

# Rev. Troy Perry: The Father of Marriage Equality

## The Amazing Story of How a 28-Year Old Defrocked Pentecostal Minister Challenged Conventional Thinking, Created a Revolution and Changed the Church, the Courts and the Culture

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*In December 1968, Rev. Troy Perry performed the first public same-sex wedding in U.S. history.*

*Over the next 45 years, the clergy of Metropolitan Community Churches, the Christian denomination founded by Perry, performed more than 240,000 same-sex marriages -- and during that time every couple was told, "Your marriage is blessed by God, but is not yet recognized by the government. We're working on that."*

*"Working on that" became Perry's life's work.*

*Here, in photos and press clippings, is the story of how Rev. Troy Perry became "The Father of Marriage Equality."*

### During the past 16 years...

...I have helped Rev. Troy Perry tell the story of his groundbreaking human rights work.

Troy Perry's lifetime of work—driven by a passion for justice and rooted in his Christian faith—has advanced justice for LGBT people, opened doors to LGBT people across faith communities, brought changes to the law which advanced LGBT legal equality, and forever changed the face of Christianity.

During these 16 years, I have also helped tell the story of Troy Perry's early marriage equality leadership by writing and editing a wide range of materials, including public statements, press releases, media stories, denominational newsletters and resource kits, published works and correspondence.

Through all of this, the element most valued by writers and researchers was missing—original source material, i.e., photographs, paperwork, and press clippings. For the period of 1968-1973, I had seen exactly one media article – a two-page spread on Rev. Perry's ministry in *Life* magazine in 1972—and one photo of Rev. Perry performing a same-gender wedding ceremony—in the same 1972 *Life* article.

Of course, there was a reason for this: In 1973, Perry's Los Angeles church was arsoned, destroying all of his early church records and documents.

In early 2013 – 44 years after Troy Perry performed the first public wedding in the United States – I began a quest to locate and compile the earliest documentation of his marriage equality work.

This is the result of that research...

# Rev. Troy Perry: The Father of Marriage Equality

## The Amazing Story of How a 28-Year Old Defrocked Pentecostal Minister Challenged Conventional Thinking, Created a Revolution and Changed the Church, the Courts and the Culture

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In December 1968, Rev. Dr. Troy D. Perry performed the first public same-sex wedding in U.S. history. Over the next 45 years, the clergy of Metropolitan Community Churches, the LGBT-friendly Christian denomination founded by Perry, performed more than 240,000 same-sex marriages -- and each couple was told, "Your marriage is blessed by God, but is not yet recognized by the government. We're working on that."

"Working on that" became part of Perry's life's work.

Here is the story, told in original photographs and press clippings, of how Rev. Troy Perry became "The Father of Marriage Equality."

### 1968

#### OCTOBER

Rev. Troy Perry founds Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles (MCCLA), a church that welcomes LGBT people. The first worship service, with 12 in attendance, is held in Rev. Perry's home, then located at 6205 Miles Avenue in Huntington Park, California, on Oct. 6, 1968.

#### DECEMBER

Only two months after founding Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles (MCCLA), Rev. Troy Perry, then 28-years old, performs what Time Magazine describes as the first public same-sex wedding ceremony in the United States. The marriage ceremony for the two Latino gay men is performed by Rev. Perry at Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles, then located at 6205 Miles Avenue in Huntington Park, California.



6205 Miles Ave., Huntington Park, CA, where Rev. Troy Perry founded MCC in Oct. 1968. Two months later, he performed the first public same-gender wedding here.



The same house, 6205 Miles Ave., Huntington Park, CA, as it appears today.

### 1969

Rev. Perry continues to perform same-gender marriage ceremonies throughout 1969; they quickly become an integral ministry of MCCLA and begin to generate press and media interest.

## 1969 (continued)

### MARCH

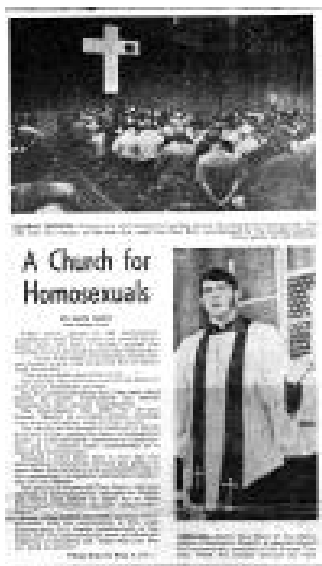
Rev. Perry officiates at the Los Angeles marriage of lesbians Neva Heckman and Judith Bellew.

