

“A Church Where Jesus Is Real”:
Race, Religiosity and the Legacies of Protest Activism in the Church of God in Christ,
1968-1989

By
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In memory of Bob Paine, 1921-2013.

Never just another fish in the sea.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Chapter One: “What’s Mine Is Yours” COGIC Political History, Protest and the Passing of the Guard	18
Chapter Two: Building Jerusalem Power, Property and Racial Justice in Memphis	45
Chapter Three: Dreaming of a Church Without Rebellion The Saints and Cultural Politics 1968-1989	70
Chapter Four: Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Liberation COGIC Higher Education, Marginal Voices and the Intellectual Legacies of 1968	96
Conclusion: Salvation, Testimony, Freedom	116
Bibliography	121

Introduction

In March 1968, mere weeks before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood in front of striking sanitation workers and their supporters at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. At a pulpit surrounded by banners bearing Bible verses and the faces of long-dead ministers, he began the first of a series of speeches that would culminate fourteen days later in his famous and final “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” address. King’s words in Memphis encompassed Biblical parables, boycott strategies, and stirring exhortations to nonviolent direct action. On that first March day, however, the preacher began with a simple celebration of black religious unity. “We have Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, members of the Church of God in Christ and members of the Church of Christ in God,” he proclaimed, greeting the packed crowd in the 3,000-seat Christian Temple. “We are all together.”¹

The interdenominational solidarity of this moment hides a longer, rarely told story of African American religious diversity that began long before King’s birth and continues to this day. In fact, King, a liberal Baptist preacher, had delivered his speech at the headquarters for the Church of God in Christ (henceforth COGIC), a rapidly growing, theologically conservative black Holiness-Pentecostal denomination. Since its foundation in rural Mississippi at the turn of the century, COGIC had come into frequent conflict with progressive churches and denominations like those that produced King. As early as 1897, its founders condemned the liberal theology and activism of their Baptist compatriots in favor of strict Biblical literalism and abstinence from secular politics.²

¹ Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York, NY: WW Norton and Company, 2007), 297.

² Calvin White, *The Rise to Respectability* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2012), 22.

Later, as the denomination set up its national headquarters in Memphis and expanded into other American cities, it drew the ire of many black intellectuals who feared its lively worship style would hurt African American public image in a hostile, white-racist society.³ With working-class origins, a tradition of ecstatic worship that harkened back to churches during enslavement and a membership that often lacked formal education, COGIC often found itself excluded from activist organizations in the first half of the twentieth century. For this reason, it has hidden in plain sight from most historians of the mass civil rights movement, despite the fact that the Temple's banners in Memphis framed Dr. King in some of the most iconic images of his final days.

At the time of King's 1968 visit to Mason Temple, however, COGIC stood on the precipice of an era of tremendous theological development and political transformation. The church's explosive growth in the decades leading up the 1960s meant that, as of 1968, its headquarters building stood as the largest black-owned public space in the mid-South.⁴ This space brought the church rapidly into the public eye at the forefront of the black freedom struggle. Young pastors within the church took the lead coordinating ecclesiastical support for the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, marching publicly beside Dr. King and bringing Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Roy Wilkins to the pulpit of Mason Temple.⁵ Thousands of other COGIC laypeople, many with stories that have since

³ Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 64-65; White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 31, 103, 107.

⁴ Anonymous, "World Headquarters of Church Opens Here," *Commercial Appeal*, December 11, 1945, Folder 1, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

⁵ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 397; Report, Memphis, FBI, March 13, 1968, RE: SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, RACIAL MATTERS, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-76, 5; Letter, Memphis, Director and Atlanta, FBI, 4/15/68, SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TN, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-320. Both in David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988) Reel #17.

faded into history, provided grassroots support for movement activities in Memphis and across the South.

As the 1960s came to a close and COGIC retreated from the limelight, these protesting believers assumed positions of prominence within the denomination as Bishops, clergy and theologians. Under the guidance of J.O. Patterson, Sr., a 1968 strike participant who became the church's Presiding Bishop a few months after Dr. King's assassination, they brought the political experiences of the 1960s to bear on their church and led COGIC into a new era of public engagement with racial inequality. In Memphis, the denomination used its size and economic influence to work toward dismantling the city's racist status quo. In small towns and big cities throughout the South, the denomination established its own schools that provided its youth with an alternative to *de facto* segregated public districts. In Atlanta, COGIC created a seminary and offered support to self-identifying "radical" thinkers like Leonard Lovett and James Tinney, who wrote liberation theology in the late 1970s and 1980s from within a black Pentecostal frame. The Church of God in Christ remained devoted to its distinct heritage as a working-class, theologically conservative organization. Nevertheless, as a new generation of believers took the reins of the church fresh from the political turbulence of the 1960s, it played host to a variety of new perspectives that sought to reconcile its religious commitments with the struggle for black equality.

This thesis looks at these perspectives, tracing COGIC's development in political, cultural and theological realms in the two decades between its protest activism in the late 1960s and the 1989 death of its second Presiding Bishop, J.O. Patterson Sr. Without attempting to assert a fallaciously unified COGIC answer to the questions posed by racial

inequality, it insists that the legacy of the 1960s proved inarguably significant for the denomination's development in the subsequent decades. Some members from the era, such as theologian Leonard Lovett, sought to dramatically re-conceptualize their church's relationship to society and exhorted their co-believers to direct action well into the late 1970s and 1980s.⁶ For these Pentecostals, the 1960s initiated a new era in which religious communities could and should function as sites for dismantling oppressive structures. For many other ordinary believers, COGIC in the 1970s and 1980s merely continued to provide material support and spiritual reassurance within a country that remained hostile to black citizens. Weighing these multiple perspectives, this thesis argues that COGIC as an institution became increasingly open to engaging with race-based inequality in the decades following the 1960s. Through a vast array of strategies that sometimes conflicted with each other, the Church of God in Christ contributed enormously to the cause of African American liberation and thus deserves a solid place in the historiography of the black freedom struggle.

COGIC Historiography

In the last decade, the National Council of Churches has consistently ranked COGIC as one of the five largest Christian denominations in the United States.⁷ Despite this undeniable significance due to sheer size, COGIC has generally evaded rigorous study within the fields of black studies, history and religious studies. In fact, only two

⁶ For example see Leonard Lovett, "Liberation: A Dual Edged Sword," (paper presented at the Annual Meeting for the Society of Pentecostal Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, November 18-20, 1982), 14/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri

⁷ "Church Giving Drops \$1.2 Billion Reports 2012 Yearbook of Churches," National Council of Churches, accessed April 2, 2013, <http://www.nccusa.org/news/120209yearbook2012.html>.

historians have published book-length works on the denomination to date, both focusing on its history prior to 1968.⁸ On one level, this scarcity of research may come from a lack of available primary sources. The Church of God in Christ does not keep its own historical records, and so materials related to its past have traditionally existed in myriad different archives, making it hard to research efficiently.⁹

On a deeper level, however, the lack of research on the Church of God in Christ demonstrates longstanding academic biases that have excluded Pentecostalism from studies of black Christianity. Anthea Butler, a historian of COGIC, identifies these biases specifically in a 2010 online panel discussion moderated by *Religious Dispatches* on the state of black religion. Responding to Professor Eddie Glaude's assertion that "the Black Church" as an "agent of change" died with the sixties, she critiques the frame of the discussion itself. "The moniker *the Black Church* never meant much to the Pentecostals," she said, "to the spiritualists, to the NOI, the Garveyites and the like."¹⁰ While Butler's comment mentions several religious and secular organizations, it holds especially true for COGIC, which rarely fits neatly into stereotypes of black religion as politically active and theologically liberal. Since the early twentieth century, progressives from Ida B. Wells to members of the Niagara convention expressed disdain for Pentecostalism.¹¹

Contemporary scholars have also hesitated to engage with the tradition, perhaps because its literalist theology places it so out-of-step with the secular leanings of many academics.

In spite of this history of neglect, however, COGIC has garnered the interest of a small

⁸ Or so claims Calvin White, the second of these two historians, in the introduction to his 2012 *The Rise to Respectability*.

⁹ Conversation with Darrin Rodgers, Springfield, MO, April 28, 2013; Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 8.

¹⁰ Anthea Butler et al, "Updated with Response: The Black Church is Dead—Long Live the Black Church," *Religion Dispatches* (March 9, 2010), accessed April 3, 2013, <http://www.religiondispatches.org>.

¹¹ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 22-23, 31.

number of authors recently, on whose shoulders this study stands.

Anthea Butler's 2007 *Women in the Church of God in Christ* focuses on the church's first seventy years, with special attention to the ways that women found empowerment within the denomination through the activities of its thriving Women's Department. Calvin White's 2012 *Rise to Respectability* focuses on the same chronological period, with a narrower focus on the COGIC's expansion in Memphis under its first Presiding Bishop. Both scholars provide enormous insight into COGIC's cleavage from middle-class, progressive Christian organizations and its complex relationship with secular political action. Their work has proved critical to situating the need for this study and clarifying the terms on which it proceeds. Particularly in its earliest chapters, this thesis draws heavily from both books and remains indebted to many of their conclusions.

No historical study of comparable length exists concerning COGIC after 1968, making this thesis the first systematic foray into COGIC's history in the era. Nevertheless, a few authors have addressed COGIC's expansion under the Patterson bishopric, and the political transformations that accompanied this expansion, in shorter form. In 2012, Notre Dame PhD candidate Lauren Beaupre published a powerful article on COGIC's history in Memphis in relation to local civil rights efforts, entitled "Saints and the Long Civil Rights Movement: Claiming Space in Memphis." Beaupre's work creatively uses the expansion and changing purposes of Pentecostal sacred space in Memphis as a way to historically reframe its response to racial injustice.¹² Beaupre provides invaluable new research on the ways that COGIC's rising membership bought it

¹² Lauren Beaupre, "Saints and the Long Civil Rights Movement: Claiming Space in Memphis," *Journal of Urban History* 38 (April 2, 2012): 971.

local prominence in its headquarters city, and her work has proved enormous for the first and second chapters of this thesis. Her narrow focus on local politics keeps her from interrogating nationwide shifts in the Church of God in Christ's culture and theology, however. Moreover, non-leadership voices in the denomination remain generally silent and broader questions about the diverse experiences of COGIC members in the era go unasked and unanswered in her work.

