a new relationship anymore, I'm hoping that’s going to change…And I think there's some financial jealousy. [Long explanation of the financial disparities in this family] I think it creates some difficulties because we're not in the same financial positions. So the work jealousy and the financial jealousy, I think, are more problematic. I don't think anybody worries about the other partners sexually or emotionally; I think all of us would say we're not jealous.

Another member of the same group as the speaker above says:

Well, I lost my jealousy somewhere years ago. It never entered in when [partner number three] came into the picture. I was jealous about things--you know, in a non-relationship context when I was much younger. I got jealous over somebody won a particular award in school. I don't get jealous but the others do. And I think [spouse] has had some jealousy over my involvement with the Lesbian Community Project. But you know I sort of developed my life on my own, you know, after [partner three] came into the picture. I--you know I didn't make my whole life revolve around just what [spouse] does. And so I've probably got my little life and it does involve LCP [Lesbian Community Project] and for a while--you know she was feeling that [her church] was kind of getting ignored and I was involved in my own church. And also in the larger community here. And LCP was getting a lot of attention…[Interviewer: So it's mostly a matter of feeling neglected or feeling time is scarce? You know, too much time is going
elsewhere? Is that the issue?] I think part of it, plus it was the recognition and the attention. [Her church] was not getting as much attention from me as LCP was.”

Also from the family above:

I have a certain amount of jealousy. But not about the other partners. I have no problem with them. They were already here. To me they have priority or whatever. I do not want to cause trouble between them. You know, I understand they love each other, and I will make every effort to help them stay together. But I will just dig my heels in a little bit if it looks like Frodo is getting overburdened. Right now she's busy working on her degree, you know, and that takes a lot of time. And one time I thought the others were wearing her out. Just a little bit, you know. So I think I have what could be described as a kind of jealousy, but not about anything sexual.

One woman says:

I think my kind of intellectual thought has been that probably for people who have intense feelings of jealousy it is just part of their personality, because I'm not a jealous person. I don’t get jealous very easily. I've never been. I don’t think jealousy's ever been a big part of my thinking. I really have, from the time I was quite young, kind of felt like I wouldn't mind sharing the people in my life. I mean I must’ve been out of the loop when that jealousy trait evolved.
A woman who chooses to be monogamous with her partner, but facilitates her partner’s polyamory says:

Jealousy certainly comes in. I think that probably the place I get the most jealous is if I feel like our relationship isn't as romantic as it can be and a lot more of that energy is going to another relationship. I kind of maintain if you are--you know, in love with two different people, then you need to find enough energy to do both, in a way that both want. And if I want a pretty romantic relationship and you're putting more energy into someone else, then you're not doing it all right. That's kind of what I maintain. And part of why--I'm non-monogamous in the sense that I'm part of a poly family. I do have my partner be with other people and I'm comfortable with that. Sometimes we're, as a couple, with someone else, but I don't look for other people. I don't have an interest in being with anyone else. And part of that's because I don't want to try to put that energy into two different people too much. I couldn't handle doing that; I couldn't do it. Some people really can but it's not very easy to maintain so much intimacy and energy with more than one person. [Interviewer: You're talking about emotional energy?] Well you know long-term relationships with two people, especially when you're living together can get quite intense. And unfortunately when I'm feeling hurt or not heard, I step back. That's part of what I do. When her energy is going somewhere else, or when she’s gone somewhere without me, then I feel lonely. So that's probably the biggest place I feel jealous. The jealousy isn't the biggest part of the problem, it's more trust.
Another informant says:

I know that people sort of expect there to be jealousy or things that like. I seem to have been born without the gene for jealousy. None of us ever thought that my controlling their genitals was any indication whatsoever of their love for me or their care for me or, you know, who they love. When I've been younger and in non-monogamous relationships, I have had--you know primary partners and had other lovers on the side. Having more partners you exponentially increase the process of time required, I don't know if the extra testosterone has anything to do with it or if it’s just who we are as people. Plus we're fifteen years older than we were then, so the amount of hurt feelings kind of becomes less as you mature. I mean other than sort of trying to get us all in the same place or on the same vacation and that kind of stuff, I didn't really feel like there were significant drawbacks or challenges.

One member of a threesome says:

So yeah, I still have some jealousy when they are together. I'm getting better about it but I wonder if it's just more like resignation. I mean I sometimes feel like--you know, like Troy Perry says, sometimes I think I have the monogamy gene. I fell in love with one person at a time. I still love [long-term spouse] and I'm kind of in love with [new partner.] But you know after four or five years, you kind of mellow out a little bit. And you know I'm not even sure that I could distinguish my love for each of them. There's certainly more sexual
energy with [new partner.] But I've come to value my relationship with [long-term spouse] more and more.

Hmm, my pattern was like so many lesbians. You fall in love, it's pretty intense for the first year or two and then it gets routine. You get so you appreciate each other and that you love each other and you're more than friends. Well you're marriage partners. I think it's probably the same in a straight relationship. Yeah, you're married. And you have to stay together because you have things that are—well, you have property together. You have children or dogs together, cats or whatever. And you make all your life decisions in connection with each other. But the sexual relationship might not be there or might just not be exciting anymore. And so what happens with a lot of couples--I mean I would do the same thing, is then you find somebody else and then you leave this perfectly good relationship except for the sex part, because then you truly believe in your heart that you're in love with the next person. So at least I feel like I've broken that pattern for myself. It's like I have my cake and eat it too.

One woman says:

I believe in sharing. I share everything, even my partners.” Later in the interview, she says, “You're not having to conform because you're trying to keep at bay some fear. You're not having to be any certain way because society is telling you to be that way…It's a commitment that simply says I want to be with you because I want to be with you. And it’s not ownership. It's like I know that I'm free to be with other people. I'm also going to think about that before I get
involved with someone else. I'm gonna only exercise that [freedom] in a way that's gonna be a positive thing. It's gonna bring a positive thing back to our relationship…You do that because that's gonna bring a healthier relationship between the two of you. So freedom and autonomy is very important. There's huge, huge reasons to negotiate everything first.

COMPERSION

Compersion, the good feeling that comes when one observes happy interactions between one’s other partners, is expressed in many ways.

One interviewee says:

We get to see each other in a different light because we get to see each other in a special relationship with someone else. And that doesn't bother me. When I see them playing together. You know? And both of them need to work on their child--their inner children…and it's like you guys go ahead, I don't want to do that. You know, you go ahead and play. But to see them playing together, that is a joy, to see two people that I care about a lot be children, which is good for them.

Another aspect of compersion is feeling secure because the other partners aren’t alone when one is unavailable. One person says:

To know that if I'm off doing something, like right now, I have no worry about them because they’re together…I would know that both of them are taken care of. I would know they have each other. And the same thing goes for them…
We don't anticipate any deaths, but it's good to know that the two of them will--or you know the two of whomever, will be there to take care of each other. I've had so many people in my life die recently. And some of them have left behind a partner. And to see that their partner was everything to them and I mean was half their life if not more, and they can't cope. I mean, it's so hard to cope. And to realize that if you've got three, you've got the other people and you're so close to them, you could grieve together but you'll also just take care of each other. Knowing that is a joy. Knowing that they are going to be taken care of if it were me [who dies first].

Another speaker says:

It always felt really comforting to me to know that they were together back at home. You know there's some great grounding in that for me. You know, being flung out all over the world, we do all these different things and they were there at home together. And there are feelings in that dynamic that felt very comfortable. Daniel and I've always said that love doesn't divide, it multiplies. So giving love to someone else only multiplies the amount of love available, not takes it away. And I really felt that with them.

JOYS

As people talked about their partners, their faces often took on the glow of lovers, becoming animated and bright, with big smiles or shy grins. They easily recounted the joys of being with more than one partner.
Rev. Justin Tanis says:

I think what was in it for me is that Daniel's completely a morning person. I'm usually a night person. And Nick was a night person. He is a night person. As long as there are things that you want to do with a partner, but you can't do because of that person’s lack of interest, it’s easier with two. With one, you just don’t do it. If you have the other people to pursue interests with, you do things with someone else that maybe you wouldn’t do without them. Nick and I used to do things that Daniel would never be interested in doing.

“Hildegard” says:

Frodo and Zora are the artists. We're gonna have that awful green linoleum in the doorway removed after Christmas. Frodo and Zora and I picked it out together… We don't all equally make decisions about the same thing. We sort of have our areas of specialty…Joys? The humor that comes of it.

Once in a while we have prayer down in the living room. I like that. We have an inclusive language lectionary. And it's from a feminist perspective. And we were using those… just about every evening we'd have worship together and I really liked that. We formed our own little songbook. You know, I'd scan things from church bulletins and so on. And so we have a little hymnbook. But when Frodo works real late on her dissertation, from about eleven PM on she's got an uninterrupted block of time, and so we temporarily suspended those. I miss those.

I like our parties when we get out our instruments and play. Pat is a piano player. And before Zora came into the picture, Pat, Frodo, and I had a Celtic
band: The Three Siphs [?]. And before that, we were in a five-woman Celtic band. Zora and Pat have a rivalry thing about singing. Competition. And so Zora doesn't want to sing with us. But when we have parties, Frodo gets out her fiddle and I get out my recorder and I play on my hymns and if Frodo's brother's here, he brings his guitar. Pat also plays guitar. Music is one of the things that we enjoy. And I like the parties.

I like the fact that we're really an intellectual household. We're not the average household. You know in one way we're sort of like the Adams family freaks on the block. You know if the neighbors only knew all the things that go on here. You know, and the solemn ritual that was in the living room after the trick-or-treaters were gone.

Oh, you know, and I love the way Frodo instigated, and Pat, redecorating the house. They love to decorate things. And Zora's artistic. And they change things with the seasons. They always have some kind of decorations up in the windows and on the mantel. And I'm not an artist. If I were living here by myself, I wouldn't have any decorations. The plants wouldn't be here. So I mean having all these people, it's enriched the household.

And the other thing I like is that we kid about being a religious order in some ways. When I first bought this house and was living by myself, I was also active in the charismatic renewal thing. And I thought, "You know, I could have some women’s community here. Well it turns out that that's sort of what has happened, but in a rather round about fashion.
With these other people, I don't have to do it all. And there are a lot of things that I can’t do anymore. I used to be able to do all the vacuuming. I can't vacuum the stairs anymore; it’s too hard on my joints. I can do it but I'm beginning to feel more limited that way.

Rev. Frodo Okulum says:

Before you even think about multiple partners you already come to the point where you understand one person cannot meet all of your needs, whether you're talking about emotional needs or spiritual companionship or sexual needs or just any kind of needs that you have, whatever they are, it's not gonna be all met by one person.