### JUNE

In its June 12, 1969 issue, the Los Angeles-based Advocate Magazine carries a news report of the March wedding of Neva Heckman and Judith Bellew, at which Rev. Perry officiated. The Advocate describes it as, "The first marriage in the nation designed to legally bind two persons of the same sex," so described because it would become the basis for the world's first lawsuit seeking recognition of same-gender marriage.

### DECEMBER

The Los Angeles Times carries a front page, break-through news story, "A Church for Homosexuals" (Dec. 8, 1969) by religion writer John Dart. The story appears only 14 months after the founding of Metropolitan Community Church and details the ministry of Rev. Troy Perry. The story effectively breaks the Times long standing policy against coverage of LGBT events and use of the word "homosexual." At the end of the article, Dart lists programs and ministries offered by MCC LA, writing, "The church offers a variety of activities and services...including...marriage ceremonies, though they are not legally binding. (Couples have to be together for six months before I'll marry them.\*)" The article is the first external, mainline journalistic documentation of how quickly same-gender marriages had become a core component of MCCLA and a regular and ongoing part of Rev. Perry's ministry, and is an indication of how early MCC had begun to codify the guidelines under which it performed same-gender marriages.



When this Dec. 8, 1969 LA Times front page article appeared, same-gender weddings were already an established practice at Perry's MCC church.

sign of whether it is proper or not for a church publication.

The church has a variety of activities and services besides the worship services. They include:

-Prayer meetings and Bible classes.

-An "Alcoholics Together" group.

-A class for the deaf (Ten deaf persons attended the recent Sunday's service with an assistant minister interpreting what was said.)

-Marriage ceremonies, though they are not legally binding. ("Couples have to be together six months before I'll marry them.")

-A "ladies auxiliary," designed partly to counsel wives, mothers or sisters of homosexuals.

-A telephone hot line and counseling service for homosexuals.

"The biggest practical need we serve is that of understanding and giving the homosexual a sense of belonging," Perry said.

★ Los Angeles Times 5  
Mon., Dec. 8, 1969 - Part 1

Most churches in America don't openly invite homosexuals as homosexuals to come and worship God," he said.

"They feel, if anything, they have to change the person and convert him from his homosexuality to make him a fit member for their church—and that's just impossible," he declared.

By Dec. 1969, same-gender weddings were an integral part of Perry's LA church. The LA Times noted, "The church offers a variety of services, including marriage ceremonies, though they are not legally binding."

## 1970

### FEBRUARY

Less than two months after publication of the LA Times story, the New York Times sends editor Edward B. “Ted” Fiske to Los Angeles to interview Perry. Fiske’s story, “Homosexuals In Los Angeles, Like Many Elsewhere, Want Religion and Establish Their Own Church,” appears in the February 20, 1970 edition of the New York Times. The article mentions the same-sex weddings taking place at MCC, and Perry notes that gay couples have spiritual reasons for wanting to get married and “settling down like everyone else.”

### JUNE

In June, it’s the Chicago Tribune with an article on Rev. Troy Perry and the growing Metropolitan Community Church. The article, “A Church for Homosexuals,” appears on June 7, 1970. It also discusses the marriages being performed by Rev. Troy Perry.

### JUNE

The Advocate publishes “Perry Plans Marriage Test” (June 24, 1970, Vol. 4, Issue 9, pg. 2). Reporter John Zeh describes Rev. Troy Perry’s plans to file a legal challenge to California’s opposite-gender-only marriage laws. The article includes contrary viewpoints by Los Angeles County Clerk William G Sharp.

Represented by LA attorney Al Gordon, Rev. Troy Perry files lawsuit on behalf of Neva Heckman and Judith Bellew, a lesbian couple at whose wedding he officiated in March, 1969. The lawsuit against the State of California is the world’s first to seek legal recognition of the same-sex marriages then being performed by Metropolitan Community Churches. Lawsuit is dismissed, but launches the struggle for marriage equality.



(L-R) LA Attorney Al Gordon, Rev. Troy Perry, Morris Kight, Steve Jordan. Gordon, a straight ally, filed the 1970 Heckman-Bellew marriage lawsuit; he often represented the LGBT community, usually pro bono.