A small number of scholars who study black Pentecostalism have also documented individual COGIC clergy members' contributions to the black freedom struggle. In "Doing All The Good We Can," for example, a wide-ranging 2003 essay on black Holiness-Pentecostal political activists, COGIC historian David D. Daniels III briefly mentions Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr.'s personal involvement in the Sanitation Strike of 1968. Daniels holds Patterson up as a notable exception to the inactivity of most Pentecostal ministers.¹³ Aside from a short analysis of social justice language in COGIC's 1973 Official Manual, however, Daniels does not relate this activism, or the activism of other COGIC members, to broader changes in the denomination.¹⁴ Jonathan L. Chism, a Rice University graduate student in religion, similarly considers J.O. Patterson, Sr. alongside other COGIC activists in his 2011 conference paper "The Saints Go Marching In." Like Daniels, his consideration of this activism's afterlife in COGIC politics, culture and theology over the following decades remains short, limited to a brief acknowledgement of the "radical" theologians produced by Patterson's theological

¹³ Daniels, David D. "'Doing All The Good We Can': The Political Witness of African American Holiness and Pentecostal Churches in the Post-Civil Rights Era," in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civil Culture in a Post-Civil Rights Era*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

education initiatives and a reference to the aforementioned 1973 manual.¹⁵

These considerations of COGIC political practice have also failed to account for the full nuance of the denomination's positions, too readily labeling it as a conservative or otherworldly organization with a few liberal members. Dr. David D. Daniels III, for example, in his previously mentioned essay "Doing All The Good We Can," proposes a "bilingual" model for thinking about Pentecostal theology in relation to activism.¹⁶ Most Pentecostal activists, he asserts, have tended to compartmentalize their spiritual and political lives, embracing conservative, "individualistic" religiosity while taking contradictory "communitarian" liberal stances on secular issues.¹⁷ This paradigm, while adept at accounting for the political diversity of churches like COGIC, fails by placing Pentecostal religiosity in implicit opposition to liberal politics. Indeed, COGIC's official stances on gender, family and even race remained, by some standards, quite conservative well into the 1980s. Nevertheless, activism comes in many forms. For COGIC leaders like Patterson Sr, who stood on the frontlines of protest in the 1960s, even apparently conservative cultural politics represented attempts to improve the material worlds of their disenfranchised congregants. By viewing the activism of COGIC's most liberal members as in tension with the denomination's religiosity, Daniels misses the opportunity to look at the ways in which that this religiosity, as manifested in politics, theology and culture, changed and adapted in response the experience of activism in the 1960s.

¹⁵ Chism, Jonathan L. "'The Saints Go Marching': Black Pentecostal Critical Consciousness and the Political Protest Activism of Pastors and Leaders in the Church of God in Christ in the Civil Rights Era" (paper presented to the Religion and Culture Interest Group at the 40th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Memphis, Tennessee, March 10-12, 2011), 8-10, SPS 2011, 57/4/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁶ Daniels, "Doing All The Good We Can," 177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

Scope of the Project:

In order to expand on these previous efforts, this thesis uses original primary research to examine a wide range of COGIC experiences from 1968 to 1989. Without claiming to speak comprehensively or finally, it embraces the apparent contradictions that define the large denomination's struggles to combat the multiple iterations of structural racism that continued long after Dr. King's death. The first two chapters focus on Memphis, looking in greater depth at COGIC Bishops' involvement in the 1968 sanitation strike and considering the ways in which they carried this protest impulse into their local leadership over the following decades. With an explicit focus on Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr. and other denominational leaders, these chapters speak to the church's politics as they proceeded from the center of its institutional power and provide one glimpse into the legacies of protest activism.

The next two chapters depart from this institutional and geographical focus on the Memphis hierarchy to look at the church's cultural and theological world as defined and redefined by laity and theologians. Chapter three uses church periodicals to analyze discourses within COGIC surrounding gender, education and the family, as taken up by both pastors and ordinary believers. Chapter four looks at the church's academic subculture as it arose within Pentecostal seminaries during the 1970s and 1980s, highlighting marginal voices that often took issue with the denomination's mainstream political stances. Ultimately, by pursuing a multi-pronged scope that involves clergy, laity and theologians, this thesis presents COGIC as an entity in ongoing conversation with itself about the most effective way toward a more just future. While acknowledging that COGIC members often disagreed over tactics, however, it insists that believers at all

levels of the church took racial justice as a goal and creatively sought out new ways to challenge inequality in its many forms throughout the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Sources and Acknowledgements

Primary research for this project came mainly from the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center in Springfield, Missouri, an affiliate of the Assemblies of God. The staff at the Flower Center have worked for years to collect COGIC materials but held limited sources related to the 1970s and 1980s prior to 2007, when the Bishop J.O Patterson, Sr.'s widow donated her husband's personal papers.¹⁸ Many of the materials in this collection—which include sermons, convocation souvenir books, audio recordings, correspondences, photographs, news clippings, administrative records and copies of the denomination's newsmagazine *The Whole Truth*—have never previously been utilized for the purpose of historical publication.¹⁹ For this reason, the following thesis operates with more comprehensive access to archival materials than any previous work on the topic.

At various points in the thesis, I also looked outside of the Flower Center to archival sources produced beyond the walls of the church. In the first and second chapters, this manifested itself primarily in FBI surveillance documents regarding the Memphis Sanitation Strike and secular newspapers, including the white-owned *Commercial Appeal* and *Memphis Press Scimitar* and the black-owned *Tri-State Defender*. In these cases, I remain aware of the segregated and racially fraught nature of the mid-century American press and the prejudices of observing FBI agents. Whenever

¹⁸ "Personal Papers of J.O. Patterson, Sr. Deposited at FPCH," *Assemblies of God Heritage Magazine*, November, 2011, 73, accessed April 4, 2013, http://ifphc.org/Uploads/Heritage/2011_09.pdf.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

possible, I have noted these circumstances and even used them as part of my analysis. Particularly on topics involving race, politics and religion, I believe that archival objectivity in the public sphere remains impossible. As a historian, I see it as my job to balance competing perspectives, all of them informed by such factors as race, class and gender, rather than produce a single correct account of empirical, historical truth.

In addition to archival work, I sought out in-person conversations with COGIC members when my time and budget allowed. This resulted in a visit to Fountain Temple Church of God in Christ in Missouri and an interview with Dr. Leonard Lovett, the church's Chief Ecumenical Officer for Urban Affairs and a critical architect of COGIC's theological education in the 1970s. My conversation with Dr. Lovett, in particular, informed my last chapter and conclusion enormously. Future research on the topic of COGIC history, however, should include more extensive oral history work with laity in the denomination. Most of my in-church primary sources came through COGIC Publishing House, an initiative of J.O. Patterson, Sr.'s that had close editorial links to the general board. The elusive voice of the ordinary believer remains obscured. I have sought out means to circumnavigate this source issue whenever possible, but a truly comprehensive history of COGIC remains unattainable without interviews that give voice to those laity who have not written their memories down.

At every stage of the process, I am deeply indebted to scholars, church members and friends for sharing opinions and offering both encouragement and help. Mary G. Patterson's donation of her husband's papers fundamentally enabled this project and although we have corresponded by email only I remain deeply appreciative of her work as both an archivist and activist in her own right. I offer special thanks, also, to Dr.

Leonard Lovett for his stories and expertise as I attempt to honor his legacy. Professor Françoise Hamlin was an incredible advisor and also opened my eyes to the issues discussed in this thesis through her courses on black history and the methodology of Africana Studies. Andre Willis, Linford Fisher, Marie Griffith, Anthony Bogue, Joseph Pucci, Amy Remensnyder, Christopher Hinshaw and Robert Cope all proved crucial to helping me find my intellectual voice and leading me, in both direct and indirect ways, to the study of black religion in America. Darrin Rogers and the staff of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center gave me more encouragement than I ever could have expected when I visited their archive as a total outsider in April, 2013. Finally, Mother Willie Mae Smith, Elder Nathaniel Smith and Curtis Perry gave me an incredibly warm welcome when I worshipped at Fountain Temple COGIC in Missouri during the final stages of my writing. I dedicate this work to them and the six million members of the Church of God in Christ.

Closing Thoughts: Continuing the Conversation

The Church of God in Christ currently stands as the second largest black Christian denomination in the United States, behind only the National Baptist Convention.²⁰ Purely by the numbers, historians of religion can no longer write off Pentecostalism in general and COGIC in particular as fringe alternatives to so-called mainstream American Christianity. Reflecting once more on Anthea Butler's comments to Eddie Glaude regarding the "Black Church," it seems that COGIC as much as any denomination holds the power to bear that moniker into the future. As Glaude's stereotype for black

²⁰ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey", The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>.

religion—theologically liberal, politically active, implicitly middle-class—fades from demographic prominence, it may be the charismatic, theologically conservative worship tradition of COGIC that takes its place.

With this contemporary reality in mind, the task of historicizing COGIC's unique approach to racial injustice becomes increasingly critical. The following thesis represents one attempt to write such a history, for an era of the church's past that has received tragically little attention from members of the secular academy. By tracing the development of the Church of God in Christ in political, cultural and theological realms in the wake of the 1960s, I hope to begin a more nuanced conversation regarding the historical relationship of black Pentecostals to the fight against racial inequality. Recognizing the multiplicity of activism and the internal contradictions of any large religious group, this thesis intends to open space for the inclusion of the Church of God in Christ in the narrative of the black freedom movement.

Chapter One: “What’s Mine Is Yours”

COGIC Political History, Protest and the Passing of the Guard

At 1:34 am on Friday, February 14, 1958, someone placed a burning cross in Reverend C.H. Mason Jr.’s back yard.²¹

Several years earlier, the 43-year-old pastor had moved back home to Memphis from the Northeast to take up a ministerial job in his father’s rapidly-growing Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ.²² Mason did well as a clergyman; by 1956 he had raised the funds to purchase a home in Glenview Place, an upper-middle-class neighborhood with an overwhelmingly white population.²³ Now, two years later, he bore the burdens of an early black resident in an area grappling with the violent reality of desegregation: death threats, white community groups raising money to buy his home and crosses lit ablaze mere feet from the bedroom of his baby daughter.²⁴

By all accounts, Mason had remained careful throughout the move-in process. Prior to purchasing the property, he had consulted with white friends about the state of the neighborhood and received word from them that it was already in the process of “Going Negro.”²⁵ When it became clear that few other black families had followed his lead, he even delayed his move-in date and made public offers to rent the property to white tenants until the climate in the neighborhood had become more receptive to black

²¹ Clark Porteous, “Fire Destroys \$150,000 Negro Church: Possibility of Arson Is Studied,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, February 18, 1958, 2, Folder 1, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ Anonymous, “He Buys House, Thinking Block Is ‘Going Negro,’” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, June 28, 1956, Folder 1, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁴ Porteous, “Fire Destroys \$150,000 Negro Church,” 2.