For each couple I can say the joys. I am very fulfilled, sexually. I think it was a little bit of a shock when I got with Zora because most of the time I’m a butch, and Zora's a butch. I mean we're not totally in roles but there was more of that energy. I mean we get more excited by butch energy. But I'm very fulfilled.

I'm very fulfilled in terms of support. Each person contributes their own kind of support. Some of them are not real supportive financially, or we might have different understandings of theology. So there's somebody else that is supportive of my spiritual needs. So there's not a lack of any kind of support.

There's the joy of diversity. There's a twenty-year age range among us. There are a number of cultures…so we have this broad cultural mix…I think it's a richness we have. We are even less societally defined than most gay and lesbian relationships. So it's up to us to define. And that's, I think, a joy. It's a joy to be
not in a box. It's a joy to be able to be who we are, to define who we are, to have our partnerships be not artificially imposed by society in any way at all but to be dictated by what we feel drawn to and what we feel drawn to when, just supporting each other in a larger family. I grew up in a family of four. A family of four feels normal to me. But you know there's more people involved than just the partners. So it's a joy to have such a large extended family, too.

Diversity, and richness or complexity of multiple partners is also a joy for this respondent:

You're not caught in a rut, [that] to me was one of the nicest things. Not that I ever got in a rut. But that possibility is greatly decreased because each one was completely different. We were very different people. And it was a challenge, developing relationships with people that are that much different. Actually career wise, educational wise, Jim and I had a perfect match…We have our own preferences of things we like to do, it’s not that we’re loving one more than the other one. As far as I'm concerned, I was loving each one the same. It was just fifty percent here and fifty percent there. That's how I could love more than one person at a time. [Inaudible] With Jim it was--I'd known him for a about a year and a half before we got together. But it was also finally discovering what it is to be really in love for the first time in my life.
CHALLENGES

Many of the challenges mentioned by these informants are common to all gay/lesbian families. They are the rights and privileges available to heterosexual couples that marry legally, or in some states, simply live together and present themselves as husband and wife. Health insurance to cover partners, inheritance rights, custody of children, income tax benefits, and joint ownership of property are all challenges for these families.

The partners frequently report time pressure as a stress on their relationships. One man reports:

There's difficulties with trying to negotiate three sets of schedules of professional people, which can be insane, really. If we all wanted to go do something together, it was just--you know sometimes it's like you end negotiations with, ‘well, okay I have fifteen minutes free on the eighteenth’ and that was kind of crazy.

Another person says:

One of the things about poly relationships that is a big factor is use of time and energy. Because if you have multiple relationships, when push comes to shove, one relationship gets a certain amount of time and energy and another relationship gets another. And if you have too many going on at once then everybody feels shorted. It's the kind of thing where you manage your time and energy and involvements in different ways than somebody who is primarily partnered to one person and their commitment is, ‘I'm just not gonna look at
anybody else.’ You know? And I shouldn't say it's not a factor because I
certainly know of many wives and husbands and spouses over the years [whose
careers] take the place of another lover. So you know there are many other things
other than lovers that can take over and become primary in terms of time and
energy and spouse availability.

We haven't really had a situation at this point where anybody's felt
neglected because I sort of hold back in terms of my other relationships and where
I'm focused right now. I do still have occasional rendezvous, and these other
lovers know [I’m getting married]…I never get involved with people unless they
all know who all my other lovers are. That's just me. That's me and it's my rule,
the way I do things. And it works for me.

So all my other lovers know about the fact that I'm gonna be getting
married and I'm really focused on that at this point in time. So they have
markedly different expectations of my time and energy. That's the kind of thing
that I really appreciate and it's the kind of thing where that'll be rewarded later on
because it's like, rather than my getting all stressed about not having enough time
for everyone, I’m at peace.

You know, they're giving me a big blessing [when they] say, ‘focus on
that; get ready for that.’ And they're all gonna be invited to the wedding. At
some point I'd like to get them involved in part of the planning of [the wedding],
as much as they would want to. So consent is a huge thing for me; it always has
been…I live by these words. So my lovers are essentially consenting to being not
top dog. They're saying, 'it's okay, you focus on this other stuff and we'll get
together after the wedding.'

The central person in the family of four says:

I have learned--I guess I already knew through this clergy and working--
you know, tent maker and ministry and all of that, that I don't have enough time to
do everything I want. But even if I were with one person, I wouldn’t have time.
Now that there are four of us I have to divide my time even more. And for a long
time it was--it felt very bad. And what it has given us, I think, is the
empowerment for each of us to go out and do what we want to do and meet our
needs and not always be thinking about ‘well my partner might not want to do it,
so I'm not going to.’ I don't think we've ever thought we need permission. We
think ‘well I'm gonna call home and tell them what I'm doing.’ But if it's
something like safety, [one partner] worries a lot for my safety. She just is the
kind of person who's a caretaker. They both came to the airport the other night,
because she didn't think I should drive late at night somewhere by myself. I know
what goes through her mind, ‘what if she's in an accident and she can’t get help
by herself?’ So I know that about her. It doesn't mean that I'm not gonna do
things she thinks are dangerous, but it means I'm gonna take that into
consideration. But we don't let what the other person wants to do dictate what we
want to do. So I think we're a lot more free in our ability to develop our talents,
whatever they are. We have different circles of friends, but they intersect. We've
all had to open our minds a lot about family. Especially me. I have to realize there's all these other biological families. So there's that.

I've had to just be really honest with myself and not feel like I have to please everybody all the time. If you're in a relationship with three women, you cannot please everybody. And we used to have a very strict schedule in which if this was Tuesday night, I was in Pat's room. You know, two nights a week with each person. Well, since I've been back on my dissertation, I come to bed so late a lot of times and Sally goes to bed before that, and so does Zora, so we don't have that anymore. We don't have that strict schedule. One of the first things that Zora did, when she came, is to make sure I had a night by myself, just to kind of bring my energy home. Now most of the time I sleep in my own room, but not without partners. But I've had to be more gentle with myself around my time, and conserve my own energy, take care of my needs. And that's been good for me.

Another pastor says:

And I think that's [partner’s] problem right now: she doesn't have time to be with us. She's got so many issues to work on with her parents. I think she would rather be with us but she can't be at two places at the same time, energy wise. And I’ve always known neither one of them's a ‘pastor's wife.’ I can't even get them to come to conference. Even if they were here, they wouldn’t be with me. I am here alone; it's hard being in that position.
We have all the same problems that other families have, except in some ways they're exponential because they're all of us interacting. But our problems are around things like who does what housework. I mean they're the usual problems any couple has, but there are more of us...I wouldn't recommend it. It's not easy. I mean take the difficulties that two people have, you multiply that because it's not just me and three other people. It's those three other people interacting with each other as well. And so there are all those potential problems. I mean there's far more opportunities for problems than there are with just two people. Even though there's also more resources for dealing with those problems. That's a big challenge.

Relationships with biological families are often difficult. Misunderstanding, lack of acceptance, or hidden relationships present problems.

One person says:

Our families [of origin] figuring out who we are. They already had to deal with our being lesbians. Now they had to add this other piece in there, which was a challenge for them. My mother's naming of it was, ‘well it's confusing and amusing,’ she said. So there was that challenge.

Another woman says:

Well, I really believe that you have to be wired differently, to begin with. Very similarly, people that are into SM are wired differently. You know? It's the spicy hot pickle of the banquet of sex. People have different wiring, different
tastes. And so I figured out that--you know, I'm wired in this way, thus and so. And these sorts of things actually are pleasurable to me, whereas with other people they might go screaming and running away. You know, ‘you're never gonna do that to me.’ And it's like, ‘good, just go away because you're not being asked to do that.’

And I don't think that people who are in a situation where one person definitely wants monogamy can do it. I mean, it's just like, just walk away if the other person wants polyamory, because there's no way to bring those two together. And fighting about it is not gonna get you where you want to go.”

Hildegard:

See, they're going out and deciding without me and bought those things. I'm trying not to blow my budget for Christmas. You know. This isn't new; this comes up every year… A lot of it is generated by expectations. [Partner’s] mother's expectations of who's going to get what for whom. And we would much rather have a commercial-free Christmas. And if it weren't for the kids and grandkids and [partner’s] family, we could achieve our goal a hundred percent, believe me.

Jean:

It’s a challenge to share her with her family, and that she’s not out to her family…so that’s a challenge to have somebody in a relationship that’s not out, not really out. So that’s definitely a challenge.”
Doubts can trouble the individuals or the household.

So the three of us just felt very strongly that God is still in the midst of our lives. Yeah, which is probably what keeps us strong despite what culture will say because none of them have doubts. I mean I would be the one who is always asking, ‘God, are you sure this is OK? Are you sure this is OK?’ And I have never gotten any negatives on that, which is a weird thing. But more often I'd get the, ‘God is doing a new thing, you need to lighten up, loosen up.’ That's what I feel like has been the message more often. So you know my failure, I believe, is in pulling away from [long-term spouse.] I think if I were called on the carpet, you know the pearly gates or whatever, I believe my sin would be: you should've tried harder to be closer to [your spouse], whether that's sexual or just more emotionally close. But I don't think I would get into trouble for being sexual with [new partner]. I think that actually, when I look at it, I think that's more cultural tapes sometimes. It's there. It’s what we learned.”

SPIRITUAL LIFE

All but three of the people interviewed are deeply spiritual, practicing Christians, serving a variety of denominations. One respondent considers herself new age, but does not have an ongoing spiritual community. One couple occasionally attend a Unitarian Church, seeking religious education for their child, but consider themselves to be agnostic, with Jewish and Catholic backgrounds. All but these three are affiliated with MCC, although some are more
closely aligned with other denominations, and consider their local MCC church as
a support group or a second church.

A typical story of the struggle to integrate sexuality and spirituality, as a
Christian believer, is told by one interviewee:

But I went through a lot of really, really deep trauma about whether I
could have my faith and be gay. And I finally decided that I couldn't and walked
away from the church. Didn't have anything to do with the church for about
fourteen years. And the nice thing is that when I came back around, I was in a
different place. Of course I came back around very slowly at first. I was walking
in very large circles around church activities and sort of sniffing as I went. You
know, ‘is it safe here?’ But I moved to this area and it was a completely different
world here. I decided it was pretty safe. But all of the crap that had built up had
really made me very suicidal in my early twenties.