## 1970 Wedding Photos

Below, a rare set of early same-gender wedding photographs, from the 1970 wedding of Jack Wilson and Ron Douglas, at which Rev. Troy Perry officiated. [Photo Credit: Pat Rocco, from the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, housed on the campus of the University of Southern California]



(L-R) Jack Wilson, Ron Douglas, Rev. Troy Perry, officiating. 1970



1970 wedding of Ron Douglas, Jack Wilson, members of Metropolitan Community Church of LA.

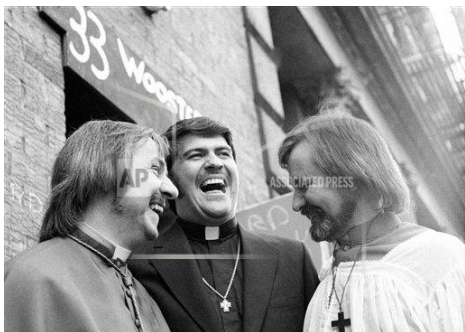
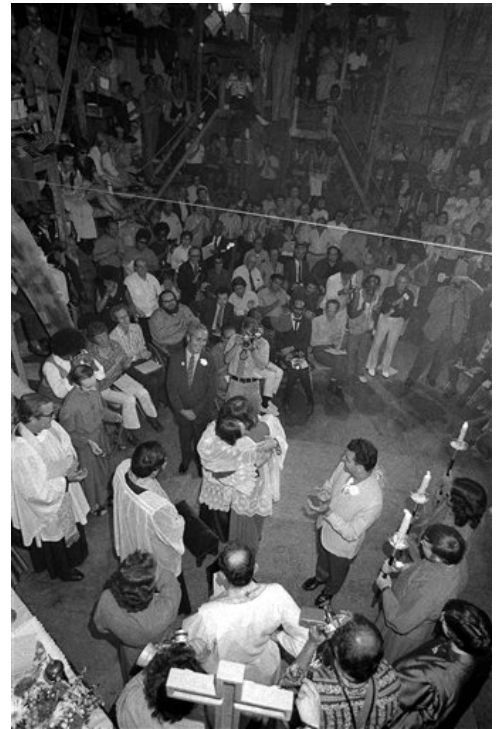


Los Angeles Wedding Party, 1970. Ron Wilson (5<sup>th</sup> from left), Jack Douglas, Frank Magill, Steve Jordan, Rev. Troy Perry.

1971

JULY

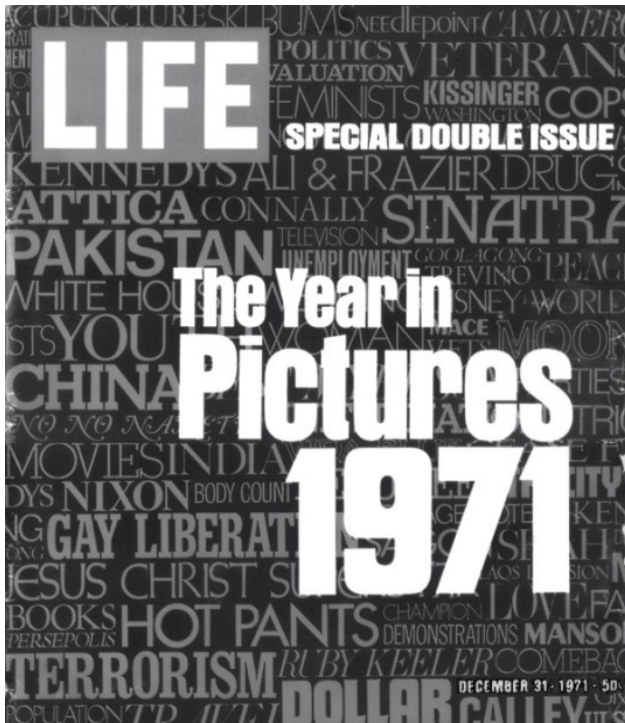
Rev. Troy Perry preaches at the anniversary services of Church of the Beloved Disciple, New York City. While there he officiates at the wedding of the church's pastor, Rev. Robert M. Clement and John Noble, July 18, 1971, before a standing-room only crowd at the Performing Garage, an off-Broadway theater located in SoHo at 33 Wooster St. Assisting Rev. Perry are Episcopal priest Rev. Robert Weeks and Catholic priest Rev. Steven Marion. The wedding was covered by the Associated Press. (AP Photos/RonFrehm)