²⁵ Anonymous, “He Buys House,” 1.

residents.²⁶ Nevertheless, in a city with as violent a racial history as Memphis', no amount of caution could forestall disaster. One week after finding the cross on his lawn, Reverend Mason saw his church destroyed by flames, in a case of potential arson that the Memphis police department never adequately investigated.²⁷ Shortly after, his house on Glenview fell victim to vandalism and burned to the ground.²⁸

Reverend Mason's story does much to illuminate the position of the Church of God in Christ more broadly in Memphis during the racially tense 1950s. Like many COGIC pastors of the era, Mason eschewed confrontational activist tactics when faced with discrimination and violence, working instead toward social advancement through a strategy of gradual, cautious assimilation. In newspaper articles describing the fires and property scandal, the Pastor's remarks remained devoid of any overt political allegations. When asked by the white-owned *Memphis Press Scimitar* about the origins of the fire, for example, he replied that he strongly doubted any connection to the white supremacists who had pressured him to leave Glenview. "Surely, there couldn't be," he said, admitting later in the article that the thought had occurred to him briefly but he "didn't want to say so."²⁹ Earlier newspaper interviews regarding his move to Glenview reflect a similar hesitance to politicize: "I am not a troublemaker," he insisted, speaking to *The Commercial Appeal* in 1956. "I was told the block is going Negro and I wouldn't have bought the place if I believed otherwise."³⁰ Nevertheless, despite Mason's reluctance to turn his personal struggle into a public critique of Memphis' status quo, he remained as

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Porteous, "Fire Destroys \$150,000 Negro Church," 1.

²⁸ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 2000), 57.

²⁹ Porteous, "Fire Destroys \$150,000 Negro Church," 1.

³⁰ Anonymous, "He Buys House," 1.

vulnerable to the consequences of racial injustice as any other black Memphian. Over the course of the following decade, this injustice would push his denomination into the political limelight as an active participant in the black freedom movement.

This chapter tells the story of that transformation, culminating with the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike in which COGIC clergy and laity played pivotal roles as organizers, public leaders and frontline grassroots activists. Drawing from the work of historians like Anthea Butler, Calvin White, and Elton H. Weaver III, it first positions COGIC within a larger trajectory of black religion in America, exploring its political history and contextualizing its early reluctance to engage openly with social movements for black equality. Then, it looks at key moments in COGIC's growth in its headquarters city of Memphis and initial involvement with local political activism, analyzing the terms by which COGIC clergy and laity became gradually more open to confronting the city's racist status quo.

Finally, drawing on primary research from local newspapers and declassified FBI surveillance files, this chapter explicates COGIC's role in supporting the 1968 Sanitation Strike. The strike support efforts of COGIC ministers served not only as particularly significant individual instances of COGIC activism but also as the furnaces in which the denominational hierarchy forged its political future. Many of the strike's most ardent Pentecostal sympathizers, including Reverends J.O. Patterson Sr, G.E. Patterson and W.L. Porter, took control of the church in subsequent decades as Presiding Bishops and members of the General Board. By examining the distinct tactics that undergirded their fight against racial and economic oppression in the late 1960s, this chapter provides a basis for understanding the political, cultural and theological developments that later

transpired under their leadership. Ultimately, this chapter argues that COGIC's involvement in the Sanitation Strike indicates a significant generational shift in the political orientation of its laity and clergy. While the church had provided support networks for its members from its earliest days in Memphis, the believers involved in the protest actions of 1968 served as harbingers of a new era wherein COGIC embraced interdenominational cooperation, confrontational political activism and a previously-unseen level of openness regarding its commitment to eradicating racial inequality.

COGIC in African-American Religious History

Charles H. Mason Jr.'s position of relative affluence during the late 1950s belies the humble origins of his denomination, which began in 1897 with a two-week revival in an abandoned Mississippi cotton gin.³¹ At the time, the fledgling church operated under the leadership of Reverend Mason's father, C.H. Mason, Sr, a child of former slaves who grew up sharecropping in Arkansas.³² Living at the height of Jim Crow, Mason Sr. faced devastating poverty and the constant threat of racialized violence. Nevertheless, after experiencing a miraculous recovery from yellow fever at the age of 14, he began to preach at Baptist revivals in Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee.³³

In the late 1890s, Mason Sr. started teaching the doctrine of Sanctification, a controversial notion originating from the nineteenth-century "Holiness" movement within Methodism. Sanctification proposed that humans could attain complete liberation from

³¹ Calvin White, *The Rise to Respectability* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2012), 25-28.

³² *Ibid.*, 11-14.

³³ Ithiel Clemmons, *Bishop C.H. Mason and the Roots of the Church of God in Christ* (Pneuma Life Publishing, 1996), Kindle edition, chap. 1.

the sin and restore themselves to perfection through their faith in Christ.³⁴ This idea broke from orthodox Baptist and Methodist theology at the time, which held that Christians continued to sin even after conversion.³⁵ Finding little audience for his views within existing Christian fellowships, Mason Sr. soon founded his own denomination alongside a like-minded minister name Charles Price Jones, calling it “The Church of God in Christ” after a name that came to him in a vision.³⁶ The church began with a single camp meeting in 1897 and quickly grew to incorporate seven congregations. By 1961, it had established an international headquarters in Memphis and claimed one million adherents worldwide.³⁷

Despite its remarkable growth, the politics of the Church of God in Christ prior to the 1960s remained intimately tied to the economic circumstances and class demographic of its original moment. Arising as it did from nineteenth-century Holiness Christianity and later joining itself with the interracial Pentecostal movement, COGIC sprung from a fundamentally different religious trajectory than theologically liberal black Protestant organizations like the AME or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Progressive Baptist Convention. In its earliest years, COGIC not only separated itself from these self-identifying progressive Christianities through differences theology but also faced frequent and sometimes intentional exclusion from them, perpetrated often by members of the black professional class. This means that COGIC enters the narrative of the black freedom struggle as traditionally conceived infrequently: unlike their Baptists and

³⁴ Ibid., chap. 1.

³⁵ Ibid., chap. 1.

³⁶ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 27; Clemmons, *Bishop C.H. Mason*, chap. 1.

³⁷ Anonymous, “Seven Congregations Originated COGIC,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 8, 1980, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

Methodist counterparts, few COGIC pastors engaged in civil resistance or preached on politics prior to the late 1960s.³⁸

In his study of COGIC's early history, *The Rise to Respectability*, historian Calvin White places this political difference between COGIC and other black churches into the context of religious culture in the wake of slavery. In establishing the Church of God in Christ, White asserts, Mason Sr. and Jones rejected far more than just the theological particulars of the Baptist churches in their area. Rather, they resisted a broader trend in black Christianity toward a highly rational religiosity that placed the social, political and educational needs of black people above spiritual fulfillment.³⁹ The General Baptist Missionary Convention, from which COGIC broke in the late 1890s, exemplified this trend. Established in 1872 by Northern and Midwestern Baptists as a centralized body for accrediting clergy, it dedicated itself to "uplifting the black masses" by pursuing African American education and endorsing a higher-critical approach to the Bible.⁴⁰ As part of this program, the GMBA instituted educational requirements for Baptist ministers in the 1870s which aimed at combatting the so-called "superstitions" which had existed within the church under slavery.⁴¹

For Mason Sr., whose only formal schooling consisted of a partial semester at Arkansas Bible College, these requirements represented a rejection of the traditions with

³⁸ One major potential exception to this statement comes in C.H. Mason, Sr.'s theologically-grounded resistance to the draft during World War I, which briefly earned him a file with the FBI. While this example provides a fascinating glimpse into COGIC's foreign policy politics, however, Mason tended to justify his stance on purely theological grounds and almost never explicitly linked it to the question of black equality. It has also received good treatment already, in Theodore Kornweibel's essay "Bishop C.H. Mason and the Church of God in Christ during World War I: The Perils of Conscientious Objection" and in Chapter 3 of Calvin White's *The Rise to Respectability*. For space purposes, I refer the reader to those two articles and will not treat Mason's draft resistance in detail here.

³⁹ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

which he had grown up. During his semester at Arkansas, Mason Sr. encountered the progressive theological hermeneutics used by the GMBA through a professor named Charles Lewis Fisher and subsequently left the school in outrage.⁴² The Christian worldview Mason Sr. adopted embraced visions, encouraged folk traditions with African origins and insisted on the prophetic significance of dreams. It had been shaped integrally by the rituals Mason Sr.'s mother and her contemporaries had practiced in secret under slavery.⁴³ By contrast, the "higher critical" theology of the GMBA and other progressive black Baptists drew heavily from religious scholarship pursued by European theologians and taught in white seminaries.⁴⁴ In this way, Mason Sr.'s break from the Baptists represented a defense of his religious heritage against assault more than a rejection of religion as a venue for social change per se. Nevertheless, his refusal to accept the educational and theological requirements of the Baptists caused them to deny his church membership in their local convention in 1897.⁴⁵ This denial, and Mason Sr.'s subsequent establishment of COGIC as its own separate denomination, marked the beginning of a rift between his church and educated black professionals that would only grow in the subsequent decades.

The rift widened significantly in June 1907, when C.H. Mason, Sr. took a life-changing trip to the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles and joined his church with the interracial Pentecostal movement. Begun by a black working-class preacher named William J. Seymour, the revival drew its inspiration from Acts 2:4, which proclaims

⁴² Clemmons, *Bishop C.H. Mason*, chap. 1.

⁴³ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 13.

⁴⁴ Cecil M. Robeck Jr. "The Azusa Street Mission and Historic Black Churches," in *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, ed. Amos Yong and Estrelida Alexander (New York: NYU Press, 2011) 30.

