Abstract

“CLERGY DEFENDING RIGHTS FOR ALL:
ECUMENISM AND MEMPHIS CLERGY”
BELINDA ANN WRIGHT SNYDER

Project under the direction of Professor Robert Hughes

This project endeavors to prepare a book on the nature and history of the clerical
interfaith group, Clergy Defending Rights for All, for that organization’s use to further its
work.

The nature of this group is ecumenical, and on behalf of ecumenism, the Rev. Robert
W. Jenson writes,

Let all these come together, catch as catch can. Let them cling to baptism, and after
that not be too precise about further conditions of fellowship.¹

Jenson’s quote speaks of baptism being central to ecumenism, yet the group’s motivating
person and a founder is Rabbi Micah Goldstein. Thus Clergy Defending Rights for All is
indeed an interfaith organization.

Clergy Defending Rights for All demonstrates ecumenicity and advocacy by
taking a stand, enhancing the faith community’s response to injustice.

¹ The Rev. Robert W. Jenson of Princeton, New Jersey, is cofounder of the Center for Catholic and
Evangelical Theology and its journal, Pro Ecclesia.
Clergy ministered together without regard to denomination during two crucial times in Memphis history: the 1878 yellow fever epidemic and the 1968 Civil Rights Era following The Reverend Dr. King’s assassination.

During the 1870 epidemics, especially in 1878 when the population was nearly wiped out, clergy did not organize as a group; yet history named them “The Martyrs of Memphis.”

A precedent occurred in 1929 when Rabbi Harry Ettelson of Temple Israel organized the Cross Cut Club, composed of eighteen liberal ministers, priests, and rabbis.

In 1940 the Memphis Interracial Commission was born when the Reverend J.A. McDaniel, chair of the all-Black Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, met with Dr. Samuel E. Howie, president of the all-White Memphis Ministers Association.

In 1945 the Association of Church and Professional Social Workers, a forum to discuss common situations of Black and White professionals, was organized.

Clergy Defending Rights for All began in 2012 after President Barack Obama endorsed gay marriage and local clergy protested. More liberal clergy deemed the former group’s actions unconscionable and formed Clergy Defending Rights for All, which meets monthly at the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center in midtown Memphis.

Interviews with seven members of Clergy Defending Rights for All illustrate a mutual quest for justice. Those interviewed are the Rev. Will Batts, the Rev. Davin

Ecumenism, a movement promoting union among religions, comes from a Greek word meaning the inhabited earth. This dissertation expands the term *ecumenism* to include all faiths.

Clergy Defending Rights for All pursues advocacy. A student at a local private school was not allowed to form a “diversity club” because that would affirm lesbian and gay students. Representatives from Clergy Defending Rights for All attended a meeting at the school to affirm the student.

Clergy Defending Rights for All showed how politics and religion may mix by sending a letter to the Tennessee House of Representatives opposing the “Turn away the gays” bill.

The dissertation concludes with the Current State of Ecumenism, and again by the Rev. Robert W. Jenson, “. . . And let all of this be a waiting on the Lord. We do not need to know what for, short of the Kingdom.”
Clergy Defending Rights for All:
Ecumenism in Memphis

by

Belinda Ann Wright Snyder

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Chapter One
Introduction and overview

As Ecumenical Officer of the Diocese of West Tennessee, I was drawn to the advocacy group, Clergy Defending Rights for All, because of the ecumenical and very eclectic composition of that group of ministers. This project endeavors to prepare a book on the nature and history of Clergy Defending Rights for All, featuring interviews with individuals in the organization, especially regarding ecumenism in the Memphis area.

An interfaith group, Clergy Defending Rights for All illustrates ecumenism and advocacy by taking a public stand against injustice. Ecumenical cooperation on behalf of justice in turn enhances the faith community’s response to injustice.

Such a response to injustice has been the case during Memphis history, as clergy ministered together without regard to denomination during two crucial times, the 1878 yellow fever epidemic and the 1968 Civil Rights Era following The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination.

Presently, eight to twelve clergy of various denominations attend the monthly meetings of clergy Defending Rights for All. In the beginning, there were twenty-four participants.
Origin of Clergy Defending Rights for All
Why and how did Clergy Defending Rights for All originate?

Rabbi Micah Goldstein stated\(^2\) that the founding of Clergy Defending Rights for All occurred after President Barack Obama affirmed same sex marriage. A group of local churches responded negatively to the President’s stance and that group received publicity. Rabbi Goldstein and about 24 other Memphis clergy considered that action unfavorable, and their response was to form Clergy Defending Rights for All. Clergy Defending Rights for All, in affirming the President, brought forth a community response to what the group perceived as injustice.

At the Present

Clergy Defending Rights for All now meets monthly at the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC) in midtown Memphis. The group members remain committed to advocacy.

A recent initiative, for example, supported a student who experienced resistance to establishing a Diversity Club at her high school. Such a club would reach out to students of various races, beliefs, and traditions. The club especially would include and affirm students of nontraditional sexual orientation. The student attends a private school and the headmaster of that school feared parents would react negatively to a Diversity Club. A meeting was called with Clergy Defending Rights for All members in attendance, and at

\(^2\) Interview on Channel 24, Memphis, at 11:05 am, September 10, 2012, by Nancy B. Allen
http://wreg.com/2012/05/17/some-black-pastors-in-memphis-oppose-president-obamas-position-on-same-sex-marriage/
that meeting the clergy offered the young woman support and affirmation. The matter is still under consideration by the school; however, the young woman does know that a group of concerned Memphis clergy is in her court.

Another example of how the group lives out its mission is that Clergy Defending Rights for All went on record opposing the “Turn Away the Gays” bill. The astounding intention of that bill deserves discussion as follows:

The “Turn Away the Gays” bill, which Tennessee Representative Bill Dunn supported, was intended to protect businesses from lawsuits if they deny customers based on sexual orientation.

According to the February 18th, 2014 Knoxville News Sentinel, Knox County Commissioner Amy Broyles warned that the law, if passed, would discriminate against homosexuals and hurt commerce. Activists from around the world, including Tennesseans, campaigned against it.

Representative Dunn, a Knoxville Republican, said that the bill would ensure religious freedom whilst shielding Tennessee businesses from some lawsuits. “A business is owned by a human being, and that human being has the constitutional right of freedom of religion,” Representative Dunn said. “In the end, it’s a human being that’s being sued.”

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3 Senate Bill 2566: http://openstates.org/tn/bills/108/SB2566/documents/TND00047627/, went before the Senate Judiciary Committee on February 18 of this year at 4:30 p.m. central. A Facebook page “Stop TN Senate Bill 2566 ‘Turn Away The Gays’ Bill: https://www.facebook.com/Stoptennesseeturnawaythegaysbill” has received more than 9,000 likes.
The bill’s initial sponsor was Tennessee Senator Brian Kelsey, a Republican from Germantown, who named it “The Religious Freedom Act,” so interpreted that if a business owner does not wish to do business with someone, such a business would be protected from lawsuits under the proposal. This especially pertains to persons in a marriage or civil union, not recognized by Tennessee.