1971 (continued)

## DECEMBER

Life Magazine devotes two pages in its 1971 year-in-review issue to Rev. Troy Perry and Metropolitan Community Churches in an article titled, "Homosexuals in Revolution: A Church for Homosexuals" (Dec. 31, 1971, Michael Durham, author; Grey Villet, photographer). One of the photos features Rev. Perry performing the wedding ceremony of a gay male couple, Andre Charland and Richard Castle, in the sanctuary of MCCLA, then located at 22<sup>nd</sup> and Union in Los Angeles. The article notes, "Perry is willing to "marry" homosexual couples, though the marriages are not recognized as legal by existing laws in any state."



### Preaching that 'God loves gays too'



Perry conducts several weddings each week. Here he invites Andre Charland, left, and Richard Castle to exchange rings while asking each of them: "Wilt thou have this man as thy wedded spouse?" Perry replaced the traditional church pew with theater seats to accommodate the overflow crowd that attends his Sunday sermons. He raised the necessary \$10,000 down payment for the \$50,000 church building with contribution collected on a single Sunday morning.

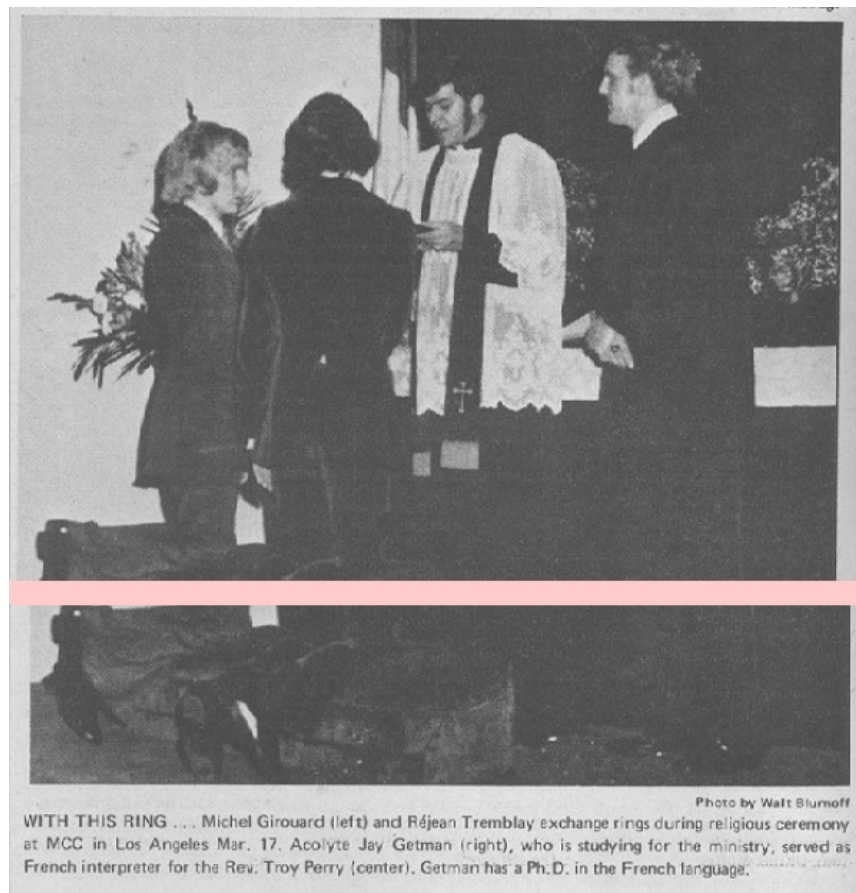
1972

### MARCH

Rev. Troy Perry officiates at the wedding of Canadian radio-TV personality Michel Girouard and his partner Rejean Tremblay in LA. Due to the unusual level of media coverage, accompanied by charges the wedding was a publicity stunt by the couple, Perry initially declines to officiate, telling the press, "I don't want to be part of a circus." After meeting with the couple, he becomes convinced of their sincerity and love, and performs their wedding on March 17, 1972, at MCCLA. To help advance marriage equality, he flies to Montreal with the couple after the wedding to participate in a press conference in support of legal same-gender marriage rights for Canadian citizens.