In the fourteen years that I spent away from church, [the struggle] just
went away. And it's kind of like I woke up from a very long nap. And I even told
this one priest, who said something about coming back to God, I said, ‘God never
went anywhere; I never went anywhere; I just had a really long nap.’ It wasn't
like a broken relationship with God, and I think that's the thing that's given me a
very distinct sense [that] there are things that are God, and there are things that are
the church. The church isn’t God… So that's what that fourteen year nap gave
me: the ability to know intuitively when things are of God. And then you know
whatever's going on in the church, sometimes those things happen to coincide,
and sometimes the church is just off doing its own little thing. And you know you
might want to help out…I think of the social justice things, those are good things to support.

Another person states:

God is in the relationship for me. Actually I can't even fully separate sex and God. I've read some of Carter Hayward's stuff and she sort of says that right relationship is where God is. And that would be the intellectual, theological way to describe how I live. But for me it's all about where my relationships are. And God is in there every day. You know? But it didn’t happen automatically, I have a long time in there from when I was growing up where the church taught me that sex was bad and sinful. I thought that, until I finally started to look at the church as an institution. And how I'm going to be related to it in a new way. And there were a lot of fears in the meantime. I felt that there was no connection between my life and God, you know, that God had left.

And for me, what I did in those years was I believed that even though I had no feeling that God was there, that I didn't even know whether there was a god, I sort of said, ‘okay, it doesn't really matter because what's in front of me right now is my relationship with my lover. And I believed that doing what was in front of my nose and trying to love that person, that was my path to God.

And sure enough, learning how to love well has been my path to God. In the years when I couldn't find God, I just felt completely desolate because all I had in my head was the framework I grew up with, and I hadn't been able to construct any kind of new way of thinking about God. So the old god had passed
away and the new god had not yet come. And in those years I loved the person who I was closest to and I learned how to love people better every day, week in, week out, just living my life, and that has been my path to God. It's so tied up, I can't even describe how tied up it is in my relationships.

[Interviewer: What kinds of things have helped that integration of sexuality and spirituality?]

Oh, I had a big leg up growing up in a church and family that basically said all sex is bad, it's just bad. And that was a huge leg up because it was so negative and it was all of one piece. So if it's all just bad, bad, bad, evil, evil, evil, when you get to the point where you know this isn't all evil and are convinced of that, then it’s so much easier to be free to explore. So everything was open to explore.

Another man found that loving relationships were the path that led him to God:

I'd given up on God long before my sexuality was an issue that really had little, if anything, to do with it. I got fed up with what I call Sunday Christians: go to church on Sunday and screw everybody on Monday through Saturday and not really following through. And most of the churches that I would go to were preaching hell-fire and damnation type things. And I'd read the Bible on my own several times and knew there was so much more. But nobody preached on God's love. Well I didn't really know what love was...And by me and Teddy, Doug, and Jim, I learned what love really is. Then I was ready for church.”
Some subjects report the importance of various Bible stories as support for their lifestyles.

One pastor says:

I study the Bible a lot. I really like the Bible. You know I teach Bible studies; I read it; I try to understand it. And I've been reading a lot. One thing that bothers me is that Israel's relationship with God as they come out of the wilderness is treated like a marriage covenant, with Israel being unfaithful and committing adultery. They were experimenting with the other religions around them, but you know being unfaithful is the best way to put it. Sometimes that bothers me and sometimes I relate it to myself whenever I hear adultery and being unfaithful and all that. Sometimes. And I have to question that.

But you know, I mean I have a pretty good conversation going with God. I can just ask. And I don't ever hear a negative. I never get a ‘stop doing that.’ And I ask God a lot. I say is this okay with his plan? Am I being faithful to [long-term partner] because we haven't had much of a sexual relationship for a long time. We're very affectionate but we're not sexual per se. But more often I get the ‘let go of your old stuff. You need to be more loving not less loving.’… I think God is saying, ‘look outside the box, be willing to see the other side.’

But I'm definitely Peter, and when I read something in the Bible about Peter I can really relate. Like the sheet story of Peter where the Gentiles come and Peter's worst nightmare comes down in the sheet and God says eat all these non-kosher animals. And I think sometimes that is what God's saying. And I’m saying, as Peter, ‘oh no Lord, not me. Oh no, I could never be non-monogamous.
I mean I could not have sex with multiple partners. I'd be promiscuous--see that's the word. The bad word's promiscuous. I probably can't even say that. I could never have more than one sexual partner. No, no, no, not me Lord.’ Well you know that's the traditional me saying I would never do that. You know, ‘you wouldn't ask me to do that, that's in your laws.’ That's me. And I feel often that God is saying, ‘yes you can. Yes you can. Not with everybody. You know, don't eat all these animals at the same time. But these two women I gave you, these two women that you love.’ And so that's still a challenge for me, to try to be able to do that.

I'm very conventional. I guess I didn't realize how conventional I was. But I mean mentally I'm willing to step out and consider all kinds of crazy things. You know really. And I've never been adventurous. I didn't think I was very liberal about sex. I thought I was very conservative in sexual ethics, really conservative in sexual ethics. But on the other stuff, I'm pretty wild. So I have these two mixed traditions that come together like that. So now I'm having to look at the sexual…I think it's helped me to look at other issues where some people are so certain this is what God's rule is. This is the law. This is what you're supposed to do; this is the ethical thing to do. And to look at other issues, now and say, ‘now wait a minute, I felt so strongly at one time about marriage and hey, now I'm with two people.’

I feel like that prophet sometimes, you know, like Hosea. I had to go out and marry the prostitute. I feel sometimes like God said, ‘this is an issue you have to look at; therefore you have to act it out. You have to go get this other
person in your relationship.’ Sometimes I feel like I'm the guinea pig. ‘So that you will understand that yes, I have rules, but people come before rules. The most important rule is love. And you know loving people is more important than any rule that anybody's ever made.’

This has drawn my partner and me a lot closer. I get verifications from Biblical references, too. I went into the MCC in Minneapolis and part of their call to worship was, ‘I am the God of Sarah and Abraham.’ And Sarah didn't have a choice. So of course when they get to Jacob and they go: ‘I am the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebecca. I am the God of Jacob and Rachel and Leah.’ And I love that. Right there they affirm multiple partnered relationships, right there at church and they don't realize that that's what they've done… God had a problem that Jacob spent so much time with one, that really he said I love Rachel…He really was in love with the younger daughter and he got stuck with Leah. But God told him in that story (I'm paraphrasing I'm sure.) ‘No, you've got both of them now, now you be a husband to both of them. When I heard that I was like, yes! I know that story a little bit. And I thought, well alrighty then. So I love that stuff…it's like, ‘this is what you do. These are the people I have given you to love.’ For Jacob anyway, ‘these are the two women I've given to you. Now you be the husband you're supposed to be, to both of them.’ Too bad that Hagar didn't get listed with Abraham …she should've been in there too. But yeah, it's crazy. Maybe it's crazy because I go back to Biblical examples, but it’s because I like the Bible so much. I think God does speak to us by using those little cultural examples.
One person reports:

In some ways [relationship with God] encouraged us to be honest about the form of our relationship, which is a spiritual issue...I think that there were times when I was worried about what people at MCC might think about it, and then I realized, ‘oh, that was from the other church.’ And I think that does have an affect on our relationship with God...[There was] a time during which I was very closeted in church. That was extremely painful for me. So I knew that I didn't want to go through an experience like that again. So I've been very out about my partners...And I do think that when I went through that period of me being closeted, I felt very ill, removed from God in many ways. The closeted experience had that affect. So it's sort of what lead me to be different about being in a relationship with Nick and Daniel so it wasn't--you know it wasn't recreating that closet, which felt to me like it was an impediment to the relationship at the time. We've both been very explicit about our idea about multiplying, and love being a positive expansion, not a limiting quantity. We were very explicit with that, how we experience God...We did make that explicit with each other, that's part of how we see this happening. You know people were created to love and care for each other. Even though the three of us, in terms of our specific spiritualities are fairly different; that piece is definitely there...It wasn't relative to how much we prayed together or things like that. And I think that there's something about swimming upstream in a way, living in a different way, that made us be more explicit about spiritual principals.
Input from former (pre-MCC) churches was mixed at best. One woman describes the history of church relationships with gays as she experienced it:

And in college years I was very conflicted. When I was seventeen I learned there was a name for what I am. And of course I was very conflicted about that. I had all kinds of religious conflicts over that. And when I was about 24, I discovered the gay bars and a little bit before that, of course, I had discovered lesbian erotic paperbacks, which I'd read inside another paperback. And so I came out in the gay world when I was in my early twenties. And I guess I was fully out by the time I was in my forties, when I came out on the job, and found that I had a very comfortable niche in the job I was working at, and found that there were a lot of other gays working in the other alcoholic programs in the building...So I'm very comfortable in [this city]. It's a very gay-friendly place. It was not a gay friendly town when I left here for the east coast in '62. Very repressed and there just wasn't anything going on. Then the '60s happened while I was away and all of the activist things and the movement for gay liberation and justice. And I came back to a wide-open [city] that was dyke Mecca...

I was brought up in the Episcopal Church. And when I was a senior I discovered the Catholic Church... And of course there was a lot of homophobia in the Catholic Church tradition. In the Catholic Church you have confession. And I felt an awful lot of guilt over that. And I tried often times--you know, I tried to make myself into a straight person. And then I ended up [acting out], you know drinking and having psychiatric problems. The conflict took up a lot of
energy and it really impacted my academic performance. Finally when I was in my early twenties, I said, you know, there are times when I really feel like a hypocrite. Whenever I act out heterosexually, that's when I feel guilty and I told that to my priest. And he said, “boy, well, you know the church teaches blah, blah, blah, if you don't feel heterosexual, it's not for you.” And I had more than one priest counseling me that way. And I began to accept myself more and then I began to notice some other guys in the gay crowd; they were at church.

When I moved to New York City--you know all the gay priests gravitate to big cities, or the Lutheran pastors who get too liberal for the Midwest and they get kicked out or ‘shipped to Siberia’, which is usually the inner city ghetto of New York. And some of them ended up building outreach to the gay community, developing outstanding inner-city ministries. I mean these were all gay Lutheran pastors…Then of course I eventually discovered MCC.

I saw about Troy Perry's first congregation in the New York Times. And you know I followed that. And so by the time I was twenty-five I really was--I wasn't conflicted anymore, really. And anyway, then I discovered the daughters of Bilitis and I ran into other church-going dykes. And one thing led to another. I found that there was a whole community of gay Christians. You know, they're not all in one denomination. But that's only recently, and of course in the last ten years, there've been the open and affirming congregations. And there are two Catholic parishes here that are gay friendly. And so far they have not gotten in trouble; they haven't run afoul of the Archbishop and they haven't attracted the
attention of the Vatican. And, you know, we do our things and we have a big turnout at the Pride Parade.