A news release from the Tennessee Senate Republican Caucus stated, “The Religious Freedom Act will protect Tennesseans from being dragged into court for their sincerely held religious beliefs regarding marriage.”

A New Mexico case was cited in which “a photographer was recently sued for declining to photograph a same-sex commitment ceremony, even though such ceremonies were not recognized by New Mexico law at the time.”

*The Knoxville News Sentinel* article concludes with Broyles saying she could not think that a business would want to turn customers away; furthermore, gay marriage, civil unions and other types of partnerships are going to gain more acceptance. “We saw this throughout the South during desegregation,” she said. “Whenever there’s a period of progressive expansion, there is some pushback.”

**Peter Gathje and Manna House**

A recent meeting of Clergy Defending the Rights for All was informative in purpose. Dr. Peter Gathje, (pronounced Gaddkee, and pictured below) Professor of Ethics and Associate Dean at Memphis Theological Seminary and director of Manna House,
Memphis, gave a presentation on Manna House.

Peter received his baccalaureate degree from St. John's University in Minnesota, his Master of Theological Studies from the Candler School of Theology at Emory, and his PhD from Emory University. Before coming to Memphis Theological Seminary, he served on the faculty at Christian Brothers University, Memphis as Associate Professor of Religion, Chair of the Religion and Philosophy Department, and Director of the De LaSalle Center for Teaching and Religion. His publications include Christ Comes in the Stranger's Guise: A History of the Open Door Community and (ed.) A Work of Hospitality, and The Open Door Reader. He has published articles on Gandhi, King, virtue ethics, and the death penalty. His research interests include nonviolent social change, restorative justice, and intentional Christian communities.

Manna House is such an intentional Christian Community, a place of hospitality for homeless and poor persons in the city of Memphis. Manna House is a bungalow style structure in a neighborhood of houses near the medical center of Memphis. In welcoming the guests, hospitality includes the offering of basics such as clothing, hygiene items, showers, and serving coffee or other drinks. Seeking interaction with the guests and to
learn their names and their stories, Manna House is grounded in the tradition of the Catholic Worker Movement. The Manna House staff welcome guests from the streets with a spirit of hospitality respecting their dignity as human beings. Manna House is open every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday from 8:00-11:30 a.m..

On Monday and Thursday mornings, men are offered showers; on Tuesday mornings showers for women are offered. Manna House believes compassion is contagious and that justice is the structure on which compassion is formed. In that way, all may have life to the fullest.

Manna House promotes witness to the reign of God by opposing all violence - violence on the streets, by the police, through imprisonment and executions and war.4

Here is an example of Peter Gathje’s rhetoric, from his blog:

The Struggle and the Full Armor of God

I was going to write today about Loeb Properties and their decision to festoon the businesses in Overton Square with “No Panhandling” signs. I am angry and disappointed by this decision, and I don’t believe the corporate-speak

4 http://mannahousenewsandviews.blogspot.com/ accessed 30/3/14
that promises that panhandlers will be directed to helpful services and not be arrested or otherwise hassled. I will continue to boycott all the businesses in Overton Square until the signs come down. This will probably mean I won’t be going to those businesses ever again.

But instead of focusing on Loeb Properties and their racist and classist ugliness, I want to focus on the beauty and goodness of the guests who come to Manna House. Today was a typical Monday morning at Manna House. We offered showers for men. Twenty-three men took showers and left wearing clean and well-fitting clothes. Another fifty-one men and women came into the clothing room for “socks and hygiene.”

Meanwhile, a hundred or more came through the house and were served coffee, took the time to read the paper, or talk with friends, or play scrabble, or catch a quick nap on one of the couches. They were people from a variety of places and backgrounds, some white, some black. They weren’t all perfect, some used bad language on the front porch and had to be told to stop, some were a little impatient making their way through the crowded house. But nobody acted like a jerk or got violent or even raised their voice in anger. And this is the way things usually go. Our guests, as Kathleen says, “give us their best.”

At various times in the morning a completely new guest came in, looking lost, and asking for either Pete or Kathleen (word on the streets lets people know who to ask for). One needed a pair of shoes (which he got). One needed a complete change of clothes (which he got). Another just needed a pair of socks (which he got). From time to time we “transcend the rules” to welcome somebody new, and then we tell the guest how Manna House typically operates so if they need something in the future, they need to “get on the list.”

As the morning progressed I was asked for “the word for the day.” The word for the day came from Ephesians 6:10-13,

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the Lord’s mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

The responses to the reading from guests:

“I know about those powers.”

“I need that strength.”

“The devil is alive and well, for sure.”

“That armor sounds good.”
And though I’m not writing about Loeb Properties, I couldn’t help but think of the legacy of “No Panhandling” signs that have been part of the vagrancy laws that came into being following slavery. Vagrancy laws were directed at freed slaves and poor whites, both of whom were out of work and relied upon handouts to survive. Vagrancy laws sought to either move them along or criminalize them. The struggle truly is “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” And it is the beauty and goodness of our guests that affirms where God stands in that struggle.5

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Hebrews 13:1-2

Following Peter Gathje’s presentation, the membership decided that Clergy Defending Rights for All would support Manna House. Clergy Defending Rights for All is indeed committed to advocacy, as the interviews in the following chapter illustrate.

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5 Ibid.
Chapter Two - Interviews

Interviews were held with seven participating clergy: The Rev. Will Batts, the Rev. Elder Davin Clemons, the Rev. Paul Eknes-Tucker, Rabbi Micah Goldstein, the Rev. Floridia Jackson, the Rev. Jeshua Holliday, and the Rev. Beth LeFever.

The interviews were conducted in person and via telephone March 6 through 12. Three questions were posed: Do you believe the ecumenical nature of this organization is vital to its effectiveness? What is your understanding of Ecumenism? and Is Clergy Defending the Rights for All in keeping with your ideals of ecumenism as an advocacy organization?

I also asked each interviewee to tell me about their feelings on ecumenism, their life, their call to ministry and what led each to Clergy Defending the Rights for All.

The Rev. Will Batts

The founder of Clergy Defending the Rights for All, and the executive director of the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center, the Rev. Will Batts (pictured at right) is also associated with Holy Trinity Community Church, Memphis.

Will sees ecumenism as essential and in a duality with inclusiveness for gays and lesbians to which he is committed.
He was hired as the first MGLCC executive director in July 2008 after serving for almost 3 years on the Board, two of those as treasurer. His varied work experiences have provided a unique set of skills that he uses every day in his job. Will has a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from the University of Tennessee - Chattanooga, and 65 hours at the PhD level in counseling psychology. He has been a high school religion and psychology teacher, bookstore manager; and a hospital purchasing manager. Most recently before starting as Executive Director, he was a partner in a medical imaging equipment business that supplied products to hospital and clinics all over the US. He also serves on the board of Neshoba Unitarian Universalist Church as Vice-President. He states his philosophy, "My passion is working for absolute, full equality for all LGBTQ citizens. It infuses every aspect of my life. I hope that the work we do at MGLCC can help make that a reality."  