### MARCH

The Advocate Magazine carries article, "A Legal First In Canada? Talk About Gay Weddings..." (March 29, 1972), about Canadian singer and radio-TV personality Michel Girouard and his partner Rejean Tremblay, who announce their plans to fly Rev. Troy Perry from Los Angeles to Montreal to perform their wedding. Upon learning that Perry is not available to fly to Montreal, they announced new plans: They will fly to Los Angeles to be married in Perry's church.



Rev. Troy Perry officiates at the wedding of Canadian entertainer Michel Girouard and Rejean Tremblay at MCCLA on March 17, 1972. Perry initially declined to perform the ceremony, concerned about a "circus" atmosphere around the couple. Convinced of their love and sincerity, he relented and performed the ceremony.



1972 (continued)

## March

On March 20, 1972, at a Montreal press conference with Canadian entertainer Michel Girouard and Rejean Tremblay, who had flown to Los Angeles to be married three days before, **Rev. Troy Perry utters what will become the most ironic words of his five-decades long struggle for marriage equality:** "I think it's terrible that Canadians had to fly to the U.S. to be married." ("MCC Coming To Canada, Perry Says in Montreal," The Advocate, April 12, 1972. Issue 83). Thirty-one years after this press conference, it will still be necessary to fly from one country to another in order to be married – only the tables will have turned: Perry and his partner Phillip Ray De Blicek, both U.S. citizens, will fly from the U.S. – which in 2003 still had not achieved marriage equality – to Toronto, Canada, to realize their goal of being legally married under the law. (See article below.)



# MCC coming to Canada, Perry says in Montreal

**MONTREAL**—The Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches in the United States, told a press conference here Mar. 20 that he expects to have MCC churches in Canada within nine months.

Rev. Perry flew here from Los Angeles, where he solemnized the marriage of singer Michel Girouard and pianist Réjean Tremblay three days before the press conference.

Rev. Perry denied suggestions from reporters that he was lending himself to a publicity stunt by the two entertainers and had made a lot of money out of gay weddings.

"I feel they are sincere, or I wouldn't have married them," he said. "Sure, they've sought publicity, but they're entertainers, and the whole series of what they have

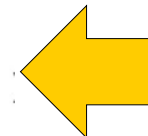
view one way or the other on a homosexual wedding?

"I think he'd have no comment whatever," said Donnelly.

Rev. Perry said his denomination was already discussing the establishment of MCC churches in Montreal and Toronto, and an American MCC minister interested in getting them started has applied to the Home Office for a visa to settle in Canada.

He said he had met with a number of French Canadians, "and it seems they are very interested in seeing MCC come to Canada.

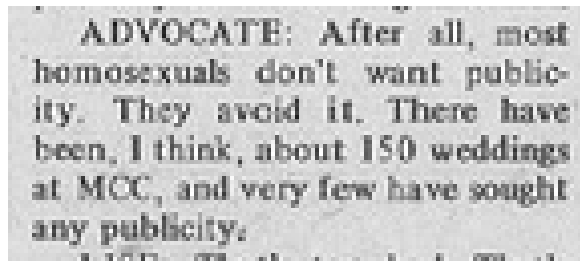
"I think it's terrible that Canadians had to fly to the U.S. to be married," he told the press conference.



## 1972 (continued)

### APRIL

How many same-gender marriages has Rev. Troy Perry performed in Los Angeles by early 1972? Advocate reporter Rob Cole puts the figure at 150. In his article, "A Marriage for Liberation" (The Advocate, April 12, 1972. Issue 83). The article is a transcript of an interview about same-gender marriage; at one point Cole and the interviewee verbally spar about whether gay weddings should be publicized. Reporter Cole states, "There have been, I think, about 150 weddings at MCC..." By this time – April 1972 – Rev. Perry is performing, on average, one same-gender wedding each week.



This quote, in the April 12, 1972 issue of the Advocate by reporter Rob Cole, documents that 150 same-sex weddings had been performed by Rev. Troy Perry by April 1970, an average of one such wedding per week since the first one had taken place 39 months earlier.