Another partner says:

Initially, [integration of sexuality and spirituality] was hindered because the only spirituality I knew about was Christian and Biblical and I thought it was all negative. So that was, of course, not helpful. Once I found out about MCC I did my own research about what the Bible says, and then I knew it was OK to be me… and even now that I'm an associate of the [Catholic order] community, I talk about my family blah, blah, blah, my household blah, blah, blah, and it's a household of four women and that is absolutely understood in our community because the whole thing about being sisters is understandable. But the ethic in common is being women who live together in community. And so they don't have the slightest little ripple about it. And many of them are out lesbians… they don't have a problem with my polyamory. Which is kind of ironic when you think about it, because that's the community where you're supposed to repress all sexuality. When I say they're out lesbians I'm talking about their orientation. I think many of them just don't practice. Some do. So that's been empowering for me to realize that, hey, this group of people accepts that I’m open to love many people and we live together in community. And that is really what it's about. It's not about having people to have sex with. It's about love, and that open-ended love that is practiced in women's communities. You know, it's not that much different, except that I'm expressing my love sexually. They’re not supposed to
be expressing sexually, for the very reason that they would tend to focus on one person. So that's been empowering to have positive interactions there, too.

MCC EXPERIENCES

The usual stories about finding freedom, acceptance, and self-esteem in MCC as gay, lesbian, or transgender people are told. This is one woman’s story:

[I got involved with MCC] chasing a girl. Absolutely. No question. And this is actually a really exciting point in my life… MCC came with the package because she's really very active in the church. I even wrote a note to the pastor a while back and said basically, okay, you know, you are part of the in-laws as far as I'm concerned; you come with the package. And I've been sort of finding my way around the church structures. In a way it was sort of an announcement to the pastor that: you are part of [my partner’s] extended family and therefore you will be part of my family. So we're gonna figure out a way to get along here. You know?

So the church came with her. But I have become active too. We go to worship services. You know, years ago I couldn't go to a Christian service at all because just one hymn from my childhood would set me off. It was usually the music. One hymn and I'd be nauseous, and I'd have to leave. I just couldn't take it. And now, you know, things come up in the evening service, which is patterned after a gospel service basically, so there's things that come in every once in a while to be purposely chosen, an old Baptist hymn just for--you know, all the Baptists in the group. And now it's like when it comes up, often times I even sing.
You know I've even sang one that the last time I had sung it was in a rural country church with my grandmother, my aunt, and my mother all standing around me. When I was a kid in the summers I would visit my grandparents. And it was kind of cool because I realized, ah, there's this internal line in my family--you know, that this music connects to. And those people are all gone except for my mother. And my mother has quit going to church for her own reasons. And so for me it was like a reconnection to my religious heritage through the maternal line, which was really cool. And that song being sung at MCC did that for me. Just to bring back that memory and sort of redeem it.

MCC has been healing and liberating for sexual minority persons, but acceptance or affirmation as poly families has often been missing in their MCC experiences. One man says:

I realize the fact that I work for the fellowship instead of for IBM or the state of California or something, does give me more options about being out about it but not completely. There's some who are out, but most people are just not out about it at all. Nobody's throwing us out, but it's a different situation. I do think there's something about being MCC clergy in which you get exposed to a broad enough array of sexual lifestyles that you start thinking beyond some of the categories taught to you in health class...It was helpful to stop thinking about those. I think life is so precious, and limiting who you fall in love with because it doesn't meet Aunt Sally's expectations or the churches' expectations, is to me a
waste of loving and a waste of opportunities to enjoy people in loving relationships.

Another person says:

There's still an amazing ignorance, even in the San Francisco MCC, you'd think that people would be a little more cognizant that poly people even exist. But the amount of surprise that we've seen on people's faces just talking about non-monogamy, and this is a congregation where there's at least enough education in this area, in the gay community at least, that there are poly relationships, and that they can be ethical. We don't have people looking at us and saying, 'oh well, that's just wrong.' They understand that actually [poly relationships] can be ethical, and people can be perfectly normal, healthy, well-adjusted individuals and be in a poly relationship. So we're not getting the kinds of reactions where people are being very hard and judgmental. But simply the amount of surprise. They're just shocked. Because they've never actually met anybody that talked about it. We've really been the first people that have ever been close to this person that said, ‘yes, this is what we're doing and we're actually building our relationship from the ground up this way because we want to.’ I think it's been interesting that there's that much lack of awareness…So simply doing educational things for the public would be good. Because I'm thinking, well if that's the way it is in San Francisco, then what about the rest of the country? And what about other places in the world? These issues are probably beyond the scope of a lot of the clergy, just because they don't have the information.
One pastor, after expressing doubts about three people having sex at the same time, says:

I don't think it's really me. But I can see where [MCC] people could do that. People are always confusing polyfidelity with promiscuity. That bothers me. I mean, as soon as you start talking about non-monogamy, they jump to promiscuity, like that was the only alternative. And now that I've lived this, I see that's really off. People still joke about it. I mean, I think they think because I have two I can have any number. And I doubt it, you know… I'm not free. I'm not different from anybody in another closed, two-person relationship. I'm not available because I've got commitments to other people. Just because there's two instead of one, [they think] I’m not OK.”

Another clergyperson says:

Some of the people at [MCC] recognize that we’re a family. That's fine, but there's no acknowledgment. And acceptance of that, not judgment, would be nice. To be able to walk into a room and not have people stare. I walked in those MCC district processions, you know, at conferences, until they began to become clergy and spouse processions. You cannot walk down that isle with three or four people. So, you know, which one do I pick to walk with me this time? Usually we're not all at conference together anyway, but that's just an example of, you know, how people look the other way.
Her partner of 23 years refers to the family as, “the freak show in the fellowship.” “The fellowship” is another way people in the denomination refer to MCC (The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches).

HOLY UNIONS

Only one couple, speaking alternately, indicate that they would not be interested in a holy union, even for the two of them, because, Ken says:

We've even got our wills all done and everything. But there's been no real need on our part anyway, to go through with a holy union. Because right now it doesn't mean that much. It has no legal standing that I know of. That day is coming, but not for a long time.

Teddy replies: I feel like this way, that we don’t need to make any more commitment.

Ken: I've made a commitment to Teddy, I don’t need to do it in public.

Teddy: Really the thing is that we've made a commitment. We don't own each other but for some reason it has worked for us. I think if we tried holding onto each other I think we would've failed. The idea that we had when we got involved is to stay together. I don't like the idea of somebody flitting from one relationship to another. I don't want to get into that habit. If I would walk away from Ken, say, at a moment’s notice, why would the other person expect me to stay with them?

Ken: Yeah.
Teddy (with a twinkle in his eye): Now it's not so much that we've made a commitment to each other, it's just we've got so much time invested.

Ken: Time investment and really we've made a commitment to each other. Not, you know a ceremony, or a wedding, but a commitment. And I'm a great believer in keeping your commitments...the younger generation seems to have difficulty keeping promises. If a person has trouble keeping their promises, whether it's younger generation or not, it's not gonna work. And I don't believe in going into a relationship just to think, 'well if this doesn't work out I can always leave.' I don't believe in that. And that's leading somebody on as far as I'm concerned. That's not right, and that's why I feel that way...Holy union should be basically for two and even on the heterosexual side, if you're gonna have an open relationship, you have no business having a holy union. But as far as to take the number out of the bylaws so pastors can do wedding ceremonies, no. I think we have a better chance to maintain it if we don't change the definition.

Teddy: My feelings are very similar to that, but I just feel quite frankly that the number two came about for the protection of children. This is more my feelings why I haven't gone to holy union, I think. And that was originally why they came up with it, because originally only the royalty got married, town people didn't. Men don't necessarily take care of their children, so the church enforced the responsibility. And when you're enforcing a responsibility, you're asking for trouble...I think that's one of the reasons our divorce rates are so high in our country. It doesn't respect the individual. If somebody doesn't do what I want, I'll divorce him. And a holy union would be the same way. If we've had a ceremony
or not is immaterial to our basic relationship. And to me it's better with two people. When there were four of us, it was an open relationship, strictly. It still is, technically. Practically speaking, it's been pretty much closed.

One woman in the process of planning a Holy Union tells about the difficulty of explaining her poly lifestyle:

We use the word marriage because it's the only word people know. There's such a lack of language around poly issues. Marriage is the only word that I can think of that connotes life-time-ness, that connotes stability, the sticking with [each other] through thick and thin. People have those things in their head when they hear the word 'marriage.'

The problem with it is that people automatically assume that another defining character of the word marriage is always exclusiveness. At least in this culture it’s always that ‘forsaking all others’ thing...Around MCC, when we told people that we're planning to get married, we usually added onto that something, and I used to do it in a sort of humorous way, so that it takes people kind off guard. I'll say something like, ‘of course that doesn't mean that we're going to quit seeing other people.’ And usually they'll laugh. And I'll say, ‘no, actually we really are going to keep seeing other people.’ And then they want to ask questions about it. I mean it really piques their curiosity because they've never seen it. It's just like, ‘oh, I don't know anybody that's doing that… and you're really setting this up? I mean this is for real, you're really setting it up this way?’ Yes, we really are. And so it's been a good opportunity to talk to people about
that. But unless you say we're getting married and then you redefine that one characteristic that's very different than what people have in their head, they're gonna make an assumption that's way off.

Ken and Teddy say:

We’ve been open about our relationships and most people have accepted us. Other people have had problems with it... So even one of our clerks at the time, [inaudible] parish, she had a lot of problems with it, with the four of us, because we weren't being monogamous. We four would get together and we'd go to a meeting together. Or Doug would go and the three of us would go out together. So we made no secret of it... My personal theory is that women tend to want more of a monogamous relationship than men do. I know it isn't true in all cases... Within the church culture there were those who don’t know us. We didn't say anything to them about it because we didn’t know them that well. And if they were just casual acquaintances, and then chances are the subject wouldn't come up, we wouldn't say anything... It’s been a challenge getting the point across that it's not necessarily orgy time when there are four of us involved, because it's actually different with each. And with heterosexual friends who know we’re gay, the supposition is, well gays are sex fiends anyway. You know, they fit that stereotype. And with the lesbian, gay and trans community, mostly they were accepting. The ones we had the most problems with were lesbians in our church.
The decision by General Conference in 1999 to restrict Holy Unions to couples, and the subsequent discussions, have been particularly hurtful to these families. Their emotional tone as they talked about it in the interviews was intense, sometimes angry, and sometimes sad. Some of the comments are more like proclamations than simple answers to interview questions.