The Rev. Davin Clemons

Elder Davin Clemons’ educational background includes a Master of Divinity from Memphis Theological Seminary, a Master of Science in Operations Management from the University of Arkansas, and a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice Administration from LeMoyne Owen College.

Davin sees ecumenism as essential to Clergy Defending Rights for All because coming from diverse traditions strengthens opportunities to speak up for the marginalized.

6 http://mglcc.org/about-us/staff/will-batts accessed 30/3/14
An attractive young man in his early forties, he often wears his police uniform to CDRA meetings. Davin’s easy smile reveals his passion for standing up for the oppressed. He is committed to ministering to the needs of all God’s people who are treated unfairly. As a minister of the newly formed Cathedral of Praise church, Elder Clemons has already begun to step up to the challenge and speak up for the marginalized. He became a member of Clergy Defending Rights for All in 2012, and supported the nondiscrimination ordinance in Memphis. That involved rallying for equality for all City of Memphis employees and standing up for the marginalized within city government.

In 2008 Davin found himself talking on the phone to his best friend, who was contemplating suicide. That was the third person I had talked out of that, he reflected, and I knew I was hearing God’s voice.

He hit bottom when he was fired from his job as an officer with the Memphis City Police Department. (MPD) He reflected, “It takes losing everything realize what we have, to draw us closer to God.

“It’s a shame that we have to get to the bottom before we seek God,” he continued, “But God still loves us on the bottom.” He was eventually reinstated to his job in law enforcement.
Rabbi Micah Goldstein

Rabbi Goldstein believes that ecumenism is essential to Clergy Defending Rights for All because the group's deliberations are encouraging commitment. Gays and Lesbians are experiencing so much hatred, he stated, and we want to defend the rights for all. Addressing the rights of all requires diverse representation.

In the December 2013 Memphis Magazine, Rabbi Greenstein, (pictured at left) described his calling to ministry. His college years were “premed, prelaw, basically pre-life. I went from biomedical engineering to the justice department in Washington, to economics.”

He heard “a calling, one that prompted his father — also a rabbi — to suggest his son might ought to see a psychiatrist. Joking aside, this “RK,” or rabbi’s kid, explains his career decision. “I realized I didn’t want just success but a life of significance and a life devoted to family, so becoming a rabbi was a natural fit. You could say I moved away from public service to Jewish service.”

In 1991, immediately out of rabbinical school in Cincinnati, he came to Temple Israel in Memphis as assistant rabbi. Serving since 2000 as senior rabbi of Tennessee’s oldest and largest synagogue and one of the largest Reform congregations in the United States, Greenstein has also forged bonds between different races and religions. He led the city’s first interfaith mission to Israel, and he commits himself to various humanitarian causes, ranging from leading clergy support of public schools in Shelby County to educating girls in Cambodia. The only rabbi selected as Tennessee’s principal speaker for
the Major State Day at the National Cathedral in 2005, Gray Greenstein was named by Newsweek in 2012 and 2013 as one of the Top 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America.

Concerning those persons who feel same sex marriages undermine traditional marriage, he said, "What does it have to do with my marriage? It's not going to affect your life. Whether or not you agree with gay marriage, it's not going to meddle or affect your life religiously. It's not going to harm my marriage - why would affect others? Leviticus says that you take the Bible word for word or else. We'd all be dead because we have insulted our parents. We encourage commitment, stability, acceptance. The fear, the meanness is hatred veiled in the name of religion and love.

The Bible says to sell your daughters!

And the Bible says if a child insults his parents, he should be put to death - why, we'd all be dead. Our work doesn't undermine marriage, it strengthens it. We want to defend the rights of all. Adultery, abuse, addiction, violence - that's what's undermining families. Gay marriage is not the problem.

It's the God of all who makes the call - so we'll leave it to God."

I was in attendance that day, and I have heard him preach. I could not help but think that Micah, a Jew, can really preach the gospel!
The Rev. Jeshua Holliday

Jeshua Holliday’s place of worship is the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, which meets at his home and on line. Jeshua is transgendered - his counter identity is “Jackie.” Jeshua enjoys the variety of persons and faiths in Clergy Defending Rights for All - and he believes such ecumenism contributes to the group’s effectiveness.

Jeshua, who presently is quite convincingly a male, grew up as Jackie in the Bronx, New York. He was raised as an Episcopalian at St. Martin’s Church there. When the then-Jackie’s grandmother passed away, a Baptist family adopted Jackie and she attended their Baptist church. He grew up feeling the duality of faith and doubt. She found herself attracted to women, and thought, “How can that be?” Because of such conflict, she found herself shying from attending church. Then she sampled other religions and connected to Buddhism. “And Buddha brought me back to Christianity!”

Certain people in his life are particularly meaningful. Dr. Valerie Bridgeman, (pictured above) associate professor of of Hebrew Bible/Homiletics at Lancaster
Seminary, met Jeshua while she was teaching at Memphis Theological Seminary. Dr. Bridgeman supported Jeshua in transition and helped him discern that his God-given name was Jeshua.

Bishop Evette Flunder (pictured at right) has also been a tremendous influence on Jeshua. Lesbian Bishop Flunder has been in a committed relationship with her partner, Shirley, for 30 years. Bishop Flunder founded the City of Refuge, United Church of Christ, San Francisco, in 1991, to unite a gospel ministry with a social ministry. She is an accomplished singer who has performed and recorded many recordings of gospel music. She is an ordained minister of the Church of God in Christ and the United Church of Christ. In June 2003, Bishop Flunder was consecrated Presiding Bishop of The Fellowship, a multi-denominational fellowship of 110 primarily African American Christian leaders and laity representing 56 faith organizations from the United States, Mexico and Africa. She is very active in AIDS related ministries in the San Francisco area and she serves on the adjunct faculty of the Pacific School of Religion.

Bishop Flunder continues to stress to Jeshua that “God brought me here for something” and that God is doing a new thing through me.
The Rev. Floridia Jackson

The Rev. Floridia Jackson believes that ecumenism is essential to Clergy Defending Rights for All because it provides like-minded yet diverse clergy companionship, and it creates an opportunity to defend the rights of others.

Being the daughter of two educators contributed to her going into ministry, but she was especially influenced by her grandparents. Her paternal grandfather was a Kleenex provider. As a funeral director, he considered it his mission to comfort and to bridge family bickering and to make family peace. So he passed out many Kleenex tissues to his clientele. As a Boy Scout leader, he was the first to have an integrated troupe. At his funeral procession, scouts of both races lined Broadway Street in West Memphis, Arkansas, where he had lived. On her maternal side, her grandparents were in the grocery business, which was remarkable for Blacks in that day and time. She described them as “profound.” They were deacons in the church, having varied ministries. He was supervisor of the Sunday school, responsible for planning and presiding over the quarterly meetings. She made communion bread for the first Sunday of every month. “She rolled that bread out, singing and praying all night,” said the Rev. Jackson, adding that Church members from Parkin and Marked Tree (Arkansas) would pick it up on the mornings to be used for Communion.
“My parents were married eight years and suddenly I was born! They waited to have me,” said the Rev. Jackson. She grew up attending Mississippi Blvd Christian Church when it was located in the Whitehaven area.\textsuperscript{8}

Her Mom taught her to memorize and recite poems, especially “Trees” and poems by Robert Frost. In one such recitation when she was seven years old, her delivery was so moving that the crowd started praying and exclaiming, “She’s preaching!!”