### JUNE

In 1972, Rev. Troy Perry changes roles and makes marriage news of a different kind – he's not the officiant at a marriage ceremony, he's the groom. The Advocate Magazine announces the news in an article titled, "Troy Perry, Mate of 3 Years, Making It Formal" (6/21/72, Issue 88, pg. 2). Article reports on the wedding of Rev. Troy Perry and Steve Jordan and includes their views on marriage-equality and society's acceptance of LGBT couples.

## 1975

MCC clergyperson Rev. Freda Smith and then-MCC clergyperson Robert Sirico perform the first U.S. same-sex wedding conducted with a government-issued civil marriage license in Denver, Colorado for Richard Adams and Anthony Sullivan. The witnesses were Rev. Elder Charlie Arehart and Rev. Troy Perry's longtime assistant, Frank Zerilli. The marriage is still listed on the Colorado Bureau of Records website.

## 1987

### OCTOBER

As part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> LGBT March on Washington, Rev. Troy Perry participates with clergy of many faiths and leads the first mass demonstration for same-gender marriage rights in front of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service Building in Washington, DC on October 10, 1987. More than 2000 same-sex couples made their public wedding vows at that event.

## 1993

Rev. Troy Perry leads mass same-sex marriage ceremony in Washington, DC, as part of the 1993 LGBT March on Washington.

## 2000

MCC's Rev. Troy Perry conducts the world's largest celebration of same-gender marriage for 3000

couples on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC as part of the Millennium March on Washington for Equality. It is a record that stands to this day.



## 2002

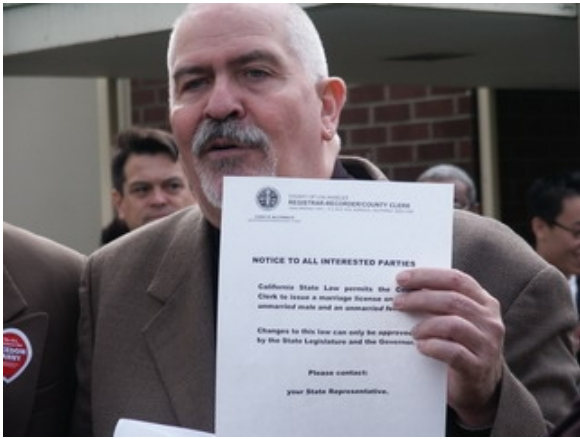
It was a late afternoon in late November of 2002, just prior to the Thanksgiving holiday. I was working in my office at the MCC Headquarters on Santa Monica Boulevard, in West Hollywood. Out of the corner of my eye, I was aware that someone was standing in the frame of my office door. I swivelled to see Troy Perry standing there; his briefcase, always bulging with paperwork, projects, reading material and correspondence, was in one hand, his care keys in the other. He was obviously heading home for the day and had stopped by my office – but for what? He was looking out of the window and he was lost in thought – he was also utterly oblivious to my presence. I sat there for well over a full minute before he began to speak. “Uh, Jim, I, uh....” Pause. “I have, uh...” Pause. Still looking out the window, he started again, slowly, almost haltingly “I have been thinking...” Pause. This was classic Troy. Those who have worked around him would have recognized the process: Some generalized thoughts or feelings – something! – was coming together falling into place. Some plan or project was literally taking form. For the first time he looked in my direction. “I’ve been thinking about the marriage work.” There was a short pause, as he began to gather steam, and the words started to tumble out of him. “I know it’s not high on most priority lists, and I know lots of our people aren’t interested in getting married. But that’s not the point.” He was on a roll now; I sat back and took it in. “I don’t think everybody is supposed to get married. But I do think everybody is supposed have the legal right, is supposed to have the equal right, to get married.” He paused again and looked out the window and continued, his voice softer now, “I’ll tell you what else I’ve been thinking: Before I die, I want to marry Phillip; I want to *legally* marry Phillip. It’s important to me.” There was a catch in his voice and his eyes were glistening.

## 2003

Supreme Court of Ontario upholds MCC Toronto's legal case -- making same-gender marriage legal throughout Ontario, Canada.