⁴⁵ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 27.

speaking in tongues as evidence of “baptism by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶ Seymour had studied the verse several years earlier in Houston, under a white theologian named Charles Fox Parham, who used Acts 2:4 to advocate a religious practice known as glossolalia: ecstatic, wordless utterances said to accompany visitation by the Holy Ghost.⁴⁷ Parham also taught that God had become active once again in human affairs, triggering a second Pentecost and worldwide revival of faith.⁴⁸ In segregated Texas, Seymour learned about these new ideas from a chair outside the window of Parham’s all-white Bible school.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, he became deeply invested in both the practice of glossolalia and the idea of a global Pentecost. In 1906, he moved to Los Angeles with hopes of spreading the good news.

Much as Mason Sr. had a decade earlier in Mississippi, Seymour found few existing black churches in Los Angeles open to his religious beliefs. Soon after he arrived and began to preach, his own congregation ejected him for heresy and locked him out of his own church building.⁵⁰ With nowhere else to go, the itinerant, Southern-born outsider began hosting multiple-day, tongues-filled revivals at an abandoned building on 312 Azusa Street.⁵¹ The revivals attracted hundreds of guests from a huge variety of ethnicities: not only African Americans, but also working-class whites, Latinos, and immigrants from China, Russia and Italy.⁵² Within a year, the event became a national

⁴⁶ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1998), 181.

⁴⁷ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 99.

⁴⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 181.

⁴⁹ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 49.

⁵⁰ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 181.

⁵¹ Cox, *Fire From Heaven*, 54-56.

⁵² Synan, *The Holiness Pentecostal Movement in the United States*, 168. White Pentecostal historians in particular have frequently read Azusa as an almost transcendently post-racial gathering (for example, Synan in *The Holiness Pentecostal Movement in the United States*, 168: “The Azusa Street Meeting was conducted on the basis of complete racial equality”). It seems well-established, through both eyewitness

media sensation. Pilgrims poured in from all around the country and C.H. Mason, Sr. made his way to Los Angeles for a transformative visit from which he would emerge convinced of Seymour's "Pentecostal" beliefs.

The progressive, professional-class black congregations of Los Angeles stood miles apart from Seymour's burgeoning religious movement. As historian Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. notes in his 2011 essay on the topic, Seymour's meetings tended to draw a poorer audience within the city's African American population, often new immigrants from the rural South who had arrived in Los Angeles after 1903.⁵³ This meant that the religious traditions practiced at the revivals had a direct lineage to slave communities in the South, in stark contrast to the local Baptist, AME and CME churches whose liturgy expressed the dominant culture of northern, liberal Protestantism.⁵⁴ By embracing the charismatic, glossolalia-filled worship style of Azusa Street and the Pentecostal movement, Mason Sr. further distanced himself from the theological and political views of these denominations and their members.

When he returned South in 1907 after a month's stay in Los Angeles, Mason Sr. attempted to replicate the revival with a series of all-night meetings in Memphis and soon after began teaching the doctrine of tongues to the nascent congregations of the Church of God in Christ.⁵⁵ The new teachings would earn him the disdain of many black intellectuals. Starting at the turn of the early twentieth century, educated African American clergy, activists and writers frequently expressed disapproval of the worship

reports and contemporary newspaper accounts, that individuals of many ethnic backgrounds worshipped at Azusa (further discussion of this in Cox, 56-65 and Robeck's essay). Whether or not their cohabitation remained as perpetually cooperative and peaceful as scholars like Synan suggest remains open to interpretation and, perhaps, further research.

⁵³ Robeck, "The Azusa Street Mission," 32-34.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30, 33.

⁵⁵ David Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders in Memphis, 1819-1972* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1975) 90-91.

style of Pentecostals, often with the concern that they would embarrass black people who strove to break from the stereotypes of slave religion. AME Bishop Daniel Payne, for example insisted that the movement's lively style defied rationality and stood as a disgrace to both worshippers and "the race" more broadly.⁵⁶ Other more famous activists expressed similar opinions: Ida B. Wells once stated that uneducated Holiness preachers "injured the interest of the entire race" and as late as 1962 James Baldwin expressed disappointment in the "naivete" inherent in his own Pentecostal upbringing.⁵⁷

In this way, Mason Sr. not only separated himself from theologically liberal churches through doctrine but also lost the respect of several generations of middle-class activists by embracing styles of worship with roots in slavery, rejecting formal education and preaching frequently to a working-class audience. Even as COGIC established its headquarters in Memphis and began to grow in size and prestige, it would take years for this rift to mend. In the intervening decades, Mason Sr. and his fellow Pentecostals worked almost entirely outside of then-young civic organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, which took their leadership from the ranks of the black professional elite. Instead, COGIC forged alternative strategies for empowerment, often through support networks at the level of individual congregations that provided safety nets for their laity without challenging racist policies through protest or explicit legal action.

⁵⁶ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 35.

⁵⁷ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 22; Clemmons, *Bishop C.H. Mason*, chap. 1.

COGIC Moves to Memphis

As COGIC spread into Memphis under Mason, Sr.'s leadership, the church's separation from middle-class political progressives remained dramatically visible. Nonetheless, existing as it did within communities of laborers and domestics, COGIC occupied a key position that allowed it to provide direct material aid to its members, who often faced the worst economic and racial injustice of the era. As the church grew in both size and wealth, it slowly transitioned into limited participation in the civil rights movement. In particular, its sizeable headquarters Temple provided unparalleled space for housing rallies, distributing resources for protest action and bringing in out-of-town political speakers. Nonetheless, prior to the 1960s COGIC's participation in social movements for black equality consisted almost entirely of offering its space to other groups and rarely involved explicit agitation from COGIC clergy themselves.

Mason Sr. had preached on Memphis street corners as early as 1897 and within a few years COGIC's growing popularity enabled him to buy a permanent structure on Wellington Street.⁵⁸ This building served as the site of Mason Sr.'s first all-night revivals after his trip to Azusa, which the local white news media covered in deeply patronizing terms. Discussing glossolalia, for example, *The Commercial Appeal* insisted that the worshippers at Mason Sr.'s revival "pretended to speak the language of Spirit" by uttering "insignificant words" like "Sycamore" and "Hicks."⁵⁹ Calvin White suggests that this negative press earned COGIC the further resentment of Memphis' black professional class: news reports like *The Commercial Appeal's* tended to group all African Americans

⁵⁸ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 100-101.

⁵⁹ Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 91

together, White notes, and thus the frequently-ridiculed style of Mason Sr.'s services exacerbated tensions between COGIC and the black elite.⁶⁰

Even so, COGIC gained tremendous popularity in the city and soon established itself as a significant force within the local religious landscape. Congregations continued to proliferate and Mason, Sr. undertook a massive series of expansions starting in the mid 1920s, purchasing the historic Royal Circle Hospital and Tabernacle Baptist Church as worship spaces for his denomination.⁶¹ Much of the expansion arose from the need for space to house the church's annual convocations, twenty-one day autumn meetings in which COGIC members from all across the United States gathered in Memphis for fasting, prayer and teaching.⁶² Convocations both established Memphis as the *de facto* center of the COGIC world and demonstrated the incredible spread of the denomination in other parts of the country and globe with their ever-larger turnout each year.

While rarely agitating for black equality against Memphis' economic and political establishment, COGIC certainly did its part to provide material support for its laity throughout the early 1900s. Many COGIC members in Memphis had come from the Mississippi Delta looking for work as the cotton industry yielded gradually fewer job opportunities at the turn of the century.⁶³ During the harshest years of the Great Depression, the church spearheaded impressive efforts to supply material relief to these members at the level of individual congregations. In the 1930s, Mason, Sr. gave food and clothing out at COGIC churches to anyone who asked as a matter of policy, funding the program with a one-dollar annual contribution from each member of the denomination.

⁶⁰ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 37.

⁶¹ Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 99.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶³ White, *The Rise to Respectability*, 97.

This program further extended to COGIC's annual convocations, at which all meals remained free of charge.⁶⁴ In this way, COGIC promulgated a project of church-based communitarian aid, providing poor people with sustenance generated from contributions within their own communities rather than brought in by outside agencies and civic organizations. Although Mason, Sr. never identified these relief efforts as a form of resistance, they nonetheless created an alternative economy for Memphis' black poor in the face of political and social circumstances that disenfranchised them.

As historian Anthea Butler notes, COGIC women played a remarkable role in mobilizing and organizing these efforts. During convocations, they cared for the sick, provided lodging for those without a place to stay and cooked meals for the hungry, often using their own kitchens.⁶⁵ Perhaps in direct relation to their efforts, the worst years of the Great Depression corresponded with one of COGIC's fastest periods of expansion. Between 1931 and 1935, Mason Sr.'s budding church grew from eight congregations to twenty within the city of Memphis, surpassing both the AME and CME in local membership.⁶⁶ Even as COGIC pastors refrained from political confrontation, the church's growing size demonstrates that it addressed real spiritual and material needs within its communities.

By the mid 1940s, COGIC's increasing institutional wealth allowed it to construct a 29,672-square-foot world headquarters at 958 South Fifth Street, named Mason Temple

⁶⁴ Elton H. Weaver III, "Mark the Perfect Man: The Rise of Bishop C.H. Mason and the Church of God in Christ" (PhD diss., University of Memphis, 2007) 258.

⁶⁵ Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 71.

⁶⁶ Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 99.

for the church's first bishop.⁶⁷ Heralded by *The Commercial Appeal* as “the largest convention hall owned by any Negro group in America,” Mason Temple included not only a 7,500-seat auditorium for convocation services but also a dormitory wing, a public address system, a 500-person dining room, a fully-staffed first-aid ward and a barber shop.⁶⁸ On one level, the edifice served to dramatically improve the services that COGIC had already provided its laity for years. As a continuation of Bishop Mason, Sr.'s Depression-era policy, the cafeteria and dormitories of the Temple remained free to those who could not pay and offered considerably better arrangements than those previously provided in COGIC members' homes.⁶⁹

On a deeper level, the building gave the Church of God in Christ, and Memphis' black population more broadly, a substantial urban space completely outside of white control. When segregated city health care failed, black Pentecostals in Memphis now had an in-house alternative at their own headquarters. When church members faced threats and jeers at segregated lunch counters, they had a fully staffed cafeteria where they could eat. Perhaps most pertinently for the turbulent decades to come, the Temple gave black Memphians an enormous space at which they could gather for rallies and speeches without intrusion by the white political and economic establishment.