Then it dawned on her that she was to preach.

One reason she wanted to be a minister was that she would not be expected to get married. She was very interested in being a clown minister, although that did not happen.

But women missionaries and evangelists were considered very strange then, and perhaps not sane. And at the age of eighteen, Floridia sought and received support from the Rev. Shirley Prinze, one of the few female ministers who was regarded as sane.

To be gay and a woman preacher! People would make remarks to her, such as, “Guess you’ll be wanting a church now.” “You’ll never get married.” They spoke to her with a sense of ridicule. Her own mother struggled with it, she said. But her father was more supportive because he had two aunts who were preachers.

\textsuperscript{8} Mississippi Blvd Christian Church, now located in the vast former Bellvue Baptist Church property, originally was located on Mississippi Blvd in South Memphis, hence the name. \url{http://www.theblvd.org/} accessed 30/3/14
By the age of sixteen, Floridia served on the Board of Directors of the United Way and the Red Cross. By the age of nineteen, she acknowledged a call and became her congregation’s youngest minister. She did not attend seminary, although she attended many colleges, finishing at the University of Memphis.

She is tall and statuesque, a dignified presence. Her conversation is animated and joyful - unless she is speaking about injustice. And when that is the case, her authority is omnipresent. It is good to have her speaking on one’s behalf.

She was called to Clergy Defending the Rights for All when a group of Baptist and COGIC (Church of God in Christ) ministers, including Dr. Andre Johnson and Earle J, Fisher, agreeing on justice issues, formed the Baptist/COGIC Southern Action Coalition. She remains with Clergy Defending the Rights for All because she is justice minded, because she enjoys like-minded yet diverse clergy companionship, and because she wanted to have an opportunity to defend the rights of others.

**The Rev. Beth LeFever**

The Rev. Beth LeFever (pictured at right) is serving as president pro-temp of Clergy Defending Rights for All.

She feels that the group’s ecumenical composition strengthens its effectiveness in coming together for social justice. And although we have differing traditions, we are stronger as a group because of those traditions.
Beth was called to Neshoba Unitarian Universalist Church in Cordova, Tennessee, a suburb of Memphis, in July of 2012. She had discovered the Unitarian Universalist Church in mid-life and was ordained in 2011 at her home church in Elkhart, Indiana. She has worked various professions, including newspaper journalism, but she states that the job which prepared her best for ministry was to work as a 911 dispatcher. She had not planned on college, but was motivated to attend in order to prepare for ministry. She studied sociology at Indiana University, South Bend.

She is a gentle blonde of medium build, and her voice is deceptively quiet in conversation. It is said by her parishioners that she has a strong, yet gentle, pulpit presence.

Beth tells the story of answering the call to Neshoba’s congregation. She and her husband, after much deliberation, decided to come to Neshoba. After a few weeks, he’d had enough of the South and went back to Elkhart. She remains at her post. They remain in conversation about their next steps together.

She became active in Clergy Defending the Rights for All because she sought a different clergy voice than as pastor to her church. She states, “The group’s ecumenical composition is a result of its need, and although we have differing traditions, we come together for social justice.”
The Rev. Paul Eknes-Tucker

The Rev. Paul Eknes-Tucker is senior pastor at Holy Trinity Community Church UCC. Holy Trinity Community Church UCC was founded to provide a community for diverse people from different ethnicities, sexual orientations, traditions and class.

Paul feels the ecumenical constituency of Clergy Defending Rights for All strengthens its effectiveness because the group provides a place where he can reach out and share diversity. Because of that and the confidence which results, clergy are empowered to empower others.

The Rev. Paul grew up in the United Methodist Church in Alabama. His parents were serious churchgoers, attending church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. So, as a child he hated church.

But then in his adolescent years, Paul realized he was a gay man. At the same time, he also realized the strength of the church was calling him. He became involved with a Christian support group in high school and rediscovered the Faith. At the age of sixteen, he realized that “faith was more than dull stuff!” To discern that God wanted to do something in his life, he participated in “casting fleece.”

The concept of “putting out a fleece” comes from the story of Gideon, a leader in Israel, in the sixth chapter of the Book of Judges. When God directed him to gather the Israelite troops to defeat the Midianite invaders, Gideon wanted to be sure it was really God’s
voice he was hearing and that he understood His directions. He asked God for a sign to prove that this was truly His will. So he put out a piece of wool overnight and asked God to make it wet while keeping the surrounding dirt dry. God graciously did as Gideon asked, and in the morning the fleece was wet enough to produce a bowl of water when it was wrung out.

But Gideon’s faith was so weak that he asked God for another sign—this time to keep another fleece dry while making the surrounding dirt wet. Again, God complied, and Gideon was finally convinced that God meant what he said and that the nation of Israel would have the victory the angel of the Lord had promised. Putting out the fleeces was the second time Gideon had asked for a sign that God was really talking to him and would do what he said he would.

And so that is how Paul Eknes-Tucker asked God to affirm his call - if someone would tell him the next day that he should go into the ministry, he would follow the call. It turned out that three people said to him that day, “Paul, you should be a preacher.”

The Rev. Eknes-Tucker participated in Methodist studies during college at Birmingham Southern and served as a Methodist pastor for two years before he was called to Holy Trinity Community Church.

He had been a closeted gay man, hiding a major secret. When he came out, he found himself in the presence of God, able to respond to his call to ministry as well. It was a dual revelation. He feels a special calling to help people live without secrets. “The fewer secrets we have, the healthier we can be.”
Clergy Defending the Rights for All is far from being the first ecumenical group organized in Memphis for social justice. Clergy who defended rights have been noted for ecumenism throughout Memphis history. Two crucial times are exemplary, the yellow fever era in the 1870s and the Civil Rights era in the 1960s.
Chapter Three
Historical precedents in Memphis

The Beginning of Memphis

Before the first Europeans, Spaniards directed by Hernando De Soto, (right) arrived in the area in 1541, native Americans had inhabited the land for at least 10,000 years. It is held by many Memphis historians that De Soto first beheld the Mississippi River from the Fourth Chickasaw Bluff, south of the confluence of the Mississippi and Wolf rivers. That is now where Memphis is located.⁹

There have been at least five flags over Memphis. In addition to the native inhabitants, France, Spain and England have claimed the region. In 1783, North Carolina sold John Rice, a land speculator, the five thousand acre tract which would become the downtown area of Memphis. When he was killed by Indians in 1794, his brother sold the land to John Overton, who sold part of that to Andrew Jackson, who in turn sold a portion to James Winchester. When in May 1819, the trio laid out a plan to develop the area, Winchester suggested naming it after Memphis, Egypt because of its location on the Nile.