### FEBRUARY

On Valentines Day – Feb. 14, 2003 – Rev. Troy Perry and his partner drive to the Van Nuys Courthouse. Their application is rejected and the clerk of court provides them with a letter explaining why the license cannot be issued under the current law. Perry steps outside and tells the waiting TV, newspaper and radio reporters, “Phillip and I are active in our church . We contribute to the life of our city. We pay our taxes, and we’re glad to do so. We only ask one thing from our government and that’s to treat us equally. I love this state, but the marriage laws of this state treat us as less than equal. So Phillip and I will come back to apply for a marriage license every year until the laws are changed and they hand us our marriage certificate, as they would to any other couple.”



Rev. Troy Perry and his partner, Phillip Ray De Blicke, apply for marriage license at Van Nuys, Courthouse, Valentines' Day, 2003. PHOTO CREDIT: Mark S. Hahn



PHOTO CREDIT: Mark S. Hahn



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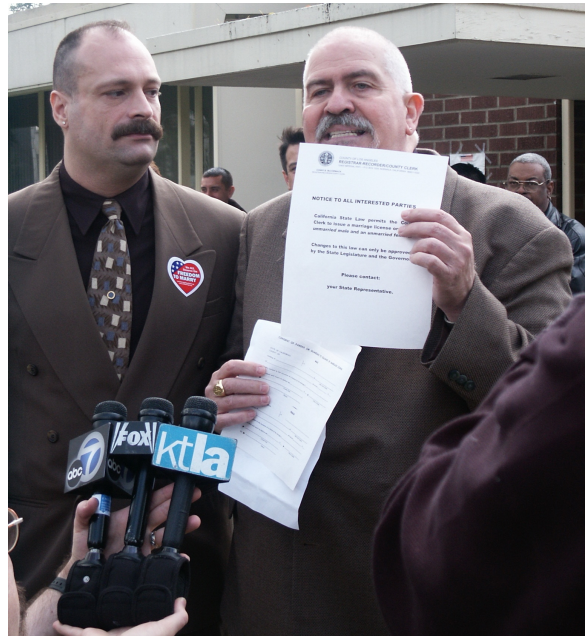


PHOTO CREDIT: Mark S. Hahn

## JULY

Rev. Troy Perry and his partner, Phillip Ray De Blieck are legally married under Canadian law at Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto on July 16, 2003. Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, officiating. MCC Toronto filed the lawsuit that led to full marriage equality in Canada.



## OCTOBER

When a coalition of coalition of 22 right wing and religious fundamentalist groups, including Jerry Falwell, Dr. James Dobson and the Southern Baptist Convention announced plans to observe the week of October 12-18, 2003 as "Marriage Protection Week: A Week Dedicated To Preserving The Sacred Institution Of Marriage," Rev. Troy Perry announced to the press that the same week would be observed as "Marriage Equality Week." Churches across the U.S. joined more than 200 MCC congregations in observing "Marriage Equality Week" in their local communities.

## 2004

### FEBRUARY

On Valentine's Day, February 12, 2004, at a press conference on the steps of the Beverly Hills Courthouse, Rev. Troy Perry and his husband, Phillip Ray De Blicek, along with activist Robin Tyler and her partner Diane Olson, announce plans to file the first of the modern marriage equality lawsuits later that month. They are represented by attorney Gloria Allred. The City of San Francisco begins issuing marriage licenses the same day.



On February 23, 2004, Rev. Troy Perry and his husband, Phillip Ray De Blicek, represented by famed attorney Gloria Allred, files the very first of California's modern day marriage equality lawsuits. Joining them as plaintiffs in the lawsuit are Robin Tyler and Diane Olson. They sue the County of Los Angeles: Perry and De Blicek seek legal recognition of their Canadian marriage; Tyler and Olson seek issuance of a California marriage license.

### MARCH

Rev. Troy Perry's OpEd article, "Why I Believe In Marriage Equality," appears in the Sunday edition of the San Diego Union-Tribune (March 14, 2004). In his 1400-word article, Perry notes, "If we as a society believe that marriage helps build strong families, and that strong families in turn build strong communities, why not allow all couples willing to take on the commitment and responsibilities to do so? If marriage is good for non-gay people, why wouldn't it be good for gay people? Isn't that what equality is all about?" See full article at

[www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20040314/news\\_mz1e14perry.html](http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20040314/news_mz1e14perry.html).

### DECEMBER

The Perry-De Blicek / Tyler-Olson lawsuit wins! Superior Court of Los Angeles rules in favor of plaintiffs: Marriage rights must be made available equally to heterosexual and homosexual couples.



