



## Bean, Carl (b. 1944)

by Linda Rapp

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Carl Bean gave up a promising entertainment career to pursue his vocation as a clergyman. He felt the call to found a church to minister to the particular needs of glbtq Christians of color, and thus the Unity Fellowship Church was born. The Reverend Bean and his denomination have shown a strong commitment to caring for people with AIDS.

Bean realized from a very early age that he was attracted to men but "somehow knew not to talk to anyone about it" at first. When at the age of twelve he did acknowledge to his foster parents that he was gay, they sought pastoral counseling for him. The session left him feeling so rejected and despondent that he attempted suicide by taking all the medicines that he could find in the house.

Bean subsequently returned to his birth mother, whose greater acceptance of his sexual orientation made his next years happier.

Despite the emotionally wrenching meeting with the homophobic minister, Bean never wavered in his devotion to the church. Throughout his younger years he attended the Baptist World Youth Seminars, where he always excelled.

Bean left his Baltimore home at the age of sixteen to become a gospel singer. His decision to use his musical gifts to spread the word of God led him first to New York. For several years in the early 1960s he lived and performed in Harlem, appearing at such prestigious venues as the Apollo Theater.

He next went to Chicago, which was home to a number of prominent black gospel performers. Bean sang with the Gospel Chimes and the Gospel Wonders, then joined the Alex Bradford Singers.

With the Bradford group he appeared in Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*. More stage roles followed. Bean performed in productions including Bradford and Micki Grant's *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*. He left the stage in 1972, however, after appearing in Grant's *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* on Broadway.

Bean moved to Los Angeles, where he was working in a department store when a recording opportunity came his way. Producers at Motown, who had heard him sing on the gospel album *Gotta Be Some Change* (Carl Bean and Universal Love, ABC Records, 1974), asked him to record "I Was Born This Way" by Bunny Jones in 1977. The disk reached number 14 on the Billboard disco chart.

With its lyrics including such sentiments as "I've learned to hold my head up high / Not in scorn or disgrace" and "We're all the way nature meant us to be," as well as its chorus proclaiming "I'm happy, I'm carefree, I'm gay. / I was born this way," the song became something of a gay anthem.

Given this success, Motown wanted Bean to do additional records--but to sing more commercially viable love songs about women. Bean declined and asked to be released from his contract. He thus ended his career as a recording artist and decided to pursue his vocation as a minister.

Bean had become a member of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) soon after his arrival in California. He recalls that, overcome by a sense of joy and community, he began to cry when he first entered the ramshackle building where MCC founder Troy Perry and his flock celebrated the love of God for all people.

Bean enrolled at MCC's Samaritan College in 1978 and was ordained as a minister four years later. He felt that his special calling was to serve the black community, and so he began his work in south-central Los Angeles.

Bean's Unity Fellowship Church (UFC) began as a weekly Bible study group in 1985. Initial meetings were held at the home of a black lesbian, but steadily increasing attendance soon necessitated a move.

The UFC, which officially organized and received non-profit status later in 1985, held services at the Ebony Showcase Theater for most of the next three years before acquiring its own site. The congregation bought an old warehouse in 1988 and converted it into the denomination's Mother Church.

At the same time that Bean was founding the church, he initiated the Minority AIDS Project (MAP). Moved by the suffering of AIDS patients and distressed that the black community was too often dismissing the disease as "a white gay thing," Bean set off on an educational mission. An interview on a black radio station, KJLH, led to a *Los Angeles Times* piece, and soon Bean was flooded with inquiries.

MAP got off to a decidedly modest start with a rummage sale fund-raiser. Bean called on Maxine Waters, then an Assemblywoman, for help, and with her assistance was able to secure some seed money for the project. Waters, now a United States Representative, remains a strong supporter of MAP.

Financial difficulties, however, plagued MAP. A 1988 benefit gospel concert starring Dionne Warwick helped keep the enterprise afloat. Three years later, when MAP was again in dire circumstances, Bean undertook a fast to publicize its plight and to appeal for donations. Later, in 1998, he organized the non-profit L.I.F.E. Records company and produced a CD, *Right Now*, the proceeds from which were given to the cause. Bean wrote all the songs himself and performed them with the Unity Fellowship Church National Mass Choir.

From the beginning MAP has primarily served the African-American community, but some 20 percent of its clients are Hispanic. The organization offers a wide range of programs, including HIV testing and counseling, AIDS prevention education, and the provision of food, clothing, and transportation to patients.

Bean was executive director of MAP until 1989, when he gave up the post to devote more time to the needs of his growing church. In 1990 UFC became the Unity Fellowship Church Movement when new congregations began forming. The denomination now has some four thousand members in fifteen cities around the United States.

Bean espouses liberation theology and stresses that his church is committed to defending the rights of historically oppressed groups, including women, persons of color, and glbtq people.

Bean has received numerous awards from both religious and secular organizations for his work in providing a spiritual home for glbtq Christians, combating AIDS, and continuously striving to improve the lives of those in the minority community. Among these honors are an NAACP Image Award (1987) for his work on AIDS, a Prophetic Witness Award (1993) from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund Liberty Award (1994). In addition, the AIDS Health Foundation has recognized his dedication to helping people with AIDS by naming one of its residential care facilities the Carl Bean House.

Bean is proud to shepherd a church that nurtures Christians faced with oppression because of both their

sexual orientation and their ethnicity, but he emphasizes that the UFC welcomes all people. He points out that heterosexuals and indeed whole families are members. This is consistent with the motto that Bean has given his church, "God is Love and Love is for Everyone."

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