Memphis owes its prosperity to that

commanding location on the Fourth Chickasaw Bluff. The location offers protection from flooding and it is ideal for river commerce. Agriculture, especially cotton, provides the economy.

The Battle of Memphis occurred in June of 1862, resulting in enemy occupation. But in August of 1864, General Nathan Bedford Forrest reclaimed the city. A Union officer, General Cadwallander Colden Washburn, escaped wearing only his nightshirt. The General Washburn Escape Alley downtown is named in his honor. Captain William H. Forrest, Nathan Bedford’s brother, rode his horse through the Gayoso House lobby to the front desk and demanded to see General Stephen A. Hurlbut. The occupiers retreated, to succeed only in recalling the troops from Mississippi.

Following the War Between the States, Memphis experienced dark times. There was an epizootic, resulting in a devastated horse population, a huge race riot occurred in 1866, and disease took a toll. The yellow fever epidemic of 1878 was the most severe, with over five thousand deaths. The city, having lost her charter, was a state taxing district until 1893.
1865 - 1878
The post Civil War and Yellow Fever Era

Memphis was hit by a series of yellow fever epidemics in the 1870s. Half the town fled and over 5000 persons died. Yet some persons stayed and served, including clergy of various religious persuasions.

John McLeod Keating writes of ecumenical participation in Yellow Fever:

"To the sick, ministers or priests speak of heaven, urge repentance and preparation for death, and give absolution in the name of Him by whose commission they officiate, doctrine and dogma almost wholly disappear. The terms of forgiveness and restoration to the Father's love are the same with all. [...] The ministers and sisters of all the Christian sects were alike conspicuous (sic) for their zeal and fidelity." 10

Had the ministers and sisters been concerned with their denominations, even to the point of especially ministering to their own, all would have suffered more. It is safe to say that, whilst not focusing on ecumenism, their ministry was unbounded.

Here follows how various faith groups individually responded to the Memphis yellow fever epidemics.

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Episcopal

Constance and Her Companions, five Sisters of St. Mary and two priests, have become known as the Martyrs of Memphis because they chose to remain in the city when others fled the yellow fever.

The first five Sisters of St. Mary worked under Sister Anne Ayres at Old St. Luke’s Hospital, at Fifty-Forth Street in Manhattan c. 1857. How interesting that their vocations were as teachers and nurses, the very skills they would continue to employ during the time of the 1878 yellow fever martyrdom. They left St. Luke’s Hospital in 1863 because of personality differences with Sister Anne. At that time, they all were Sisters of the Holy Communion. Their mentor, Dr. William Augustus Muhlenberg, refused to intervene in the dispute.

Although the Church of England had encouraged religious orders for both men and women for a thousand years, the orders were suppressed during the English Reformation in the sixteenth century. Then, in the nineteenth century, at the time of the Oxford Movement, orders were again encouraged. England’s daughter church in America soon followed in 1845 at Manhattan’s Church of the Holy Communion, when that one woman alone had professed her vows to the Sisterhood of the Holy Communion. Not very structured, the American order focused on serving the sick, the homeless, and the poor.

We give thee thanks and praise, O God of compassion, for the Heroic witness of Constance and Her Companions, who, in a time of plague and pestilence, were steadfast in their care for the sick and the dying, and loved not their own lives, even unto death. Inspire in us a like love and commitment to those in need, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ; who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, now and for ever.
Harriet Starr Cannon (at left) became a probationer in that new order in 1856, the same year that Charles Quintard entered the priesthood. The Rev. Mr. Quintard became the second bishop of Tennessee.

Bishop Quintard decided in 1867 to establish a home for Civil War orphans and he consulted his old friend Mother Harriet for advice. ¹¹

When in 1878 the Sisters were vacationing at the convent’s mother house in Peekskill, New York, word came that the yellow fever had returned to Memphis. There had been epidemics in 1872 and 1873. The sisters had originally come to Memphis to start St. Mary’s School, and immediately returned to Memphis not to serve as teachers, but as nurses. The four sisters, Constance, Ruth, Thecla and Frances, died of the fever, as did the two martyr priests, the Rev. Charles Carroll Parsons and the Rev. Louis S. Schuyler.¹² Sister Hughetta Snowden survived the plague, and she is included in that group as a white martyr, i.e., one who survived.¹³


¹² The *Sisters of St. Mary at Memphis: with the Acts and Sufferings of the Priests and Others Who Were There with Them during the Yellow Fever Season of 1878.* (New York: Printed but not Published, 1879), 1-51.

¹³ Hillary, Sister Mary, CSM. *Ten Decades of Praise - The Story of the Community of Saint Mary during Its First Century.* (Racine, WI: The DeKoven Foundation for Church Work, 1965).
Jewish

Rabbi Max Samfield, PhD, was a towering figure in the Memphis Jewish community. He helped organize a local Young Men’s Hebrew Association and the Hebrew Relief Association, and he was editor and publisher of the Jewish Spectator weekly newspaper. He was one of the governors of the Hebrew Union College and a founder of the Tennessee Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Children.

At the age of 25, he was called to Temple Israel, then called Congregation Children of Israel. The advertisement of the position read, “Wanted: A Minister and reader at a salary of $2500 who can preach in English and German.” He married Pauline Frank of New Orleans and they had seven children, two of which died of yellow fever. Rabbi Samfield remained in
Memphis during the two major yellow fever outbreaks of the 1870s, helping to care for the afflicted to and bury the dead.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Methodist}

In February, 1826, the Methodists formed the first church of any religion in the city, the First Methodist Church, which met in a log cabin near the mouth of the Wolf River.\textsuperscript{15} Although they suspended church services during the yellow fever era, they did not suspend their ministry. One of the Methodist clergymen, the Rev. E. C. Slater, remained in the city during the epidemic and perished of the fever.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} \url{http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejudaica/ejud_0002_0017_0_17393.html} \textit{Encyclopaedia Judaica} (online) 2014. accessed 30/3/14

\textsuperscript{15} The Wolf River, which originates in Benton County, Mississippi, flows into the Mississippi River, near the northern end of Mud Island, north of downtown Memphis. Source: The Wolf River Conservancy, \url{http://www.wolfriver.org/assets/1652/introduction_to_wolf_text.pdf}, accessed 30/3/14

\textsuperscript{16} Denis Alphonsus Quinn, \textit{Reminiscences of the Yellow Fever Epidemics that Afflicted the City of Memphis During the Autumn Months of 1873, 1878, and 1879}. Providence, R.I.: Freeman and Son, State Printers, 1846, p. 185.
In 1940, Dr. W.B. Selah, pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church\textsuperscript{17}, said that in Methodist philosophy\textsuperscript{18} “the personal and social gospels are two sides of the same coin.”