In a strange twist of fate, this independence arose directly from Bishop Mason, Sr.'s history of non-confrontational co-existence with Memphis' racist power structures. As historian Lauren Beupre argues, Mason, Sr.'s ability to construct the Temple came largely from his knack for cultivating the favor, and even support, of wealthy white

⁶⁷ Anonymous, “World Headquarters of Church Opens Here,” *The Commercial Appeal*, December 11, 1945, Folder 1, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

patrons.⁷⁰ Early funds for the structure had come from E.H. Crump, a political machine boss who held tremendous power in Memphis during the first half of the twentieth century.⁷¹ Crump ardently opposed black political empowerment and had engineered the police harassment of several African American politicians in the early 1940s.⁷² The fact that Crump enthusiastically supported Mason Sr.'s construction project demonstrates that Memphis' powerful white leaders did not count the denomination among the ranks of political agitators nor consider it a threat to white supremacy. Just as Bishop Mason's son, C.H. Mason, Jr., used exceedingly careful rhetoric during his move into Glenview in the 1950s, the COGIC hierarchy itself maintained a public image that endeared it to even the most segregationist leaders.⁷³

Regardless of the structure's origins, COGIC's use of the Temple after its construction soon broke with the church's otherwise a-political reputation. As early as the first decade after its construction, the COGIC hierarchy began offering its sizeable headquarters to Baptists and Methodists, who used it for events that could not fit in their smaller church meeting spaces.⁷⁴ In 1946, the building hosted a talk by Mary McLeod Bethune, engineered through the activist's friendship with COGIC Women's Department leader Lillian Brooks Coffee. Two years later it served as the site for a fundraiser sponsored by Paul Robeson's Interracial Progressive Party.⁷⁵ In 1959, Mason, Sr. and his Executive Commission offered the space to a Freedom Rally for the Memphis Volunteer

⁷⁰ Lauren Beaupre, "Saints and the Long Civil Rights Movement: Claiming Space in Memphis," *Journal of Urban History* 38 (April 2, 2012): 976-980.

⁷¹ Weaver, "Mark the Perfect Man," 266-267.

⁷² Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 33.

⁷³ Whether this cautiousness served as a deliberate, strategic mask or represented a genuine adherence to conservative denominational stance on issues of racial justice at the time remains open to speculation, since surviving COGIC records from the era rarely talk about civil rights issues like segregation directly.

⁷⁴ Weaver, "Mark the Perfect Man," 274.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

Ticket Campaign.⁷⁶ In a moment that surely would have surprised the recently-deceased Boss Crump, black civic leaders like Russell Sugarmon and even Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke from the pulpit he had helped to fund, demanding African American political representation and an end to segregation.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, even as Mason Temple became the *de facto* center of Memphis' growing anti-segregation efforts by virtue of its size, COGIC clergy remained politically inactive as compared to their Baptist and Methodist peers. By the early 1960s, civil rights tactics among Memphis' progressive ministers had shifted from voter registration to nonviolent protest. Baptist pastors like Billy Kyles and James Netter faced arrest as they stalwartly occupied segregated spaces.⁷⁸ According to David Tucker, a local Memphis historian working during the 1970s, only a small number of COGIC clergy participated in these protests, among them future Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr., at that point merely one among many low-level COGIC clergy.⁷⁹ Despite these examples, the older generation of COGIC ministers and the denominational hierarchy itself remained mostly on the sidelines during the 1960s, with some pastors even insisting publicly that clergy should avoid political action.⁸⁰

While a rapidly aging Bishop Mason, Sr. offered his Temple's pulpit to national and local progressives, he never stood at that pulpit himself as an advocate for civil resistance nor took to the streets in protest. For the most part, COGIC provided the physical space for rallies concerning black political empowerment but neither promoted a

⁷⁶ Ibid., 284.

⁷⁷ Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 45-49; Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007) 29.

⁷⁸ Joan Beifuss, *At The River We Stand* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989) 100.

⁷⁹ Tucker, *Black Pastors and Leaders*, 149.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 149.

clear stance as an organization regarding equality nor moved into the realm of nonviolent civil resistance. All of this would change in February 1968, when the church very publicly gave not only its Temple and but also the labor of its clergy and laity to a Sanitation Strike that immobilized the city for two months. By the end of this strike, COGIC had openly confronted Memphis' majority-white political establishment and a new group of ecclesiastical leaders, fresh from the experience of nonviolent protest, had taken up the church's reins.

The Sanitation Strike, COME and COGIC's Turn to Protest

On February 12, 1968, 1,300 black sanitation employees in Memphis stayed home from work in an unprecedented mass strike against longstanding labor inequities.⁸¹ The Memphis Sanitation Strike subsequently lasted sixty-five days, attracted the attention of national organizations from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and played host to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968. Ostensibly, the strike responded to the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two garbage men who had fallen into an unsafe, outdated trash-compactor in early February.⁸² In fact, tension over working conditions for garbage collectors in Memphis had been building for decades. Even as they provided a vast majority of the unskilled labor in the Memphis Sanitation Department, black workers received wages of between \$1.10 and \$2.10 an hour, faced the constant threat of firing with no promotion prospects and had no recourse to a city-recognized union.⁸³ After the

⁸¹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 104.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1-4.

⁸³ Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 66-67.

city government had thwarted a previous attempt in 1966 at organizing with threats of arrest, the workers had few options left but mass direct action.⁸⁴

Most garbage workers, like early COGIC members, had migrated to Memphis from the rural South with the mechanization of cotton and found themselves without a support network in the new urban environment.⁸⁵ Moreover, in their earliest days they lacked union financial backing due to ordinances against labor organizing for city employees.⁸⁶ Both of these facts meant that they had to appeal to unconventional sources for moral and material sustenance. Outside of Memphis, they sought the help of national labor groups, like the American Federation of Labor and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; within the city, they soon found allies within a wide variety of mostly black civic and religious organizations.

By the time the strike began, COGIC had established itself as one of the most financially successful black organizations in the city, with a massive headquarters to show it. Moreover, because the church had congregations inside many of the blue-collar communities impacted by the strike, it stood in a prime position to mobilize and facilitate support. Historian Michael K. Honey claims that Reverend J.O. Patterson, Sr. heard about the strike before it even happened from a sanitation worker named Nelson Jones.⁸⁷ While no sources survive to suggest Jones' relation to COGIC, he may well have been a congregant. Surely at least some of the garbage workers would have worshipped in COGIC churches, considering the thriving presence of the denomination throughout the city. In any case, Jones' appeal to the minister soon elicited a favorable response from

⁸⁴ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 73-74.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

Patterson and several other younger clergy in his denomination, who jumped into strike support efforts with an enthusiasm uncommon in earlier generations of the church.

This response first manifested itself through the offering of space. On February 17th, the church held a mass rally of workers alongside sympathetic students at Mason Temple.⁸⁸ In line with COGIC's long tradition of community-based material support, the meeting served a critical role in the distribution of food to the families of strikers: youth, clergy and congregants assembled sacks of donated groceries, including beans, eggs, bread, coffee and canned milk.⁸⁹ The meeting also played host to vocal support from several COGIC clergy members, who took the pulpit to speak about the strike. An article in *The Commercial Appeal* article from the next morning quotes J.O. Patterson, Sr. addressing the crowd of civil resisters directly, telling them "what's mine is yours if you need it."⁹⁰ W.L. Porter, another powerful COGIC clergyman who had once served as C.H. Mason's chauffeur in the 1950s, took a conciliatory tone more typical of the denomination's older administrators, insisting that the purpose of the rally was not political.⁹¹

Political or not, the February 17 gathering served as the first of several instances in which not only Mason Temple but also COGIC clergy played a very public role in local strike support efforts. On February 24, Mason Temple hosted a meeting of the

⁸⁸ Report, Memphis, FBI, February 20, 1968, RE: SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-24, David Garrow, ed. *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

⁸⁹ Anonymous, "Union to Seek Delay on Debts, Rally Is Held," *The Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1968, 19, David Garrow, ed. *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 19; background on Porter's chauffeur job from Anonymous, "COGIC Leader Bishop W.L. Porter Dies," *The Commercial Appeal*, April 3, 2009, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2009/apr/13/cogic-leader-bishop-wl-porter-dies/>.

Ministers Alliance, an interdenominational group of clergy led by SNCC leader and African Methodist Episcopal minister James Morris Lawson.⁹² Around the same time, Lawson worked with clergy from COGIC and several other black churches to establish a ministerial group called COME, or Committee on the Move for Equality, in support of the strikers.

COME-affiliated clergy promised to open their congregations to those in need, collect donations and lead economic boycotts of downtown businesses for the duration of the strike.⁹³ With a deep devotion to nonviolent direct action, the Committee on the Move for Equality also met in Mason Temple virtually every night, meticulously planning marches and protests intended to put pressure on the city's obdurate government.⁹⁴ The first roster of COME's strategy committee boasted the name of G.E. Patterson, a young COGIC pastor and nephew of J.O. Patterson, Sr. who went on to become the church's presiding Bishop in the early 2000s.⁹⁵ Several other COGIC pastors, including W.L. Porter, his brother Billy Porter and J.O. Patterson, Sr, soon joined COME in other capacities.⁹⁶ Alongside Lawson and other Memphis ministers, these clergy soon proved an invaluable force in marches, boycotts and rallies that put political pressure on the city and drew attention to the garbage workers' efforts.

⁹² Report, Memphis, FBI, February 26, 1968, RE: SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-20, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

⁹³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 219-221.

⁹⁴ Beifuss, *At The River We Stand*, 105.

⁹⁵ Beifuss, *At The River We Stand*, 356.

⁹⁶ Billy Porter mentioned as having discussed strategy alongside Billy Kyles in Report, Memphis, FBI, March 7, 1968, RE: SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, Memphis Field Office File #1-157-1092.; W.L. Porter and J.O. Patterson, Sr mentioned in Memorandum, SA William H. Lawrence, SAC, July 26, 1968, SUBJECT: COMMITTEE ON THE MOVE FOR EQUALITY (COME) RM, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-357 4, both in David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reels #17 and #18, respectively.

