

# Seeking Refuge

A Milwaukee church celebrates 50 years of making space for everyone – even when others wouldn't make space for them.

By JENNIFER WALTER



Above: Milwaukee MCC's current location on Mineral Street. Left: the Rev. Tory Topjian

The church stands squat amongst a row of two-story homes on Mineral Street in Walker's Point. But you can't miss it – the bright white brick, vibrant cerulean accents and stained-glass windows beckon, friendly and welcoming, to the quiet street.

It's the home of Milwaukee Metropolitan Community Church, a faith community that church leaders believe is also the oldest existing LGBTQ+ organization in the city. This November marks 50 years in Milwaukee since its inception; five decades of community, faith, acceptance, adversity and historical strides for LGBTQ+ residents throughout the city.

The worldwide MCC is a faith community founded by the LGBTQ+ community and other social justice movements of the 1960s and prides itself on inclusivity and acceptance. "The church has always been a church for all," explains David Huibregtse, a board member at Milwaukee MCC. "You don't have to identify as anything to come to the church."

"I jokingly say, it's kind of the Heinz 57 of all the faith traditions in the world," says the Rev. Tory Topjian, the Milwaukee MCC head pastor who was raised in the Armenian Orthodox Church. "Coming into MCC, we have probably over 200 clergy give or take, but we've come from every different walk of faith."

The first MCC service was held in Los Angeles in 1968, and three years later a community incorporated in Milwaukee. Services were held all over – in people's homes, in other churches, and for a period of time at the Astor Hotel. In 1993, the congregation was looking for a permanent home and was about to finalize a deal for a building whose owner was getting out of business. When the owner learned that he was working with

an LGBTQ+ organization, he told church leaders he'd rather "torch the building" than sell it to them.

The church landed instead in the bright building on Mineral Street, now home to about 40 parishioners carrying on its tradition of activism and LGBTQ+ support with several ministries intended to be a "beacon of light to those who feel marginalized or oppressed, or who don't think they fit in in their own faith tradition or culture," Topjian says. After all, he explains, the global MCC church was founded with the mentality that they would "be put out of business, so to speak" – that one day, every church would be truly accepting of everyone, regardless of their identity. ●



**THE L••K-SEE**  
Recent stories that have caught our eyes

By CHRIS DROSNER

**Language Matters:** This summer, Milwaukee County announced it would no longer call people in jail or other custody "inmates," replacing the term with "occupants" or "people in our care." "These terminology updates reflect a more humane and less adversarial approach," says Supervisor Felesia A. Martin. "Officer" also replaces "correctional officer," and the Internal Affairs Division has been renamed the Professional Standards Division.

**Resting in Peace:** Hats off to Tyrone MackLee Randle Jr., the artist and activist who led a search to find the unmarked burial site of George Marshall Clark, the only person to die by lynching in Milwaukee, and raise \$4,600 to give him a proper granite headstone. The marker for Clark's grave in Forest Home Cemetery was dedicated on Sept. 8, exactly 160 years after his murder in the Third Ward.

**Get up, Grampa!** Former Gov. and current UW System boss Tommy Thompson, who turns 80 this month, still water-skis? Of course he does. As summer closed, he was showing his grandkids how spry he is when he heard his arm "pop" – the sound of his biceps detaching from the bone. After surgery, he plans to continue water-skiing, and maybe even hit the downhill slopes this winter. Legend.