**Presbyterian**

First Presbyterian Church's history closely parallels that of the city. The early years of growth were interrupted first by the Civil War in the 1860s, then the yellow fever epidemics a decade later when its pastor, the Rev. Henry Bowman, lost his life while ministering to the sick. The Presbyterian Church in the United States publicly opposed racial segregation since 1950.\textsuperscript{19}

**Roman Catholic**

The three major yellow fever epidemics of 1873, 1878, and 1879 devastated the Irish population of Memphis. Many of the estimated eight thousand Memphis citizens who died during these epidemics were Irish who, unlike so many of the upper classes,

\textsuperscript{17} St. John’s began downtown, in 1859, at the corner of Union Avenue and Fourth Street. Called “Central Church Mission,” it had an original membership of 40. By the end of the century, it was bursting at the seams. The members decided to build a new sanctuary at the corner of Peabody and Bellevue. At the same time, they chose to affiliate with a denomination, becoming St. John’s United Methodist Episcopal Church, South. St. John’s opened its doors in 1907. Source: [http://www.stjohnsmidtown.org/history](http://www.stjohnsmidtown.org/history) accessed 30/3/14

\textsuperscript{18} John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, was particularly concerned with inviting people to grow in God’s grace and in the knowledge and love of God. The Methodists emphasize putting faith into action. Furthermore, the goodness of creation is fulfilled in human beings, who are called to covenant partnership with God. God has endowed humanity with dignity and freedom, and summoning humankind to responsibility for our lives and the life of the world. [http://www.ume.org/what-we-believe/our-wesleyan-heritage](http://www.ume.org/what-we-believe/our-wesleyan-heritage) accessed 30/3/14

\textsuperscript{19} [http://www.firstpresmemphis.org/History.html](http://www.firstpresmemphis.org/History.html), accessed 2/4/14
had been unable to flee the city. Father Martin Riordan died in the 1878 yellow fever epidemic, as did his assistant.20

Even though the clergy of Memphis employed their individual denominational resources, they did not limit themselves to such, giving all they had, in the spirit of ecumenism, without discrimination to serve others. They did not regard the race or creed of any of the afflicted persons. They saw to it that the suffering persons were cared for, and that those who succumbed were properly buried. Regarding advocacy, those clergy worked together heroically for the rights of all-concerned.

1929
The Cross Cut Club

On February 11, 1929, Rabbi Harry Etelston of Temple Israel assembled eighteen ministers, priests, and rabbis to discuss the formation of a group of liberal minded religious leaders and educators.21 Named The Cross Cut Club,22 their mission was to exchange ideas in a fellowship that would reach beyond sectarian and doctrinal differences.23 The Cross Cut Club sponsored an annual Goodwill Conference among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.24

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23 Lewis, Selma. MIFA - Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association - Diversification and Unity, Researched and written by, edited by Jeanne Tackett and Ellen Abhay www.mifa.org/diversificationandunity accessed 30/3/14

Ecumenism certainly increased the effectiveness of the mission and ministry of the Cross Cut Club.

Downtown Memphis, c. 1927

1940

The Memphis Interracial Commission

The Memphis Interracial Commission was born in 1940. The Reverend J.A. McDaniel, chair of the all-black Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, invited Dr. Samuel E. Howie, president of the all-white Memphis Ministers Association, to meet with his group. The two groups combined to charter the Memphis Interracial Commission. The Memphis Interracial Commission stated a double purpose - to promote harmony and justice between all races and creeds, and to interpret for the public the conditions in the city of Memphis which defeat Justice for any one group.  

25 Ibid.
1968

The Civil Rights Era and the Sanitation Workers Strike

In the 1960s, Memphis was at the center of civil rights issues. William Dimmick, Dean of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral on Poplar Avenue, downtown in Memphis, and other Memphis clergy not only tried to offer support to the workers, but also labored to mediate a settlement of the strike with then-Mayor Loeb and city leaders. An all-night meeting to attempt to settle the strike was held at St. Mary’s Cathedral. Regrettably, the group’s effort was not successful.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was asked to come to Memphis to mediate, and he did so with reservation. He gave his famous “I have been to the Mountaintop” speech on April 3, 1968, in Memphis the day before he was assassinated.

King’s assassination rendered Memphis dazed and bewildered. A dusk to dawn curfew was enforced, and persons were not allowed to enter or leave the city.

On the day after Dr. King’s death, Dean Dimmick hosted a memorial service for area ministers, priests and rabbis, at the Cathedral. As the group considered what they might do to help end the sanitation workers’ strike and bring peace to the community, they made an impromptu decision to march to City Hall to ask Mayor Henry Loeb to
make concessions and to pray for an end to the strike. Dean Dimmick, carrying the Cathedral’s processional cross, led the march.

Dimmick’s decision was not popular, and it came at a cost: about half of the people who worshipped at the Cathedral left the church and never returned. (When they transferred out, it boosted the membership of other Episcopal churches in the city.) Dean Dimmick became part of an ecumenical group of Memphis clergy who gathered after that event to address poverty and human suffering in the community.

That gathering, an ecumenical/interfaith organization, came to be known as the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association, or MIFA. MIFA continues to be a backbone of support for seniors, families in crisis and youth in our community.26

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Post-1968

MIFA

The Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association (MIFA) was founded in 1968 in an unprecedented cooperative effort by church leaders. It thrived despite opposition seeming resolved to defeat it.

Early in 1968, Rabbi James Wax and the Memphis Ministers Association had submitted "An Appeal to Conscience" to The Commercial Appeal newspaper about the sanitation workers' plight. The appeal drew attention to the injustices of low wages and poor working conditions. The reaction among the populace was that it was not appropriate for church leaders to address social issues.

The sanitation workers went on strike in February. With the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on a trip to Memphis to address the strike, the fury, grief and mistrust that followed widened the chasm between the races.

Following King's assassination, area churches and faith leaders intent on healing the city's wounds realized they would have to work together. In September of 1968, MIFA was born.

MIFA gained little support initially. Advocacy work was not popular and the board was divided in its goals. Executive Director the Rev. Berkeley Poole noted, "One (group) wanted to be a bridge among churches. The other wanted a greater presence in social concerns." Consequently, they experimented with several programs, from police community relations and neighborhood stabilization to African-American studies.
These projects produced little action and MIFA suffered. Finances were depleted, and when Berkeley Poole resigned in 1971, hope was nearly abandoned.27

Gid Smith and Bob Dempsey were hired as coexecutive directors. They accepted their positions with the understanding that MIFA did not have the funds to pay them. The partnership they formed was the turning point for MIFA.

Smith and Dempsey transformed MIFA into an organization of direct action. A comprehensive protocol for the creation of programs was established - each program being categorized as “delivery of service” or “systemic change.” With conscientious volunteer leadership, programs like Meals on Wheels, the Memphis Food Bank and The Mid-South Senior newspaper were created.

MIFA extended new senior programs, opening two senior centers, expanding its home-delivered meals program, providing home ownership options and counseling for the elderly, and adding the Senior Companion Program.