Through their participation in COME, a younger generation of COGIC clergy broke with the denomination's political history dramatically, positioning themselves alongside known agitators and publicly opposing the city's racial and economic status quo. As proclaimed in its widely distributed newsletter *The COME Appeal*, the minister group sought to wield public demonstration as a "ringing challenge" to the "personally degrading" white power structure of Memphis.⁹⁷ This rhetoric contrasted sharply to the cautiousness with which COGIC members like C.H. Mason, Sr. and his son had traditionally treated Memphis' predominantly white political establishment. By joining COME, clergy like Patterson, Sr. put COGIC very openly into conflict with the city's government.

Furthermore, COME brought COGIC into cooperation and dialogue with liberal denominations and progressive civic organizations from which it had historically separated itself. Mason Temple played host to several famous out-of-town guests, who came to the city at the invitation of COME members. By April, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Roy Wilkins, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Ralph D. Abernathy, Gardner Taylor of the Progressive Baptist Convention, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr had all called for worker equality from the pulpit of Mason Temple.⁹⁸ The presence of these nationally recognized activists in

⁹⁷ Anonymous, "Memphis Negro Ministers Support Sanitation Workers Strike," *The COME Appeal*, March 1968, 4, FBI File #157-1092, Memphis Field Office, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

⁹⁸ Wilkins: Report, Memphis, FBI, March 13, 1968, RE: SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, RACIAL MATTERS, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-76, 5; Abernathy: Letter, Memphis, Director and Atlanta, FBI, April 15, 1968, SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TN, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-320; Taylor: Letter, Memphis, Director, FBI, April 13, 1968, SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TN, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-31; King: Letter, Memphis, Director, FBI, March 17, 1968, SANITATION WORKER STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TN, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-87. All of the above in David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern*

COGIC space and alongside COGIC clergy demonstrated the church's newfound willingness to work for social change across denominational lines. It also joined the Church of God in Christ permanently with the black freedom movement in the public imagination. J.O. Patterson, Sr. walked next to Martin Luther King Jr. during a March 28 protest that attracted enormous media attention.⁹⁹ Subsequently, King gave his April 3 "I Have Been To The Mountaintop" speech in Mason Temple, his prophetic words framed by the auditorium's recognizable facade mere hours before James Earl Ray shot him at the Lorraine Motel. In these instances and many others, COGIC grew more and more visible within the enduring iconography of the Memphis movement, even as its longstanding theological divisions from other black churches remained obscured in press coverage and historiography alike.

While the participation of COGIC laypeople in the strike remains less well documented than the administrative activities of leaders, ordinary believers played a significant role through the mass protests organized within their congregations. Aside from the obvious sacrifices of garbage men from within the church's membership, COGIC women contributed a huge amount to the execution of economic boycotts. Nine days after King's assassination, over two hundred black women picketed downtown stores, dissuading patrons from buying new clothes for the next morning's Easter Sunday services.¹⁰⁰ Records of the demonstration, which come primarily from FBI surveillance memos, do not mention names or denominational affiliations of marchers, but one can

Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988) Reel #17.

⁹⁹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 397.

¹⁰⁰ Report, Memphis, FBI, RE: MEMPHIS SANITATION WORKERS STRIKE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, RACIAL MATTERS, April 15, 1968, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-321, 1, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

safely assume that COGIC women would have stood among their ranks. These grassroots boycotts, coupled with others of similar type, finally put the economic pressure on the city to end the strike. As Michael K. Honey asserts in his study *Going Down Jericho Road*, concern over the loss of Northern businesses investment proved to be one of the most definitively persuasive factors that forced Memphis' mayor, Henry Loeb, to reach a settlement favorable to the workers' demands.¹⁰¹

In spite of its salient presence on the frontlines of protests, COGIC managed to maintain a reputation for moderation among the city's most conservative forces throughout the strike by distancing itself from the movement's far-left elements. A close reading of FBI surveillance documents produced by the Bureau's Memphis Field Office during the spring of 1968 reveals this phenomenon clearly. These documents frequently emphasize COGIC's distance from so-called "Black Powerites": in late February, for example, they drew attention to a Mason Temple speech from W.L. Porter in which the minister advised strikers to resist the influence of black power activists in the community.¹⁰² As the spring wore on, the documents often portrayed COGIC clergy favorably as restrained voices within COME. When the Strategy Committee made moves to include the more radical, youth-oriented Black Organizing Project in its roster on April 2, the documents noted that Patterson, Sr. and his son balked.¹⁰³ These actions and others like them earned COGIC leaders a strange kind of favor among the Bureau investigators,

¹⁰¹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 489.

¹⁰² Report, Memphis, FBI, RE: MEMPHIS SANITATION STRIKE, RACIAL MATTERS, February 20, 1968, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-24, 2, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

¹⁰³ Report, Memphis, FBI, RE: BLACK ORGANIZING PROJECT, RACIAL MATTERS, May 6, 1968, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-36, 48, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #18.

who qualified them as “extremely stable, cautious and law-abiding ministers...who in the past have urged caution [but] nevertheless will stand up for what they believe is right.”¹⁰⁴

COGIC’s hesitance toward the strike’s most radical supporters echoed a strategy of public moderation with precedent in the denomination’s longer political history. From the days of Bishop Mason, Sr. onward, COGIC had developed an increasing amount of prestige, autonomy and power in Memphis by carefully maintaining outwardly benevolent relations with the many hostile institutions that aimed to disenfranchise the city’s black poor. These relations kept COGIC from embracing open agitation but also bought the church a level of autonomy that later proved quietly crucial to local black freedom efforts. The Sanitation Strike would have had limited success, for example, without Mason Temple as a space for rallies, food distribution and COME strategy committee meetings. Twenty years earlier, that same Temple had come about through C.H. Mason, Sr.’s slyly collegial public relations with the segregationist Boss Crump. By maintaining a balancing act between activism and conservatism during the strike, COGIC emerged from the fires of the late 1960s with the autonomy it had earned from decades of apparent moderation intact, even as it embraced protest more enthusiastically than it ever had before.

In the end, the very fact that COGIC had participated in the strike at all put the church into a state of creative tension that propelled its political and theological development for decades to come. After enduring years of racial violence and economic injustice, COGIC and its members finally crossed denominational divides and aligned

¹⁰⁴ Report, Memphis, FBI, RE: MEMPHIS SANITATION STRIKE, RACIAL MATTERS, February 29, 1968, Memphis Field Office File #157-1092-324, 8, David Garrow, Ed. *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #17.

themselves publicly with a grassroots protest movement for black equality through their membership in the Committee on the Move for Equality. The legacy of this activism continued to impact the manner in which the denomination approached the question of racial inequality for years, particularly as a younger generation of leaders brought their experiences in the 1960s to bear on COGIC's politics, culture and theology.

The Election of J.O. Patterson, Sr. and the Legacies of 1968

Within a year of the Memphis city government's settlement with the sanitation workers, the Church of God in Christ saw the most significant leadership change in its history. C.H. Mason, Sr., the church's beloved founder and first leader, had died in 1962, leaving no clear method for determining his successor. After six years of heated internal strife, the church adopted a new Constitutional Amendment in January 1968 that provided for the election of the next Presiding Bishop from COGIC's Executive Board through a vote by regional delegates.¹⁰⁵ The Board set the election for the following November's Memphis Convocation, giving potential candidates a full nine months before facing a vote.¹⁰⁶

Reverend J.O. Patterson, Sr. had sat on the church's Executive Committee since 1952. In this position, he had served as general secretary and maintained the denomination's publishing house while continuing to pastor his own 1,600-person congregation in downtown Memphis.¹⁰⁷ As such, he had already witnessed the challenges

¹⁰⁵ Robert R. Owens, *Never Forget! The Dark Years of COGIC History* (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Publishers, 2002) 160.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁰⁷ "Memphian Will Serve as Presiding Bishop," *The Tri-State Defender*, November 23, 1968, 2, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

of running an international denomination and stood as a natural candidate for the Presiding Bishopric. Moreover, in the time between the January meeting and the Convocation he had become the church's public face through his central involvement in the nationally covered Sanitation Strike. Come November, he swept the election by a large margin, defeating his closest rival by over 100 votes.¹⁰⁸ As Patterson assumed the same pulpit that had just seven months earlier hosted Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final speech, he represented the experiences of a new generation of Pentecostal believers who came of age during the tumultuous years of the mass civil rights movement.

Whether or not Patterson's activism within the Memphis civil rights movement had specifically decided the election, the fact that he won demonstrated a huge amount about the changing priorities of his denomination on the whole. Whereas Mason had governed autocratically, the 1968 election gave COGIC laypeople their first opportunity to select their own leader by democratic process.¹⁰⁹ That they chose Patterson, who had openly demonstrated a willingness to involve the church in secular politics on a national scale, speaks to the lasting impact that the 1960s left on the Church of God in Christ, not only in Memphis but throughout the country and world.

In this way, Patterson, Sr. began his twenty-year tenure as Presiding Bishop with a mandate of sorts from his ever-growing ecclesiastical constituency. By engaging publicly with racial injustice on a local level, he and many other believers in Memphis had expanded the possibilities of black Pentecostal political self-definition, even as they remained deeply devoted to their denomination's distinct theological and cultural roots.

Whether and how the diverse members of the Church of God in Christ would make good

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¹⁰⁸ Owens, *Never Forget*, 172.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

on the promises of the 1960s during the Patterson Bishopric remained, at that point, unknown. Would the experience of activism spur them on toward further engagement with the structural inequalities that restricted black life? How would the internal culture of the church change to meet the ongoing realities of racial injustice? And what new theological visions would arise from within COGIC's ranks, as the struggles for justice on earth collided with the experience of the immanent divine? The multifaceted and sometimes-conflicting answers to these questions form the subjects of the chapters ahead.