One man says:

I think it's one of the worst decisions we've made to not allow [Holy Unions for multiples]. I think it betrays something fundamental about our history. One of the things I never expected has been a real blessing is people who were in MCC in the '60s and '70s. Many of them don't come to MCC anymore because it's not cutting edge and not relevant for them…these aren't young people who are just not cutting it. These are people in their sixties and seventies who said, ‘I joined MCC as a counter-cultural movement and it isn't anymore.’ And one guy was telling me about how the fellowship has changed, because, he said, ‘How are we ever gonna get accepted? You're using marriage, that's gonna push everybody's buttons; it's gonna scare all the straight people; how can you talk about marriage, blah, blah, blah.’ You know the Holy Union thing. That was an important historical bit for me to realize that people are still looking for acceptance as gay or lesbian or trans. This is not a new question. And having done advocacy around right to marriage for queer couples, I don't think that this [perception] matters actually…I think we'd be in a far stronger theological and social position to say that it's not our job to determine who God brings together, or who gets to bless that. You know it's clear to me that the right to love, a sexual
freedom, is a much stronger position than to see if we could be like straight people. And I think that we've lost some of that. Although just doing a Leadership Conference on sexuality and spirituality, I think we've made some steps to regain some of that, too. That was a really, really powerful experience.

People said things like: ‘we had a nice little church before this issue came up.’ So the people who didn't want to deal with it, didn't deal with it. But the people who did had some very radical, very powerful ideas out there. And people who affirmed that they liked hearing ideas they were opposed to as well as things they agreed to. And then there were things that they thought they were opposed to, but realized they weren't, and things that they thought they agreed with but then they weren't sure that they did. And you know there was sort of a range of acceptance. And I think we need to have that discussion around inclusiveness.

Another person echoes the concern that discussion of sexual issues should be more explicit within MCC:

I would wish that there could be more teaching, more explicit acknowledgement of sex as a part of life. It comes out occasionally in a sermon or a reading. We get everybody moving and into our bodies occasionally. But I think it is so different in most churches. There is a very fine line between tolerance and welcome. Sex comes up in some district workshops and some other things. But we don’t talk about it enough. [Inaudible] It's one church that is more open than any other place that I've been but it still seems like a disability to talk about having sex itself…So I feel like--I think that there's not any kind of sexual
teaching in our church…We don't hide it, you know. There are people who know about us, I mean people are really very inclusive. I've never felt put down or anything and I’ve never see anybody else put down. It's just that--I guess somehow it’s not OK to talk about it here. And yet I know that some other [MCC] churches don’t ever even say the words “lesbian” or “gay” or whatever, let alone talk about sex.

One person, newly active in an MCC says:

If we were looking at a lifetime triad, then we'd be in trouble. Yeah. So sure, I have very strong opinions on that. And what's gonna happen some day on down the road if the two of us together form a relationship with a significant other person, and we really feel that that person is going to become a permanent member of our relationship? Then what happens? Because it certainly is reasonable to think that [my partner] and I would be totally committed to the poly thing from the outset. And what if we're developing this relationship that is a permanent triad or quad or god only knows what.

I've called it tribe before, where you have permanent connections with people that are like family. Tribe is a good label actually, because it allows for those shifts over time where people can say, ‘okay it's sexual at this point in time and then in another point, maybe it's not, but it's still familial.’ And all those things fit under the word tribe, so I like that word a lot. It's very flexible.

What if one day, after we've been married for ten years and we really feel like we can see the structure of our relationship unit is bigger than the two of us
and it's looking permanent, what do we do then? That won't fit under those bylaws, the thing with two people. So yeah, I have very strong opinions that that ought to be modified, because it would be a sad thing for us, having finally landed in a congregation and finding my roots in that congregation… You know it'd be a really sad thing for the two of us to be married together in that congregation and then ten years down the road we say, ‘okay, our relationship is not only solid, we're in this for the long haul together, but we also have these other relationships that have developed as a result of that. And at this point in time, we would like the church to recognize this as our tribe, or whatever we come up with.’ If the bylaw stays the same, it isn't gonna be possible, is it?

One clergyman was clear that his pastoral care would not be hindered by the necessity of working around the bylaw restrictions:

People have said the bylaw means that you're forbidden to bless more than two people in a relationship or people in open relationships. There's no way that bylaw would prevent me from doing it. I mean I have done it before. There's no way that would prevent me from doing another one should the occasion arise. So I think we need to talk about it and I think that we need to be forceful. This is a difficult time with the transition of Troy's retirement, and I think we need to be far more forceful in some ways about raising some of these issues…We don't say anything about loving relationships as the ethical standard. We say a lot of traditional Christian stuff. And I think if we were able to get some clarity around these statements about how love and sexuality are related to God, that faith piece
might answer for us the bylaws question. You know that has to flow out of the theological principal about why we would do that, and we haven't done enough of the background work to know there's no principal of sexuality at which we're making this decision. We're making the decision on political principals and so forth.

And I think it's neat that people want to talk about it, and that we're not talking enough to them about it. I think those are the sort of questions of clergy who work professionally in the queer community. They aren't exactly as in touch with people who are in a larger community who deal with sexuality in their secular life where there're not with queer people, not with Christians, they're with the average population. I think that raises different questions for them, than the ones that we have. And to be leaders in the denomination we have to think about ethics issues and be able to speak to that. So I think that it is more a lack of faith conversation than sexuality conversation that lead to that vote. But I was very disappointed in it. I thought it was one of our weaker, more fearful moments. I personally felt that there wasn't peace in saying my relationships aren't good enough. We were probably not very effective changing it at that time. But I thought--I was just appalled by it...because it's about drawing lines, and about whom did it offend…

I think we spend so much time learning from the churches that don’t like us, accommodating the churches that we left behind, and not nearly enough time studying about, learning about meeting the needs of our own queer families and allies. You know, what are the issues important to each of those people? I don't
really care what the National Council of Churches thinks about us. But I do care that there are people who are in desperate situations because they don’t know about the love of God for them. And some churches hopscotch right over that need. We don’t want to offend straight people in other churches; so we’re not gonna talk about queer issues in church. We could sell our soul out but we're not talking about queer issues because we're not connected with our own beliefs around sexuality and gender. That road is for the welcoming churches, if that's the case. So if we don't have any distinct message around those things then we don't have any reason to exist. I don't think that's the case, but I think if we choose that road, how will we be different than any welcoming church in the mainline? Other than the fact that they're normal, conservative people who don’t want to think they’re queer. That's my concern. And that we're not reaching young career people with postmodern concepts…

What attracted me fifteen years ago was the excitement. Why would a young person say MCC is exciting now? There are a few churches that are attracting a lot of young people. And they're being explicit around sexuality, about varieties of sexual orientations, gifts, and relationships like polyamory. And, you know, those are the churches that are doing interesting stuff, and the people are coming. And until we can wrap those pieces back together, I'm worried.
Another pastor presents a pastoral care rationale for doing Holy Unions for multiples:

That's the way it is for gay people sometimes. They get married just so they can feel moral about their life. They start thinking, ‘well look, I did this before God, and the church didn't fall in, so it must be okay. But you know that we did come before God and I think God would've said something during the ceremony if God was displeased.’ I think sometimes a marriage affirms in some people's minds that this is okay. ‘It's okay for us to live in a marriage because we got married by the church.’

One woman reports positive experiences with MCC clergy:

I have been really pleased with the clergy specifically at MCC San Francisco, they have mentioned, in any place where they could, I think, that they support relationships based on consent. They believe that people who are freely consenting and freely finding love. This includes their [specifically] including poly relationships, which from the exterior some people will say, ‘oh well that must be promiscuity.’ So they don't go by just by the cover of the book. They say, ‘look underneath the cover and see. Is it supported by honest, loving, consent? Because they wouldn't support a relationship if it was all about one person literally being a slave, being controlled. They wouldn't support that. So they support- a relationship where, if there's an imbalance of power, it's there because the people choose it. So the free choice is the important thing. Their emphasis on the holiness of our choices is really helpful. I've gotten a lot of
affirmation from [clergy]. Even the way they call people up to communion, because they don't assume. When you come up in groups they don't assume that they know what the relationships between the people are. If two people come up, they're not gonna assume that they're a monogamous couple. And it isn't their point to know, and I like that.

One person concludes:

So we have to relearn how to talk about sexuality and spirituality. I do think that I've learned a lot by listening to people who are living it. I learned a lot by the insight that people in multiples have gained. And I think that we need to be visible and open about relationships. I would love to see some way for us to know that love makes a family, just like the body of Christ. We need a model that shows different kinds of couples and multiples and get people to see that. And I thought, ‘what would it be for people at MCC to see our families? You know, to see what these things actually look like. These things that you're voting on are real people. Because for some it seems to be a very theoretical issue, but people impacted by that decision don’t see it the same way.

Another conclusion:

Interviewer: What would it mean to you if MCC was to define holy union in a way that includes families like yours?

Well, first of all, it would mean to me that MCC is not doing what society dictates, trying to define relationships in terms of some artificial criteria other
than love between gay people. To say two, to my mind is just as bad as to say male and female. It's overly defining, by some characteristic other than loving and wanting to commit to one another. If MCC were to allow multiples I don't know that we would be there yet. We think of ourselves as family, but to actually state that, to get to the point where we're willing to put our word on it in public, that's hard. I mean that's another trust level between all of us.

But it would mean that MCC is not following the mainstream. It would mean that MCC is saying we are recognizing the quality of love that already exists. We're talking about deeply committed life partners and it's obvious that, whether we have a ritual or not, they are already families. So to have MCC say we recognize that you are making life commitments, that's important, and that would be a blessing, a big blessing. And I think they need to actually have a ceremony in MCC because [that would be] saying we accept [these families]. And we already know that God accepts it because otherwise we never would've lasted this many years if that was the case.
CONCLUSION

MCC can learn a lot from the stories of these polyamorous relationships. This volunteer sample consists of mature, faith-filled, thoughtful adults, most of them dedicated Christian believers. Their relationships are long-term and appear to be stable. One non-MCC couple have conflicting ideas about the future structure of their family, but even they are determined to make their marriage last, and have worked hard to understand and accommodate their differing needs and desires.

There is much diversity in their family structures, but even the two “single” women consider themselves part of large extended families of choice. In some cases, new partners have been added to bring novelty and fresh energy to waning couple relationships. These persons find this morally preferable to abandoning or breaking up with the partner in order to love the new person. One man remained married to his wife and supported her for years until she died, while at the same time establishing close, lasting, intimate bonds with other gay men. Sometimes, former lovers are still considered to be close friends and extended family members. Even when the relationship is a vee, where only one partner reaches out to another lover, they talk of bringing back positive energy to their primary relationship. Renewal of liveliness and love within a family can itself be thought of as “new life,” the procreative result of expressing expanding love bodily.