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27 The religious tradition of Memphis has been “shaped by frontier, rural life-style, and cultural insulation,” write Dr.'s Peter Takayama and Suzanne Darnell of Memphis State University. Their article on the development of MIFA, “The Aggressive Organization and the Reluctant Environment; The Vulnerability of an Interfaith Coordinating Agency” evaluates the religion of the area as characterized by evangelism, salvation of the individual, and the belief that the problems of society are not the concern of religion. Practiced by most Memphians, this brand of religion sanctioned the status quo and did not predispose the city to be the home for a vital metropolitan inter-faith organization.

“That MIFA exists at all was what fascinated me,” says Dr. Darnell. “It was ecumenical, interracial, and it arose at a time of racial hostility. It was devoted to social action when the community was not.”
In 1984, MIFA acquired the City Slickers program, now Teen Job Services; today that program trains, mentors and guides 40 teens in the 38126 zip code. MIFA serves people in crisis. Through the Job Bank, individuals get employment training. In 1983, MIFA’s housing program for homeless families was established.

In 1989, innovative fundraising began. Projects included Starry Nights, a drive through display of holiday lights at Shelby Farms, the sale of bricks for the Pyramid’s entryway, and The MIFA Thrift Store. A partnership with Elvis Presley Enterprises exposed MIFA to Elvis fans internationally. With opportunities at all levels of giving, the entire community could be involved in MIFA.

By 1998, over 200 local congregations were showing their support through monetary and in-kind contributions and countless volunteer hours.

In 1997, Margaret Craddock became executive director. She started at MIFA as a VISTA and lent her years of experience and visionary leadership to carry the organization into a period of new growth.

Entering MIFA’s fourth decade, its leaders reevaluated MIFA’s programs, keeping the most effective ones and delegating the others to agencies that could accommodate them. Refining its programming and simplifying its mission, MIFA overhauled its 910 Vance facility and began a $25 million Campaign for a New Century.

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28 38126 is an urban zip code in Memphis, Tennessee. Median household income here ($10,734) is significantly lower than US average ($56,604). The population is primarily African-American, younger, and mostly single. The average house value here ($59,500) is lower than in the Memphis metro area as a whole. The median age here is 27. There are 3,339 men and 3,995 women. The median age for men is 23 while for women the median age is 29. [http://www.neighborhoodlink.com/zip/38126] accessed 3/3/14

MIFA's housing program experienced tremendous growth. Idlewild Court and Presley Place, as well as the Les Passees Center for Children and Families, opened between 1998 and 2001. Today the program provides 100 housing units and a comprehensive program for families transitioning out of homelessness.

MIFA serves more than 55,000 seniors, teens, and families yearly. When asked why they chose MIFA, current supporters responded this way:

“MIFA has breathed hope back into a community where a feeling of hopelessness and despair has often prevailed. Through MIFA, thousands of people are no longer hungry, homeless and uncared for. Hilton Hotels Corporation is proud to be associated with an organization that provides such vital services to the community and supports MIFA's efforts to help people lead more productive lives.”

30 “Helping change Memphis: MIFA makes a difference for 40 years.” http://www.mifa.org/diversificationandunity accessed 30/3/14
Chapter Four
The Future of Clergy Defending Rights for All and Ecumenism in Memphis

This study of Clergy Defending Rights for All is very apropos for the Diocesan Ecumenical Officer. The group is composed of clergy of at least ten different denominations; moreover, the members of the group are of different races, ages and sexual persuasions. They are so diverse that when I am in their company, I am seated at the heavenly table. I have made friends. If I need to make a connection in the faith community, I have a starting point. When I go to church events, I am never a stranger. People know me as well wherever I go - and that is augmented because of my association with Clergy Defending Rights for All.

That they all may be one. John 17:21

Ecumenism is a movement promoting union between religions especially between Christian churches. It is the doctrine of the ecumenical movement that promotes cooperation and better understanding among different religious denominations aimed at universal Christian unity. Ecumenism, from a Greek word meaning 'the inhabited earth,' seeks greater Christian unity or cooperation.

It has been said that Sunday morning is the most segregated time in the United States. Memphis is no exception to that. It is the time when people of like opinions and faiths assemble to worship their God in their traditional, respective ways.


32 Yet in the Roman Catholic world, ecumenism is a parallel movement headed in the Vatican aiming at the eventual inclusion of all other churches and religions into the Church of Rome.
Brother Jeffrey Gros (pictured above) was a meaningful voice for ecumenism. Brother Jeff is a household name when considering ecumenism and the purpose of ecumenical organizations. Jeff served ten years as Director of Faith and Order for the National Council of Churches and fourteen years as the Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In 2005 he joined the faculty at Memphis Theological Seminary as the Distinguished Professor of Ecumenical and Historical Theology. In the fall of 2011 Brother Jeffrey returned to Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois, as the Catholic Studies Scholar in Residence.33 While a resident scholar, he also served as president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, a consultant to the Chicago archdiocese’s Office of

33 *The Amazing Life of Brother Jeffrey Gros – A Profile in Missional-Ecumenism*  
Posted August 19, 2013, by John Armstrong  
http://johnarmstrong.com/?p=5255 accessed 30/3/14
Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and an adjunct professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.\textsuperscript{34}

Br. Jeff published well over 300 papers and articles; he had book reviews published in over three dozen journals. His first article was "Self Acceptance and Religious Maturity" in \textit{Spiritual Life}, in the Summer of 1967.

Just ten days before he died in August 2013, he sent to \textit{Koinonia}, the Newsletter of the Office of Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue published by the Paulist Fathers, what was probably his last piece, "Appreciating the Past and Looking to the Future."\textsuperscript{35}

Brother Jeff writes,

I could not have imagined in 1959, when I graduated from college that I would see the Patriarch of Constantinople and a host of fellow Christian church leaders attending a papal funeral in 2005; that the heir to the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and the English throne would change his wedding plans for the event; or that the celebrant, now Pope Benedict XVI would very publicly include the Reformed superior of the Taize Community, Roger Schutz in communion.

An amazing legacy of gifts for which we all praise God.

I could not have imagined, when I walked into the Concordia Lutheran Seminary office of Arthur Carl Piepkorn in 1963, that Religious Freedom and Ecumenical Engagement would become successful outcomes of the second Vatican Council still in process until 1965; that there would soon, by 1966, be a dialogue with Lutherans and other Reformation churches; and that the results of these dialogues would be so fruitful in the pastoral, liturgical and educational life of my own Catholic Church.

An amazing legacy of gifts for which we all praise God.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} http://ncronline.org/news/people/ecumenical-leader-br-jeffrey-gros-dies-age-75 This story appeared in the Aug 30-Sept 12, 2013 print issue under the headline: Ecumenical leader Br. Jeffrey Gros dies at age 75.

\textsuperscript{35} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey_Gros accessed 30/3/14

\textsuperscript{36} http://www.lstc.edu/chapel/sermons/?a=sermon&id=241 Sermon by Brother Jeff Gros accessed 30/3/14
I quote Jeff when I give talks or sermons relating to ecumenism. He was a very willing consultant to me as well as an inspiration for my work as Ecumenical Officer.