Chapter Two: Building Jerusalem

Power, Property and Racial Justice in Memphis

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his first address to the striking sanitation workers of Memphis on March 18, 1968. He delivered the speech at a rally of over 25,000 people sponsored by the Committee on the Move for Equality, mere hours after King had arrived by plane from Los Angeles at the ministerial group's invitation.¹¹⁰ Standing in Mason Temple, behind a pulpit that had hosted thousands of COGIC sermons, the Baptist minister first lauded the sanitation workers for the importance of their underappreciated work: "The person who picks up the garbage, in the final analysis, is as important as the physician," he argued, "All labor has dignity."¹¹¹ Then, after decrying the poverty that continued to plague African American communities like Memphis', he used the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16: 19-31 to argue for universal moral responsibility to the poor:

You know, Jesus reminded us in a magnificent parable one day that a man went to Hell because he didn't see the poor. And his name was Dives. There was a man by the name of Lazarus who came daily to his gate in need of the basic necessities of life. Dives didn't do anything about it. He ended up going to Hell.¹¹²

King's subsequent exegesis of the Lazarus parable emblemizes the ferocity of his later-life rhetorical attacks on economic injustice. As historian Michael K. Honey notes, King appealed to the full range of class demographics in his audience by refusing to indict Dives for his riches per se.¹¹³ "There is nothing in that parable that says that

¹¹⁰ Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007) 294-297.

¹¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Martin Luther King Jr. Addresses Striking Workers in Memphis, Tenn., March 18, 1968," (Speech, Memphis TN, March 18, 1968), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.aft.org/yourwork/tools4teachers/bhm/mlkpeech031868.cfm>.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 298-299.

Dives went to Hell because he was rich,” the pastor clarified, explaining that Jesus never condemned wealth in itself.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, King’s argument regarding America’s moral obligation to its poor black citizens came swiftly, with unmistakable theological implications: “Dives,” he continued, “went to hell because he passed by Lazarus every day and never really saw him.” If America could not use her wealth to win equality for those black people who continued to live in a “lonely island of poverty” amidst a “vast ocean of material prosperity,” King insisted that she would join Dives in the inferno.¹¹⁵

King’s use of the Lazarus story established a precedent in the city of Memphis with which other preachers interacted as they analyzed the parable in subsequent years. On November 1970, the newly elected Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr. chose the same verses as the basis of his opening address at the Church of God in Christ’s 63rd Annual Memphis Convocation. A comparison of the two sermons, delivered just over two years apart from the exact same pulpit, does much to illuminate the peculiar, selective manner in which Patterson, Sr. pulled from the radical theological currents associated late 1960s protests in his leadership of COGIC throughout the 1970s.

While King’s 1968 speech put the theology of damnation to work very directly for an invocation to end poverty, Patterson’s 1970 sermon took a more cautious approach. Like King, the Pentecostal Bishop began his address with a disclaimer about Jesus’ view of wealth: “God didn’t condemn [Dives] because he was rich,” he insisted, adding that Jesus in his time “wore the Biblical equivalent to Oxford suits” and “never

¹¹⁴ King.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

refused an invitation to a banquet.”¹¹⁶ After this strangely common piece of analysis, however, the two men diverged. King had argued that Dives allowed his riches to blind him from the God-given task of aiding America’s poor. Patterson, by contrast, focused on the church itself as the object of Dives’ negligence, insisting that the wealthy man had earned damnation because his money “distracted him from God.”¹¹⁷ Drawing a broader lesson for his constituents, Patterson, Sr. insisted that COGIC laity had supported the denomination with “crumbs,” giving money to the church only after they had bought “long-stem glasses and wall-to-wall carpets.”¹¹⁸ While King turned Lazarus’ poverty into an indictment of America on par with the later sermons of Jeremiah Wright, Patterson spun Jesus’ parable into a politically innocuous call for greater financial support of the church.

While Patterson Sr.’s interpretation may seem moderate when compared to King’s reading of the same story, it remains intimately tied to COGIC’s position in Memphis at the beginning of the 1970s. As a nationally famous, largely itinerant activist leader, King had the freedom to use politically inspirational and even inflammatory rhetoric in a variety of locations without having to deal personally with the local fallout from resistant racist institutions. Patterson, Sr, on the other hand, worked daily as a prominent black civic leader within a city whose government and economy remained in the hands of a white, conservative elite well into the 1980s. As he assumed the role of Presiding Bishop and grew the size and scope of his church, he sometimes chose to put aside his activist past, at least publicly, and strengthen his denomination by shoring up its

¹¹⁶ J.O. Patterson, Sr. “Treat Lazarus Right,” (Speech, Memphis, Tenn, November 1970), COGIC Dept. of Public Relations, Audio Recording (Vinyl), Albums--COGIC, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

financial and spiritual resources. Nevertheless, this public moderation stood as an important strategy by which COGIC won the sociopolitical influence to create change from within Memphis' status quo.

This chapter investigates this strategy and many others employed by the COGIC hierarchy within its ongoing efforts toward achieving political and economic equality for Memphis' black people throughout the 1970s and -80s. First, it uses local press to reconstruct the tense environment of the city in the years immediately following the sanitation strike, offering insight into the context Patterson Sr. faced as a new Bishop attempting to strengthen the local influence of his denomination. Then, it looks at the public relations tactics his administration utilized to help COGIC flourish as a black institution within a city that remained deeply hostile toward African American empowerment long after the marches of 1968. Finally, it details three main areas in which COGIC used its influence to work toward racial justice during Patterson's tenure: the development of institutions for urban economic uplift, the promotion of local black political power and interface with national civil rights organizations. Ultimately, through these examples, this chapter demonstrates that Patterson, Sr. and other COGIC hierarchy members brought their activist experiences into church leadership in the 1970s and 1980s even as they retreated from the more confrontational rhetoric of the 1968 strike.

Memphis After the Strike: Anxiety, Radicalism and Suspicion in the River City

On March 28, 1968, ten days after King delivered his sermon on Lazarus from the pulpit at Mason Temple, the pastor returned to Memphis to lead a march through downtown in support of the strikers. The day began peacefully. At 8:00 am, marchers began to assemble outside of Clayborn African Methodist Episcopal Temple. One

observer, John Spence, recalled the event as a “homecoming”: “We would see people we knew,” he recalled, “see someone we hadn’t expected to see and be pleased.”¹¹⁹ A black postal worker in attendance remembered the marchers as predominantly working-class, Christian citizens, while an article in *The Commercial Appeal* from the following week described them as people who would “put on a white shirt and tie on Sunday.”¹²⁰ As with earlier demonstrations King had led in Montgomery, Selma and Washington, D.C., the event stood to showcase publicly the exceptional stoicism and determination of nonviolent protesters in the face of unyieldingly racist conditions.

Somewhere in the planning phases, however, King, Reverend James Lawson and the ministers of COME had left stones unturned. Even as crowds began to form in front of Clayborn Temple, black students had already walked out of their classrooms at Hamilton, Lester, Northside, Douglas, Booker T. Washington and other high schools around the city to join the march.¹²¹ At the same time, police and FBI reports identified several ex-convicts and members of self-identifying radical groups like the Black Organizing Project (BOP) and Invaders among the protester’s ranks.¹²² The new faces-- many of them young, frustrated and relatively inexperienced in nonviolent organizing -- gave the crowd energy and showed the remarkable range of pro-strike solidarity within the city. Nonetheless, they also wore at the strategic coherence of the day’s planned activities. As King scholar Keith D. Miller notes, Reverend Lawson had broken from his

¹¹⁹ Joan Beifuss, *At The River We Stand* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 213.

¹²⁰ Jimmie Covington, “Negro Leaders Sift through the Rubble for Answers,” *The Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1968, 25, FBI File #157-1092-36, David Garrow, ed. *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #18.

¹²¹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 335-336.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 338.

typical practice of screening and training marchers before the March 28 demonstration.¹²³ This meant that many of the several thousand Memphians present had never formally committed themselves to the principles of nonviolence. As the morning carried on, the picket signs of older activists--covered with slogans like “Unionization for the Sanitation Workers” and “Justice and Equality for All Men”--found themselves joined by more abrasive rallying cries. “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs” proclaimed one, while another told the city’s obdurate mayor Henry Loeb, in no uncertain terms, to “Eat Shit.”¹²⁴

What happened next remains obscure in both primary and secondary sources, clouded in the conflicting reports of white- and black-owned newspapers, eyewitness accounts, FBI surveillance memos and historians’ narratives. By 10:15 am, a participant named David Caywood claimed that some kids had broken into a liquor store in the vicinity of Clayborn Temple against the protestations of James Lawson.¹²⁵ An hour later, as an exhausted, belated Dr. King finally arrived from the airport and the march began, the organizers heard the sounds of shattering store windows on Beale Street.¹²⁶ Fearing a riot, Dr. King’s lieutenants rushed the pastor off the scene while Lawson called off the march via bullhorn, but it was too late: police began spraying mace into the protesters’ eyes while defiant black teenagers, furious at the onset of violence, smashed more windows and began throwing bricks.¹²⁷ As chaos escalated, a 25-year-old policeman named J.L. Jones shot Larry Payne, a 16-year-old black child, in the stomach, killing him. Jones would later tell police authorities that Payne had attacked him with “the biggest

¹²³ Keith D. Miller, *Martin Luther King’s Biblical Epic: His Final, Great Speech* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 10.

¹²⁴ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 338.

¹²⁵ Beifuss, *At The River We Stand*, 217.

¹²⁶ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 344-345: Professor Honey meticulously reconstructs the precise order of events here by cross-referencing several interviews with participants and oral histories.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 347.

knife [he] ever saw” after the policeman caught the youth stealing a T.V. from a downtown store. Fifteen black eyewitnesses, however, claimed that the boy had surrendered to arrest and died with his hands in the air.¹²⁸

Even bracketing empirical questions about the source of the day’s tragedy, March 28 invited a heightened level of disdain against black citizens by the white government and press of Memphis. Almost immediately, Mayor Henry Loeb converted the city into a police state, calling in 4,000 national guardsmen, closing liquor stores, imposing a curfew and authorizing the “questioning of people on city streets” between 7 pm and 5 am.¹²⁹ Four days later, an opinion piece in *The Commercial Appeal* by journalist Guy Northrop vented confusion, frustration and fear regarding the turmoil. “Objective reporting from the scene of violence is impossible,” he wrote, “because things happen too fast to delve into causes and motivations.”¹³⁰ In the absence of firsthand knowledge of the events, however, Northrop and other journalists in white-owned papers tended to give Memphis’ police force the benefit of the doubt. “Looking back,” he insisted, “one can be thankful that law officers moved as quickly as they did to dam up a flood of wrath that could have spread further.”¹³¹ According to commentators like Northrop, the demonstrators invited chaos by protesting rather than standing as the victims of aggression by overzealous,

¹²⁸ Anonymous, “U.S. to Probe Cop Killing of Memphis Youth: Hold Five Hour Wake to Mourn Death of Boy, 16,” *The Chicago Defender (Daily Edition)*, April 1, 1968, 5, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (494368693). Further information on the investigation into Payne’s death in Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 359-361.