Polyamory is only a threat to marriage if non-monogamy requires divorce. If both partners in a primary relationship agree that sexual exclusivity can be negotiated, or that their relationship is open, the novelty provided by a new partner can enhance the long-
term relationship, whether the new partner is a temporary or permanent part of their life together.

A relationship that is working well and is generating love to share may be expanded to include others. These families stress that love grows and reaches out to others. They often comment that love is not a limited resource such that giving love to one means taking love from another. Several explain this as similar to adding children to a family; one doesn’t stop loving the first child when the second is added. Each child is loved and appreciated for that child’s own unique characteristics and needs. Treating children fairly does not mean treating them the same. The same principle is applied to these poly families. Certain relationships may hold priority by reason of longevity or proximity or a lover’s special need, but these poly people don’t attempt to treat everyone alike; they attempt to be open, honest, and fair with each other person.

Goss (1997) refers to this expansion of family by taking in others as procreativity, and argues for equal rites for all families.

Our diverse relationships can be procreative, and we should claim that truth with equal rights and rites, just as heterosexuals do. Everyone has the right to create a family form that fits her or his needs to realize the human potential for love in non-oppressive relationships. Everyone has the right to define significant relationships and decide who matters and counts as family (p. 19).

Communication skills are practiced and honed within these families. Full disclosure of emotions and desires, negotiations for time and for specific sexual activities, clear statements of boundaries and limits, and consensus decision-making produce just, honest, fulfilling relationships. Both the BDSM communities and poly families depend
on and encourage development of excellent communication skills. MCC congregations could benefit by learning communication skills that apply to relationships within the church as well as to household, family, or lover relationships.

Ironically, so much social stigma is attached to non-monogamy that these families often feel compelled to be closeted, even in the queer space of MCC churches. The stresses created by the perceived need for non-disclosure, by people who place a high value on honesty and good communication, call out for affirmation and support from the spiritual communities of MCC churches. This is expressed as being forced to “live a lie,” or as fear of disclosure leading to sanctions and career jeopardy. In a denomination that tries to create safe space for sexual minorities, this discrepancy creates acute pain. MCC can address this pain by providing sex-positive teaching, encouraging integration of sexuality and spirituality, providing opportunities for story-telling by polyamorous people and listening to the stories, and by creating new rites, or expanding the definition of Holy Matrimony/Holy Union to include covenants among more than two adults.

The compersion that has replaced jealousy in some of these households is an emotion that the church needs. If the examples poly people can give the church are followed, we will be enabled to “rejoice with those who rejoice.” Polyamory is spoken of as an orientation, rather than a lifestyle situation. Polyamorous people want to claim the same rights as anyone else to live their lives as “normal” people.

For some, a polyamorous lifestyle is more honest and true to who they see themselves to be than attempting to be monogamous, when “that’s just not who I am.” They want the rights and privileges of marriage. Although they all seem to realize that their families will not be legally recognized anytime soon, they want their churches to
Rev. Frances Mayes, MCC Holy Union

acknowledge them as families and to affirm the possibility of integrity, holiness, and justice in polyamorous relationships.

The joys these partners experience are spoken of by such words as “richness,” “diversity,” “complexity,” “fulfilling,” “out of the box,” or “novelty and security at the same time.” Financial benefits enable some to devote themselves to study or spiritual pursuits they would not otherwise be able to afford.

The complexity that is a joy can also be a challenge. None of these people suggests that polyamory is a good choice for everyone. Some see their own families as special cases. Maturity and responsibility for one’s own actions are cited as prerequisites for this style of family building. All of the couples interviewed wanted to add to their original partnerships, not abandon them. Most had previously had experiences with serial monogamy, or saw it in others and wanted to avoid the harm caused by divorces or break-ups.

The challenge of time pressures, surely not unique to multiples, could be eased if they were viewed as a family. Just as activities are scheduled to avoid undue strain on couple relationships, so these families could be accommodated in ways that minimize stress on the relationships involved. “Couple’s retreats” could become “Relationship retreats” if these families were acknowledged as legitimate.

One idea in common to most of the sample is that love is expanded when adding more people to a family. They do not fear loss of a partner’s love when that person is interested in someone else. The circle of love that expands, rather than divides, is an example needed by church communities. The joys of diversity can be experienced even
as new people change the character of the group. Innovative ideas or new concerns need not threaten the stability of the existing group.

Resentment appears to exist around perceived judgments of non-monogamous sexual lives. Polyamory is about loving more than one, they insist, not about orgies, or moral laxity, or promiscuity. The subjects contrast this with cheating, lying, and sneaking around, which some see as inevitable results of attempts at monogamy. They wish to be known for the quality of their relationships, not the number of sexual partners they may or may not have. Same-sex couples also want the quality of their relationships to be seen, rather than the gender of their partners. This could enable them to be more empathetic to the struggles of poly families for recognition. Solidarity with others suffering oppression is a sign of spiritual maturity.

As MCC culture becomes increasingly multi-national, the need for inclusion and recognition of polygamous families in counties where this practice is the norm and is legal, will force reconsideration of the definition of marriage and therefore of the rites of Holy Union and Holy Matrimony. Churches will be forced to examine which families meet needs for holy, just relationships and what rites are needed to accommodate diverse understandings of marriage and family. A universal fellowship will need to accommodate the traditions of many cultures. Secular legality seems a poor criterion for defining a church’s rites. Perhaps this will bring into question the appropriateness of clergy signing state documents, thus acting as agents of the state, rather than as spiritual leaders conducting a rite of the church. MCC could accept leadership responsibilities by affirming diverse family forms and by creating rites of Holy Union for the families that already exist within its boundaries.
As Africa in 2002 deals with decades of war, famine of unprecedented scope, and an overwhelming number of AIDS deaths, can we not see the wisdom in creating stable families of whatever configuration works for them? The Hebrew Scriptures emphasize concern for widows and orphans; the same concern surrounds the Quran’s permission for a man to take up to four wives. The New Testament emphasizes love of neighbor. Jesus said that laws were made for humans, not the other way around. If any denomination can lead the way to more humane laws for forming families, and to recognition of more diversity in family configurations, it is UFMCC. Will we accept the challenge?

The same impulse that leads to a desire to be inclusive of all persons regardless of race, ethnicity, ability levels, faith backgrounds, sexual orientation, or gender identity could enable MCC to understand and reach out to the minority group that is the polyamory community. The experience of struggling to give understanding to others about the experiences of sexual minority persons could enhance the ability to listen to polyamorous families without prejudgment. A people striving for acceptance among other Christians could be more sensitive to the needs of its own minority families to be accepted and affirmed.

Some of the people whose ideas formed the content of this paper argue, somewhat reluctantly, that political expediency requires that the definition of Holy Union/Holy Matrimony include a limitation on the number of partners to two. This is viewed as necessary to ensure the eventual acceptance of same-sex marriages as legitimate. At the same time, most interviewees see the reluctance to open the definition to include them as a slap in the face and a painful wound inflicted by the church they serve. They feel they’ve been relegated to second-class citizenship. They object that people who do not
know them or their families are judging them. They ask MCC to listen to their stories, consider their experiences, and define Holy Union, not on the basis of political expediency or unexamined assumptions about the Bible, but taking into account what they have learned through experience and taking a mature, thoughtful, theological stand.

The metaphor of the body of Christ works both ways. We incorporate the body of Christ into our own human bodies at communion (or a powerful symbol of that body if you prefer.) In doing so we are remembering Jesus and re-membering ourselves as the body of Christ for the world. Is this not a reminder of how two become one flesh? Both remain whole and separate and both, at the same time, become one by sharing bodily hospitality. In accepting the bodily love of another, we are empowered to reach out in love to others.

If the meaning of sex has gone from imaging God in us (Genesis), to unitivity with procreation as blessing (Judaism), to intrinsically sinful, with procreation and avoidance of concupiscence as concessions (Catholicism), to a human right (Reformation), to a way to embody the love of God (incarnational theology), then we must ask different questions of our polyamorous friends. Do non-monogamous relationships image and operationalize the love of God in the world? Do they lead toward wholeness and joy or toward splitting and shame?

Using Nelson’s definition of sexual sanctification, does polyamory promote growth in bodily self-acceptance, in the capacity for sensuousness, in the capacity for play, in the diffusion of the erotic throughout the body (rather than its genitalization) and in the embrace of the androgynous possibility? It’s all about relationships. The question
isn’t what we do with whom, but how does our bodily relating foster the justice-seeking
cindom of God?

MCC can and has created its own definition of marriage to meet the pastoral
needs of our people. We are not compelled to conform to state bigamy laws any more
than we conform to state DOMAs or sodomy laws. We are a counter-cultural force
seeking to redefine marriage and family to include a diversity of new family structures
that meet modern family needs. We do ourselves a disservice if we support only a very
limited kind of alternative family that looks most like the mainstream cultural ideal:
sexually exclusive couples.

In reality many of our long-term relationships are not sexually exclusive. Pretending to conform to dominant culture ideals encourages the same kind of “fronting”
and pretending that any closet forces. It would be more honest to bless groups who intend
long-term poly relationships, name them as holy, and free them to celebrate their moral
and sexual choices. How can we approve (but often not acknowledge) “open”
relationships and not bless honest poly relationships? Shall we establish a policy of
“Don’t ask; don’t tell?” We will look the other way if you are non-monogamous; just
don’t ask us to bless your loving family commitments? “Why do they have to flaunt it?
What will the neighbors think?”

In a culture that no longer supports ownership of women and children by men,
marrying strictly for money is no longer considered moral. People are instead allowed to
combine resources in any way that meets their needs. If money is an issue in deciding
who may marry, then a group of adults may provide more security and flexibility in
lifestyle than a lone couple. Children may have the benefit of spreading the risk of having
unemployed parents among more adults. Parents could have more time/energy for children given the benefits of more pooled resources. Death or divorce of a parent need not create the disruption of living with only one grieving parent.

And if love and commitment are the criteria for what makes a marriage, who will be the judge to declare a threesome or any group’s love and commitment invalid? “Being banned from legal marriage is vastly different from rejecting it: it’s a sign of lower status, a banner saying your heart is beneath the notice of the society and the law” (Graff, 1999, p. 211). Shall we work for equal status for same-sex love in the eyes of the law, while creating our own second-class citizenship status for those whose love extends to more than one?