2005

**October**

The City of West Hollywood dedicates and installs a permanent brass historical marker in the 8600 block of Santa Monica Boulevard to honor Rev. Troy Perry's contributions to "social equality and spiritual justice" for LGBT people.

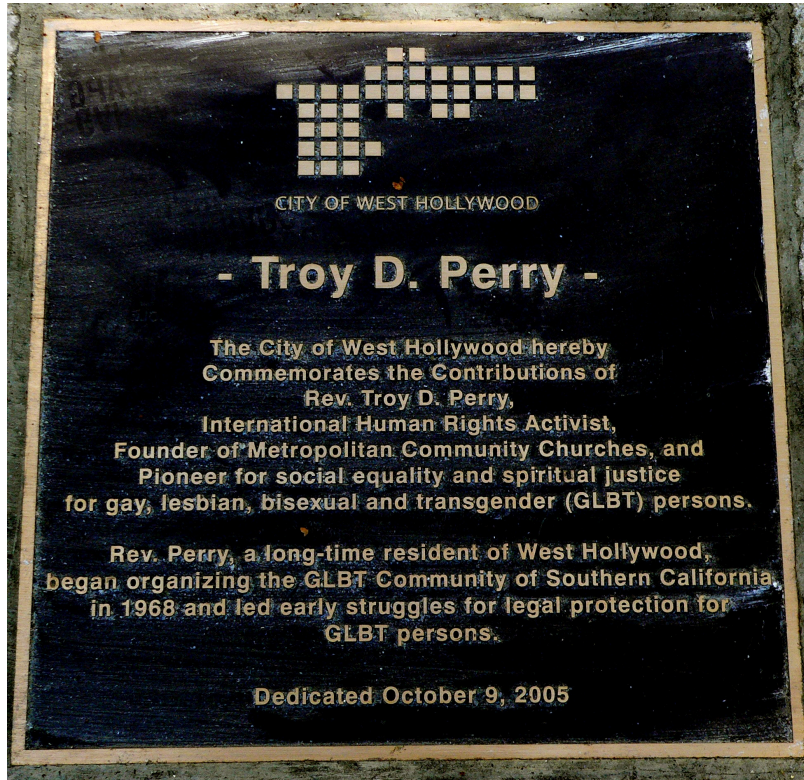


Photo Credit: Mark S. Hahn



Photo Credit: Mark S. Hahn

**2008**

**FEBRUARY**

The plaintiffs from the first of the California marriage cases—Rev. Troy Perry, his husband Phillip Ray De Blicke, Robin Tyler, and her wife, Diane Olson, with attorney Gloria Allred at the Beverly Hills Courthouse for their annual marriage action and press conference. Three month’s later, California’s Supreme Court would rule in their favor, making same-gender marriage (at least, temporarily) legal in California.



**MAY**

On May 15, 2008, in a historic victory, the California Supreme Court rules in favor of Rev. Troy Perry, his husband Phillip Ray De Blicke, and fellow litigants, making same-gender marriage legal in California. The court rules that the state constitution guarantees same-gender couples the right to marry.







James N. Birkitt, Jr.

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**RESEARCHER'S BIO:**

James N. "Jim" Birkitt, Jr. is a writer, communications specialist and fundraiser with The Birkitt Communications Group, Los Angeles. Jim served as Communications Director for 2000's Millennium March on Washington for Equality, as Communications Director for Metropolitan Community Churches worldwide during 1997-2009, and was MCC's Development Director during 2002-2003. He has written more than 720 MCC news releases, 64 local MCC resource kits, 370 MCC denominational newsletters on church growth, marriage equality, local MCC resources, human rights and local MCC news, and has helped raised more than \$12.5 million dollars (USD) for non-profit organizations. Jim created and launched the MCC Founder's Circle and Moderator's Circle programs, and manages MCC's annual Fellowship Sunday and Global Justice offering campaigns. He resides in Los Angeles and may be reached by e-mail at [JimBirkit@aol.com](mailto:JimBirkit@aol.com).

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Special thanks to Mark S. Hahn, who serves as contributing photographer for this project. Perhaps more than anyone else in the history of Metropolitan Community Churches, Mark has meticulously recorded the historic contributions of Rev. Dr. Troy D. Perry and the work of Metropolitan Community Churches on film.

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