The Task of the Ecumenical Officer

Concerning the future of ecumenism, the Rev. Robert W. Jenson writes about “Ecumenism’s Strange Future” in the February 16, 2014 issue of *The Living Church.*

There will be faithful congregations, some in and some out of the mummies of the mainline. There will surely be surviving faithful churchly institutions, broke but struggling on. There already are societies of clergy and laity, formed for survival in spiritual hard times. There will be desperate persons and families, holding faith in unfriendly seas, unfriendly seas. There are Pentecostal groups with high understandings of Eucharist and its fellowship. There are theologians who write for the Church of the creed.

Let all these come together, catch as catch can. Let them cling to baptism, and after that not be too precise about further conditions of fellowship.\(^{37}\)

Clergy Defending the Rights for All will do likewise. New projects are envisioned and the membership is ever eager to advocate for those who benefit from their taking a public stand against injustice. Ecumenical cooperation on behalf of justice in turn enhances the faith community’s response to injustice. As a result, Clergy Defending the Rights for All, as well as the entire faith community, will be stronger and more faithful. All concerned will have fellowship and confidence that the rights of all are of value and of loving consequence.

As Diocesan Ecumenical Officer, I will seek out opportunities to share faith with persons of other denominations. I envision ecumenical worship and charitable works. Just as

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the ancient Greeks considered *Oikoumenikós*, to mean “of the whole world,” so shall I consider ecumenism to refer to the present world of faith.

**Conclusion**

The writer of this dissertation on ecumenism and advocacy loves the Episcopal Church and I came to it maturely and intentionally.\(^{39}\)

As James Waring de Bernières McCrady writes, “It is commonplace to point out that of the three greatest branches of the historic Church Catholic, the Roman has concentrated most on suffering and sacrifice (the Good Friday church), the Orthodox has concentrated most on resurrection and ultimate triumph (the Easter church), and the Anglican has concentrated most on the incarnational experience that all of creation is God-created and imbued, and that all people are called to participate in it, as God was willing to become in Christ (the Christmas church).\(^{40}\)

I would not trade her for anything of this world. I loved Enquirers class, and I loved choir practice. I love designing newsletters and crafting liturgies. I love being a priest - and celebrating the Holy Eucharist is the greatest joy of all. It is literally touching heaven, and

\(^{38}\) The countries which bordered the Mediterranean Sea composed the known world in the time of the ancient Greeks.

\(^{39}\) I was confirmed in 1965 by the Rt. Rev. John Vander Horst at St. John’s Knoxville while a student at the University of Tennessee. I grew up as a Methodist, very much under the influence of my choir director, an Episcopalian who planned liturgy and music with great care. When Mr. Albert Rabb died suddenly, the church leaders quickly went back to the old ways sans the beauty of worship I cherished. Trinity Methodist Church remains a beloved neighborhood church and gathering place. They are outstanding in community service, most recently garnering headlines for hosting the homeless, a scandal when certain neighbors complained that it was against property zoning regulations.

\(^{40}\) McCrady, 123.
sharing it with all-concerned. Nothing calls me like Mother Church, nothing. I was especially attracted to the Episcopal Church because of the openness and acceptance offered to all sorts and conditions of persons. And with such devotion, my own participation in Clergy Defending Rights for All is amplified.

So as much as I am in favor of ecumenicity, I am also in favor of denominationalism. Ecumenism is not the same as homogenization or uniformity. Clergy Defending Rights for All has credence because clergy of differing denominations, loyal to their own traditions, are united in a quest for justice. Clergy Defending the Rights for All rejoices in the sharing of faith diversity.

Epilogue

Clergy Defending Rights for All

My opus has two strains - Ecumenism in Memphis and the advocacy Group, Clergy Defending Rights for All.

Here I have written how various faiths worked together in Memphis history to provide a background for understanding how and why Clergy Defending Right for All came to be. Clergy Defending Right for All developed during a time of need, but it has since faltered. Currently the group is seeking identity and purpose.

I stumbled upon the group when I was seeking a local paragon of ecumenism within my local community. Clergy Defending Rights for All consists of ministers of various faiths; it organized to protest against a more conservative clergy group which made waves protesting President Obama's published stance on same sex marriage. After that triumph, the
organization still exists, yet hardly casting a brilliant flame. We meet monthly, the original
two dozen crowd is now ten or less. Despite the small ranks, we remain delighted to serve
anyone who may be in need of social advocacy.

In Memphis History from the early nineteenth century on, clergy did work
together, accomplishing much as individual denominations, and by working together an
ecumenically strong foundation was laid. This was the predecessor, nee foundation, of Clergy
Defending Rights for All's pure quest for advocacy. I am seeing how the group could really
benefit and blossom if everyone perceived what great things would happen were we set loose
freely to conquer in love. Such an awareness could manifest! This could result in a very
strong super strain of advocates for justice which would be revolutionary. Perhaps we could
include a few attorneys with a cause.

I have come to know the group members well enough as friends to know that every
one of them would jump at the opportunity to stand up against injustice - especially if each
had the encouragement of his or her colleagues. I can vouch that everyone desires a
opportunity to serve others.

It's what they desire and are waiting to happen, an opportunity to go to bat for
someone innocent but less fortunate. Most of us act that way because of our own lives - we
have been there, done that. Survival and perspicacity are other ways the group is a living
testimony to the Faith.

I will be sharing what I have written about them with them. There are some local
situations brewing presently which could benefit from our method. Likewise, the
membership would be able to minister to others from the strength grown of their own
travails.

None of the group has a police record. Each is a genteel person who has many and
great, sublime and sundry experiences leading them to God and to a ministry which may
ultimately free the captive. As well, each of the group members is well-educated.

So I have established this thesis, this treatise, as academic, based on tradition and
research. Our threefold stand is tradition, advocacy and love. We have no "Christian Banner,"
or even the Rainbow Banner.

In our group prayers, we petition to be used, used even for a tiny bit of what we have
to offer this community in a time when it is desperately needed.

It takes a dedicated time, less than an hour, to read through the
City of Memphis court dockets. It is easy to surmise, and to
gather the sentiment, that not all justice handed out per se is
truthful and fair. What a positive impact would be made by a court
appearance of Clergy Defending Rights for All!

Clergy Defending Rights for All would never seek attention as individuals or
collectively, yet that happens, But our courage is supported by a strength which is greater
than we are, Perhaps the greatest strength of ecumenism is that, as we share our faith and our
love of God, we are strengthened by all that we share and all on which we base our love.

Ecumenism is a broad subject, yet it is not so broad that students and young people
cannot grasp it, and that vulnerable clergy cannot derive strength from it. It is, moreover,
embracing, and because of its origin, all-loving.
The premiss that clergy, or any other people in leadership, should defend the rights of all persons who cannot do so for themselves, is a given. We have many Bible stories to back that up - the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, to name a few. Here, by Clergy Defending Rights for All, simply and clearly, in our own time and place we are presented with such opportunities for ministry.

Amen. soli deo gloria.
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