If happiness or “compatibility” is what makes a good marriage, then people who find themselves to be happiest with more than one partner should not be denied the church’s blessing and support for their chosen love-style. Household configurations that meet the needs of queer families will, of necessity, look somewhat different from the idealized norm of the American heterosexual nuclear family, a model in which few real people actually live.

Leonard Sweet (1994) in FaithQuakes reports that in 1958, 72% of homes in America had a husband who was the “breadwinner” and a wife who was “homemaker” and “child-rearer.” In 1990 it was seven percent. Sweet asserts, “The ‘nuclear family’ is an invention and aberration of modernity, especially of the 1950’s. The ‘nuclear family’ is one of the strongest progenitors and protectors of patriarchy. It is extended families that undercut the patriarchal model” (Sweet, 1994, p.162-163). Sweet calls these extended families “matrix families” described as multigenerational households and
complexes of relationships that bind people together by blood and duty as well as friendship and circumstance. This is the postmodern family according to Sweet (1994) and seems an equally valid description of queer “chosen families.”

Social change always precedes legal change. As we fight to legalize same-sex marriage, we also ought to recognize the reality of the poly families among us and honor their loving, moral choices as well. Why should the legal arguments influence our blessing of those we wish to include in holy unions? It is predictable that the sodomy laws will fall before the bigamy laws do, but why let the state define what is holy, what is moral, what we will bless? We’re not doing that now, and I for one do not want to concede to the state the power to decide what is holy.

The Platonic notion that everyone is part of an original dual being and spends his/her life searching for her/his “other half” is the basis for much of the romantic idea that there is one perfect mate for everyone, the “match made in heaven” that has an eternal quality. The Bible does not sacrilize such a permanent pair-bond. Biblical families are diverse. The Hebrew Scriptures focus on the larger concept of the people of God and the New Testament on the believing community as the new family. Nowhere is the ideal of monogamous heterosexual marriage presented as the only legitimate form of family.

Aware as we are of the damage to self-esteem caused by homophobic rejection of same-sex marriage, shouldn’t we respond empathetically to the pain of persons whose social situation or personal choice has put them in the position of having to hide their plural relationships, whether hetero-, homo-, or bi-sexual? Do we want to continue to embrace a “natural law” theology tied to procreation that would deny us any kind of
families, or can we begin to see marriage as a social invention, subject to reevaluation with changing times and needs?

MCC can lead the churches in developing a multi-cultural, multi-dimensional, theologically based, 21st century understanding of marriage and family. It can continue to lead in developing a sex-positive theology of sexuality and diverse sexual theologies. As an advocate for minority persons defined by their sexuality or gender diversity, MCC is in a position to lead the discussion currently arising in many places around the definition of family. As a denomination able to encompass diverse thinking and actions around many issues, it is in a position to affirm diverse relationships as no other church body can at this time. Changing the definition of Holy Union to include multiple partners would be a liberating, socially responsible, theologically supportable move.

Accommodating to the majority culture by denying polyamorous families full support may be politically astute, but it may compromise integrity. Is it ethical to uphold the rights of the families who look most like the heterosexual norm, while adding to the oppression of other queer families? Should fear of being thought morally lax be allowed to create a situation where some families are kept hidden away in the denominational closet? The stories of these polyamorous MCC families can indeed inform the question of how to define Holy Union.

MCC has provided cutting edge leadership as a model of ecumenical relationships by incorporating doctrinal diversity and diverse worship styles into one denomination. It is beginning a new adventure in realizing a worldwide fellowship that can share resources more equitably and can be flexible enough in structure to accommodate local conditions.
and cultures. I am confident that MCC is up to the task of supporting diverse relationship styles and family structures, too.

As queer people, we inhabit the borderlands between definitions of sex and gender; we cross all boundaries of class, color, and ethnicity; we live in at least two cultures simultaneously: gay and mainstream. In many cultures our role as both/and people has been to cross boundaries, to push limits, to be intermediaries. We have been the artists, the poets, the decorators, the shamans, the politicians, and the good-will ambassadors. We bring beauty, innovation, understanding, and spirituality to our cultures. It would be a shame to disown or try to “tame” our most creative “fringe” people in a misguided attempt to conform to “traditional family values” that represent the norms created by the upper-class Victorian nuclear family in North America in prior times. 21st century families need new norms and values to guide us through postmodern confusion and uncertainty. Our grandchildren may marry, but their marriages will not be the institution supported by our grandparents.

The Bible supports pluralism in lifestyles. In Romans chapter 14, Paul is dealing with an issue over which there was disagreement in the early church: whether or not eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols was morally permissible. If current issues of sexual morality are substituted, it might read like this:

Romans 14

(Original text is from the New Revised Standard Version. Parentheses indicate texts I am paraphrasing and/or modifying. Italic text is my own substitute version. Underlining signifies words of Paul that I want to emphasize as containing the main point of the passage.)
1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

2 (Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.) Some believe in living joyfully polyamorous lives, while others believe that monogamous, permanent, pair-bondings are the only proper place for sexual expression.

3 (Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.) Those who are free must not put down those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those whose sexual expression is more varied; for God has welcomed them.

4 Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 (Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike.) Some want their relationships blessed by the church, and demand to be given all the benefits that accrue to married couples in our culture. Others judge the institution of marriage to be faulty and unhealthy, and want their relationships to be honored without conforming to any predetermined social customs.

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

6 (Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.) Those who plan weddings, do so to let the whole world know that their love is of God.
(Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.) *Those who have a lot of sex honor and celebrate sex as a good gift from God, indeed for some, a doorway of transcendence through which to comprehend more of God. Those who abstain, do so to honor the gift of sexuality by reserving it for the circumstances they consider blessed by God. And both, by their life choices, give thanks to God for the gift.*

7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.

8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.

9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

11 For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. *The only "rule" is non-exploitation, the rule of love: do nothing that will cause harm to others or yourself.*
14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

15 (If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.) If your behavior is injuring another, you are no longer walking in love. Don't let your conduct cause the ruin of another of God's beloved children, and don't let others pronounce that what is good for you is in fact evil.

17 (For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

18 The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.) For the kindom of God is not about sexual rules, but about pure motives and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

19 Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

20 (Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; 21 it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.) Do not, for the sake of sexual pleasure, destroy the work of God. Everything is clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall away and reject the church by insisting that yours is the only right choice. We must find ways to honor and respect each other’s moral decisions without trying to make everyone conform.
22 The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.

23 (But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.) Don't do anything that you are convinced is wrong for you at this point in your life. If you listen for the voice of God inside, you will know right from wrong. Listening without reflection to the old tapes that play back societal rules is not living by faith. As St. Augustine said: Love God and do as you please.

MCC has an opportunity at this time in history to provide models of new rites that meet the needs of the diverse family forms that exist in the new postmodern world where both/and answers are being applied to either/or questions of the past. Our integration of theological and cultural diversity, and our ministry to communities that violate and transcend rigid norms of behavior and identity place MCC in a cutting-edge position. As sexuality, gender, family, and marriage are being re-defined, MCC can provide examples of stable, holy, just and loving relationships, and can provide ceremonies to support and honor new relationship forms. Indeed, we may be the only Christian denomination with the flexibility to do so at this time.
EVALUATION

The issue that birthed this study is whether MCC should enlarge its definition of Holy Union. Those who answer, “yes,” believe this is a justice issue or a theological issue; those who answer, “no,” do so on the basis of their understanding of the will of God for all people or as a regrettable political strategy. The participants in this study, for the most part, are in the former category.

The study has several limitations. The sample is not representative, but volunteer. It is reasonable to assume that those who feel most strongly about the issue would be most likely to volunteer. Even the respondents expressed some reluctance to be identified for fear of repercussions. As long as polyamory remains a socially disapproved lovestyle, and disclosure is perceived as dangerous, it is unlikely that a truly representative sample could be gathered.

The researcher’s time, money, energy, and linguistic limitations, and institutional deadlines are also limiting factors. A larger number of interviews would yield richer data and perhaps more diversity of attitudes. Even as this study concluded, there were more people interested in volunteering to be interviewed. To speak to a worldwide fellowship, cross-cultural or multi-cultural studies would be desirable. Both linguistic translation and cultural translation will continue to be pressing needs.

Some parts of some interview tapes were difficult to hear and were not able to be transcribed in enough detail and precision to be useful. This is a technology problem that could be remedied in future studies with an external microphone clipped to the participant’s clothing. It was the researcher’s intent to make the recording devise as
unobtrusive as possible, but considerable quality was lost in some cases by leaving the recorder on a table between the subject and the interviewer.

This project was undertaken to elicit stories of polyamorous people whose experience could add to the ongoing denominational discussion. As such, there was no attempt to “balance” their statements with arguments against them. Doing so in a future volume would be valuable to MCC leaders and people. A comparison study of monogamous couples to polyamorous families would also be valuable and perhaps provide more validity.

Given the limitations above, the study does serve as an introduction to the lives of polyamorous people. For those who want to hear more “data” it can be a beginning source of information that could lead to more open-minded consideration of the questions faced by MCC: What do holy, just, sexual relationships look like? What is the theological basis for a doctrine of ethical sexual behavior? What is marriage/holy union? How should church rites relate to secular laws? What makes a family? How does a specifically queer theology of liberation speak to these questions? For whose rights are we willing to take risks? What are the limits of inclusivity for MCC? How much theological openness is possible while still remaining Christian and seeking acceptance among the larger church? Who decides what transgressions of the “rules” will be tolerated? Accepted? Affirmed? Encouraged? How can an international institution honor cultural diversity and individual moral choice while calling its people to healthy, just, godly living?

None of these are easy questions, nor are they likely to be answered in the short term. It is this author’s sincere hope that this study can give voice to people who are rendered voiceless, or at least hushed, by current attitudes and beliefs. In Judges 19, a
parallel story to Genesis 19 of the misuse of sex as a weapon of violence and power-over, the writer concludes that given the injustice observed, it is necessary to “consider it, take heed, and speak out” (v.30b). May the voices presented here be considered; may their words be truly heard; may those with courage and opportunity speak out on their behalf.

The results of this study will be rewritten in the form of a long article or short book with limited annotated bibliography that can be made available to MCC members and friends in various venues. It might be self-published or submitted to Chi Rho Press or Pilgrim Press for possible publication. Various workshop presentations can be created to meet specific needs. Workshops are held at many MCC regional and local conferences each year and this material would be of interest to various groups within the Fellowship.
REFLECTIONS

Doing this project has been an enriching, energizing experience. I met so many wonderful people. They were articulate and had strong feelings. I am grateful for the experience of knowing them. I was able to spend up to three days in the homes of some poly families where I was able to observe their interactions. They were wonderful hosts, providing impromptu “tours” of their cities’ features, maps and directions, and introductions to other potential interviewees. I was taken to MCC churches and welcomed there as well.

