

OBITUARY: Mark Bidwell

Pastor embroiled in scandal leaves behind legacy of good works that cannot be denied

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

In the preceding 20-plus years before his very public fall from grace, Rev. Mark Bidwell built a solid reputation as a minister, activist and all-around compassionate human being that no one scandal can besmirch. The former senior pastor of Metropolitan Community Church - Detroit died Jan. 3 at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak. He was 53.

"Regardless of what they'll say on the certificate of his passing, I really do believe that Mark died of a broken heart," said Rev. Delores Berry, a traveling evangelist who frequently appeared at MCC-D and knew Bidwell well. "I know that his work will outlast the memory of his rough times. He was a dynamic individual who thought of helping people in healing situations and he was tireless in that."

Bidwell was born Dec. 28, 1958 and raised in Metropolitan Detroit. He worked for a time for General Motors before beginning his ministerial career. Joining MCC-D in 1989, at a time of great turmoil for the church, Bidwell quickly became a deacon. In April 1993, Bidwell began serving as interim pastor even though he had yet to be ordained. That came in 1997, when he began his tenure as senior pastor for the church, a position he held until September 2011.

Bidwell earned a bachelor's degree in finance from Lawrence Technological University before going on to get his master's in pastoral ministry from MCC's Samaritan College. He also attended Ss. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Orchard Lake.

Once at the helm of MCC-D, Bidwell began reaching out and the ministry expanded under his guidance. In 2000, he attended the first Transgender Day of Remembrance. The event took place outside the old Affirmations community center on a cold, rainy November day.

"After the service, Mark came up to me and offered the church for the following year," said Michelle Fox-Phillips, one of the event's organizers. "Since then he's been on the planning committee every year.



Rev. Mark Bidwell in 2007 leading a service for Transgender Day of Remembrance. MCCD is planning a memorial service on Saturday, Jan. 28. BTLfile photo: Andrew Potter

As part of the weekend's events, he also offered to baptize transgender individuals who wanted to be baptized in their new name. So he was an integral part of the Transgender Day of Remembrance from the first year we had it."

After the passage of Proposal 2, which banned same-sex marriages in Michigan, in 2004, Bidwell became active in the fight for marriage equality. He organized annual trips to the Oakland County Courthouse, where same-sex couples applied for marriage licenses, and performed mass same-sex commitment ceremonies in front of Ferndale City Hall as part of the annual Motor City Pride festivities.

Bidwell received the Unity Award at the 21st annual Community Pride Banquet in 2006, and traveled the following year to Bucharest, Romania, to take part in a gay pride march where marchers were outnumbered by police and surrounded by armored vehicles.

"Fortunately, because I speak no Romanian, I didn't understand what the protesters were angrily screaming and shouting at us," Bidwell told Between The Lines at the time. "Axil, a German MCC minister, and I carried an MCC banner with 'God Loves All' (written) in Romanian. It

was a hit with the TV news crew."

Roland Smith joined the MCC-D church in 2006 and was instantly impressed by Bidwell's presence.

"I had never met such a warm and compassionate man," Smith reflected for an article on the MCC movement's 35th anniversary in 2007. "He loves people. That impressed me."

Indeed, Bidwell believed it was his calling to reach out to whomever he could.

"We've fed the homeless and strived for human rights and justice for all people," he said in the same article. "We realize that a church is more than Sunday services. We're called to do great things in the world."

Bidwell's works and position often saw him featured in the media, and at times he was even the recipient of hate mail and death threats. But in September, he made the news for a much different reason. Struggling in recent years with diabetes and ill health, Bidwell, whom parishioners say had recently taken to sitting to deliver his sermons, which were noted for their brevity, revealed he had fallen victim to addiction.

On Sept. 21, a man with whom

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Bidwell had injected methamphetamine died in Bidwell's Ferndale home as the result of an overdose. Though no charges were filed in the incident, Bidwell soon found himself in the center of a media storm. The local print and television media picked up on the story and anti-gay religious groups carried it across the world.

He resigned from his pastoral position and MCC temporarily suspended his ministerial credentials. Sadly, Bidwell would not live to make penance and see his reputation restored. His health continued to deteriorate and, distraught, he attempted suicide. Bidwell was hospitalized on multiple occasions and

died of organ failure last week.

"Toward the end of his life he struggled with addiction which ultimately led to medical complications," Bidwell's daughter, Amy Dooley, told the Daily Tribune. She recalled her dad as "a fantastic father to my brother and I, and a fantastic grandfather to my two children."

Despite the tragedy of his last days, friends, family and ministerial colleagues all agree that there is no undoing Bidwell's good works, and no denying the impact he made as a champion for gay - and, indeed, human - rights for many, many years.

"There were many good things about Mark before he got in trouble with alcohol and drugs," said Jackie Walker, MCCD's vice-moderator. "He did a lot for our church. He brought it from shambles in Roseville and built it up to the 150 members we have today."

Berry said that Bidwell deserved to be remembered for his successes and not his shortcomings.

"We place people like Mark on a pedestal because he's done so much and helped so many, and I'd like to keep him there," she said. "I acknowledge that he has some broken places like the rest of us, and I think he lost his way. I really do believe that his heart just couldn't keep beating. He knew he was responsible for a lot of hurts. So I think Heaven took him home.

A memorial service is in the planning stages for Saturday, Jan. 28 at MCCD. Funeral services for Bidwell took place Saturday, Jan. 7 at the Lynch & Sons Funeral Home in Clawson. The family has asked that memorials be made to The Ruth Ellis Center, 77 Victor Street, Highland Park, Michigan 48203.