The benefits of simply doing the interviews were mutual. People were glad that someone was interested in them. I heard many times, “I’m glad you’re doing this,” and “We need this,” referring to information gathered from poly people. They felt affirmed by the attention being paid to their families and their ideas and feelings. They also pastored me, after the interviews, as they listened to my personal concerns and helped me process events that were part of the travel experience. I felt very cared-for.

Going to other parts of the country to do interviews became retreats for me. In Portland I spent one afternoon at a Catholic retreat center, enjoying the hospitality of the nuns. I linked myself to a group of college students and went on a guided tour. Stations of the cross, gardens, and a sculpture garden dedicated to the mysteries of the rosary, set on a steep cliff under redwood trees, provided a perfect environment for prayer and refreshment. In San Francisco, trips to the ocean provided the setting for private meditation and healing rest.

I found the interviews harder to do than I had expected. Many times the urge to share parts of my story, or to provide reassurance had to be kept at bay. It was good
exercise for active listening skills, but felt very one-sided. My own needs to connect and to be in solidarity with others, had to submit to the need to tape the interviews and not skew the responses. Sometimes I was able to carry on more normal conversations after the formal interviews.

Knowing these people has given substance to the urge to be an advocate. Just as I hope to influence opinions by sharing the stories, I was influenced by the interviews and other experiences with these families. What once was an “issue” now has faces. These are real people, with real needs and strengths to share. The energy to pursue full inclusion of these families feels steadier, less volatile. It feels more like conviction than anger energy.

My experience with the local poly group has introduced me to many people, living with many life choices that are outside the social norms. These are primarily heterosexual or bisexual persons and families. Most view Christianity with the kind of skeptical antagonism common in the gay community. Some have found spiritual nurture and community as pagans, some have compartmentalized their spiritual needs and continue to worship in Christian traditions, but often with the guilt and shame responses also common in the gay and lesbian communities. To feel good and whole and happy, these people choose multiple partners. They are a group whose “lifestyles” put them at odds with most American Christian churches.

The counter-cultural welcoming community that is MCC can find a way to reach out to minister to the spiritual needs of heterosexual and bisexual, as well as homosexual and mixed-orientation polyamorous families. Our (MCC) experiences of finding peace with God in the face of society’s homophobic condemnation should be valuable resources for this other group of people condemned by society for their polyamorous lovestyle. If
we want to be able to freely love whom we love and live with whom we choose without penalty, then we ought to be able to extend the same hospitality to polyamorous families. Redefining Holy Union to include them would be a start.

It took God a long time to convince me to go to seminary. Speaking out for women in the Baptist General Conference cost me the loss of a church family; my need for acceptance as a woman pastor led me to the American Baptist Churches. Ordination in ABC was another hurdle. As my ministry developed, I became a spokesperson for gay and lesbian Christians. My nice little ministry at North Rome was threatened by my advocacy for sexual minorities. Kicked out of my Baptist church, I became a fellow traveler in MCC.

In a class at ETS a Native American pastor and shaman named me a warrior. My relationship with a trans-woman put me “on the edge” again as MCC struggled to incorporate gender-queer people. Struggling to understand the transformation of a broken gay Orthodox priest who came out and found love and God in the leather community, I once again found myself advocating for a misunderstood minority. Each time, I have known the right path for me, but resisted it to varying degrees. Like Hosea, God used my life-experience to call me to the defense of poly families. What a long journey this has been from fundamentalism!

I experience both excitement and a certain reluctance to be a pioneer. Advocacy feels right to me, and puts my best skills to work; at the same time, I don’t relish the position of standing up for freedom while people coming from backgrounds similar to my own “throw stones.” Some small fundamentalist child in me still wants to be the “good
girl” rewarded by “good” people. Perhaps my situation is similar to St. Paul’s, wanting to be all things to all people.

From a fundamentalist child to a moderate evangelical to an ecumenical liberal to a progressive queer risk-taker. If there’s anything left of this that can still be called Christian, I don’t think I want to know about it. I hope that I have expanded my circle to include my past as well as creating boundaries open enough to include new insights, theories, and the experiences of people I have yet to meet. There is excitement in realizing that I can never know all of God, but inasmuch as people image God, I can keep learning from those who are “different.” The honesty, openness, kindness, hospitality and mature love in the poly families and networks I encountered while doing this project convinces me that I certainly want to know more of them.

As my theology has widened and deepened, so has my social circle. In fact, each has encouraged the other. As I have centered on liberation through the grace and love of God Herself, I am more willing to be open to people whose thinking and experience is different from mine; as I find new aspects of God modeled in diverse people and relationships, I am more open to an ever-changing, open-ended understanding of Godde. The more I experience life, the less I know about God, and the more I know God.

In my experience, Fundamentalism leads to a false and fragile sense of security in knowing what is true, as long as one accepts its premises “by faith” and does not think too much. It breeds intellectual dishonesty and intractable rigidity. Knowing the rules leads to arrogant self-righteousness covering low self-esteem and fear of condemnation. “Fronting,” pretending to be certain while hiding struggles and doubts, is expected.
“Growth” means increasing facility with orthodox beliefs and behaviors. Conformity is rewarded; deviance is punished.

Having been ripped out of a Fundamentalist environment, daring to serve God with my mind, has led me to value honesty, integrity, loving relationships, open-mindedness, diversity, creativity, and risk-taking. Growth means openness to ambiguity and newness, confidence in an ever-changing relationship with the holy, life as learning experience, not test, celebration of, and participation in diversity.

Risking this project, controversial as it is, has opened me to a new world of counter-cultural, faithful, creative, honest people who dare to let the promiscuity of grace free them to be models of loving community/family relating. There must be room for them in a just, loving, open-minded society. There must be room for them in MCC. We must make room for them in our hearts.
NOTES

1 General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, a denomination of separatist fundamentalists that left the American Baptist Churches in the 1950's because of that body's ecumenical leanings and its inclusion of the much-feared "liberals" teaching a social gospel.

2 Baptist churches are considered autonomous and set their own policies and structures. Most elect deacons for a limited time period to specific roles on deacon boards that function as boards of directors.

3 Vatican II language for Protestants. Before 1965, we were all "heretics."

4 "Coming out" is a term used in the gay community to mean disclosing one's sexual orientation to another. It is short for "Coming out of the closet."

5 Passing means living in the dominant society in such a way as to avoid being associated with one's own minority group, in this case being taken for heterosexual.

6 Hetaerae were women trained and educated as companions for men, similar to the Japanese geisha.

7 I use “kindom” (where all are kin), rather than “kingdom” to translate the Greek basilea. This seems more inclusive and fits Jesus’ statements about the first shall be last and the last first in this realm.

8 BDSM and “Leather community” are terms for people who engage in “kinky” sex, including such practices as fetishism, bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, or sadomasochism. There is a strong honor code among such people which values communication to assure that any sexual encounter is safe (physically, bacteriologically,
and emotionally), sane (no alcohol or other drugs), and consensual (permission given for each step and “safe words” to end the activity immediately).
Appendix A

Interview request email message

Please forward this message to anyone who might be interested. I am an MCC pastor writing a dissertation for my Doctor of Ministry degree. I need to interview people with more than one partner for my paper. The interview may take an hour or more and will be recorded. I will change names and other identifying information as necessary for privacy when I write my paper. I believe that our stories are the most powerful way to change attitudes. I will be at the Region 5 Conference in Toronto; I can make arrangements to travel to some locations near you (especially if there is more than one household willing to participate.) If you are willing to be interviewed, please email frnmayes@umich.edu or give me a call at (734) 449-4189. Rev. Fran Mayes
Appendix B

Consent and typical interview questions

Hi. This interview is part of my work toward a Doctor of Ministry degree. I would like to tape record it for my own use only. When I write my paper I will not use your real names or any other information that would identify you, unless you want me to. When the paper is done, I will destroy the tapes. Is this OK with you?

1. Tell me about yourself – your coming-out and faith stories.
   A. When did you learn you were gay/lesbian/poly?
   B. How did your church/religion/spiritual group help or hinder your coming out?
   C. How long have you been with MCC?
   D. How did you find MCC? What has it been like for you?

2. Tell me about your partners.
   A. How did you meet?
   B. Where does everyone live?
   C. Are all of you equally involved? (sex?)
   D. How do your partners feel about each other?

3. What have you learned from this relationship?
   A. What are the special joys of being in this chosen family?
   B. What are your biggest challenges? (Where is your pain?)

5. What about your spiritual life?
A. What effect does your relationship with God have on your relationship style?

B. How does being polyamorous affect your spiritual life?

C. What has helped or hindered your integration of your spirituality and your sexuality as a polyamorous person?

6. What changes would you like to see in MCC or your local church to better meet your social and spiritual needs?

   A. What would it mean to you if MCC were to define Holy Union in a way that includes families like yours?

   B. Would you be interested in having a Holy Union for all of you?
Appendix C

MULTIPLE PARTNER QUESTIONAIRRE

1. Name or pseudonym to use in my paper______________________________

2. Age ________ Partners’ ages _____________________________

3. Gender ___________ Genders of partners _______________________

4. Where do you live? Address, City, State, Country

5. How do you name your sexual identity? __________________________

6. In what faith tradition were you raised? __________________________

7. With what religious group do you currently identify? ________________

8. What words do you use to talk about your household? For example, when
introducing others to them or when talking about your poly lifestyle.

Do you know of others who might be willing to be interviewed?

Contact information: Name: ________________________________

Phone (_(__)________________________________________

Email: ______________________________________________
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NOTES

1 General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, a denomination of separatist fundamentalists that left the American Baptist Churches in the 1950's because of that body's ecumenical leanings and its inclusion of the much-feared "liberals" teaching a social gospel.

2 Baptist churches are considered autonomous and set their own policies and structures. Most elect deacons for a limited time period to specific roles on deacon boards that function as boards of directors.

3 Vatican II language for Protestants. Before 1965, we were all "heretics."

4 "Coming out" is a term used in the gay community to mean disclosing one's sexual orientation to another. It is short for "Coming out of the closet."

5 Passing means living in the dominant society in such a way as to avoid being associated with one's own minority group, in this case being taken for heterosexual.

6 Hetaerae were women trained and educated as companions for men, similar to the Japanese geisha.

7 I use “kindom” (where all are kin), rather than “kingdom” to translate the Greek basilea. This seems more inclusive and fits Jesus’ statements about the first shall be last and the last first in this realm.