¹²⁹ Anonymous, “Aura of Tension Slowly Subsides; Minister’s Sermons Ask Restraint,” *The Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1968, 1, FBI File #157-1092, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #18.

¹³⁰ Guy Northrop, “As Chaos Rages, Facts Flee the Scene,” *The Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1968, 7, FBI File #157-1092-34, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #18.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

racist law enforcement.

If the reputations of all black Memphians took a hit from the events of March 28, the city's African American clergy endured an especially large share of the blame. A *Press Scimitar* editorial on April 1 accused unspecified "Negro Ministers" of fallaciously emphasizing the "racial" aspects of a labor issue and insisted that they "withdraw their pickets from mainstreet and get ready to cooperate with leaders of both races."¹³²

Implying a causal relationship between the tragedies of March 28 and the political statements of black pastors, the editorial went on to assert, threateningly, that the Memphis ministers risked "arousing angry interference from some white person" if they "continued [protesting] too long."¹³³ Other articles theorized conspiratorially about

collusion between ministers and Black Power groups. An April 1 feature in *The Commercial Appeal* claimed that black ministers "hinted at violence in their pep talks to rallies" and were "under pressure from young militants and black power advocates."¹³⁴

While the report eventually identified youth, rather than the ministers, as instigators of the March 28 riots, its implication that the pastors had invited the turmoil raised Black Power as a boogeyman that would haunt Memphis' black clergy for years.

COGIC, Patterson and Public Relations: Claiming Ideological Space

As Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr. moved from his position as a protester into the leadership of one of Memphis' largest denominations, he faced a public discourse on racial justice that put him between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he had been

¹³² Editorial, "Wise Advice From Church Leaders," *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, April 1, 1968, 6, David Garrow, ed., FBI File #157-1092, *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #18.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Covington, "Negro Leaders Sift through the Rubble for Answers," 25.

integral in offering the resources of his church to Memphis' largest mobilization for black freedom yet, demonstrating his commitment to the pursuit of racial equality. On the other, he stood as a new, untested public figure in a city with press that continued to crucify black clergy politically for their supposed connections to radical activists. Moreover, as detailed in the previous chapter, he worked within a denomination that had flourished since the darkest days of Jim Crow by courting the financial support of its home city's racist economic and political establishment even as it subtly undermined their authority and provided resources to liberal movements. At the dawn of the 1970s, Patterson, Sr. faced a choice: openly embrace the political currents of King-inspired leftist theology and risk losing the favor of a white establishment that feared radicalism, or perpetuate his church's historical public image of moderation.

In the years immediately following his election, the Bishop chose the latter option. Local newspaper reports from 1969, 1970, and 1971 reveal a conscious striving on Patterson, Sr.'s part to distance his church from the so-called radical activists frequently lambasted by members of the white press. In a 1969 *Press Scimitar* article entitled "Negro Bishop Cool to Black Power," Patterson played the paper's own game against it, criticizing the tactics of unnamed Black Power advocates in the city on religious grounds and thereby recasting himself as a moderate. "It is the position of the Church to oppose violence," he stated in a closed session at the COGIC convocation, "and I think that the emphasis on raised fists, long haircuts, African garb tends to obscure the moral aims of these worthy causes."¹³⁵ Patterson's comments chased away any lingering associations between COGIC and the carnage of the 1968 strike in which they

¹³⁵ "Negro Bishop Cool to Black Power," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, November 7, 1969, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

had so publicly participated. They also adhered the church to a vision of middle-class respectability and created space for COGIC to establish its own discourse on racial justice amidst the era's crowded activist scene.

Indeed, beyond simply repudiating Black Power, Patterson, Sr.'s comments carved out a new public image for COGIC that fused the church's recent activist history with its historical commitment to evangelization and sanctified living. In another *Press Scimitar* article one year later, Patterson Sr. went further to assert that COGIC's religious work in the Memphis community constituted a truer vision of Black Power than that offered by militant groups like Black Organizing Project. "Black Power means more than a clenched fist, knotted-up hair and a shaking body," the article quoted him as saying in his address at the church's annual convocation. Citing COGIC's work providing food and clothing for Memphis' poor, he insisted that the "Black Power boys" needed to "get right with God," and only then could "help somebody."¹³⁶ By framing his denomination's long-term commitment to preaching and community aid in the re-appropriated terminology of Black Power, Patterson asserted a new political significance for the church even as he reaffirmed its longstanding suspicion of so-called "radicalism." In his careful hands, evangelization itself became a project of black liberation while allowing COGIC kept its non-threatening image with the white press untarnished.

This public image allowed COGIC to fall back into its positive relationship with Memphis city government with remarkable speed after the strike. In an open letter to church members published at the start of the denomination's 1970 Convocation Yearbook, the notoriously racist Mayor Henry Loeb even extolled the church's value to

¹³⁶ Charles Rodgers, "Black Militancy Hit By Bishop," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, November 9, 1970, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

Memphis. “We are proud that your convocation is meeting in our city,” he insisted, going to note that COGIC churches did an “outstanding job” in fulfilling the modern need for “God’s guidance.”¹³⁷ Nowhere did Loeb hint at the fact that this guidance, as it had manifested itself over the previous years, had inspired a whole generation of COGIC leaders to partake in mass nonviolent protest against the mayor’s own administration. Through the lenses of a thousand TV cameras posed on the March 18 riot, the Church of God in Christ could have found itself forever blamed for the violence of the Sanitation Strike. Instead, within just two years it had won back enough prestige to elicit enthusiastic letters of support from powerful white conservatives.

With other city leaders, support of COGIC went beyond words to involve substantial financial and material gifts. In one of the stranger moments in COGIC history, millionaire real-estate mogul Robert G. Snowden and his sister Mary Todd donated the downtown Chisca Plaza hotel to Patterson, Sr. at no cost to the church in February 1972.¹³⁸ Press releases associated with the donation carry complimentary statements that make Loeb’s pale by comparison. “The reason we picked this particular minister is because we felt that [he and his] Church have done so much for Memphis,” Thomas H. Todd, husband of Mary and longtime city councilman, declared; “[COGIC] has brought God-loving, peaceful people to the city of Memphis.”¹³⁹ When viewed in tandem with the

¹³⁷ *The Sixty-Third Annual Holy Convocation: “Christ the Universal Need”* [Convocation Yearbook] (Memphis, Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1970), 3, J.O. Patterson, Sr. Collection, 97/7/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹³⁸ Samuel M. Crouch, interview with David Tucker and Odie Tolbert, *Oral History Research Project: The Black Clergy*, Memphis, April 12, 1972, 13, Memphis State University oral history research project, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri. Bishop Crouch, who was present in the meeting between J.O. Patterson, Sr. and the Snowdens, claims that the decision occurred, “with no strings attached, [in] less than four minutes time” after the Snowdens heard from Patterson about “the type of work [COGIC] was doing.” No other surviving records give clearer insight into possible motivations for the Snowden’s donation.

¹³⁹ “Church Accepts Chisca Plaza Hotel,” *The Commercial Appeal*, February 5, 1972, Folder 2, Articles,

public skewering Memphis black ministers had received in a group just four years earlier during the Strike, Snowden's words prove the efficacy of Patterson, Sr.'s self-distancing from the rhetoric of Black Power. Indeed, Patterson, Sr. continued to embrace an image of respectability in his own statements to the press surrounding the Chisca donation: "I'm not sure why Mr. Snowden and Mrs. Todd chose our Church for this gift," he remarked to the *Press Scimitar* in 1972, "but I know they were not rewarding us for mugging, raping and stealing. The Saints don't do that."¹⁴⁰

Of course, as often happens, an economic incentive undergirded the kind words of Loeb and Snowden as well. By the mid 1970s, COGIC's annual November convocations pulled a quantity of money into Memphis that made the church impossible to ignore. A 1976 feature in *The Commercial Appeal* by Lynn Norment claimed that the entire Memphis economy spiked when the Saints came to town.¹⁴¹ Throughout her article, a variety of business owners openly expressed their thankfulness for the hundreds of new COGIC customers who came from all across the United States to spend money in the second half of November. "The peak Saturday ranks as one of our busiest days other than Christmastime," explained Jerry Caldwell of King Furs, echoed in similar words by fellow executives at Goldsmith's Department Store, Madison Cadillac, Morrison's Cafeteria and even the local Burger King.¹⁴² Politics aside, COGIC's sheer size and buying power as one of Memphis' largest black institutions demanded more and more respect from the city's business owners and government throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁴⁰ "Chisca Plaza is Presented," *Press Scimitar*, February 4, 1972, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁴¹ Lynn Norment, "Convention Means Cash for City," *The Commercial Appeal*, November 16, 1976, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

Even this economic power, however, had come about to some degree from Patterson, Sr.'s conscious regulation of COGIC's public image. In one of his first acts as Bishop, the pastor had urged COGIC members to support a systematic census of the church's membership. In a 1969 open letter published in the denomination's newsmagazine, *The Whole Truth*, he described the strategic importance of such an action: "If we let [the city] know how much the hotels profit here in Memphis," he explained, "we could make Memphis take its hat off for us."¹⁴³ Speaking frankly about the ongoing racism of Memphis' police force, Patterson, Sr. held up respectability as a goal that benefited congregants personally. "Delegates to [our convocation] don't have any business being harassed by policemen," he explained. "We don't need to be subjected to any kind of embarrassment. The red carpet should be thrown out to us."¹⁴⁴ Attentive to the unique position afforded by his church's large membership, Patterson, Sr. resolved to wield COGIC's buying power as a tool for demanding respect. Just as laity in the 1968 strike had put their numbers to work mobilizing mass downtown boycotts, Patterson, Sr. used the church's size to win longstanding favor and influence within his home city.

In this way, Patterson Sr. and COGIC seamlessly slid from the treacherous waters of 1960s activism into a place of remarkable respectability, stability and power in one of America's most racist cities. Moreover, while the Bishop himself may never have fully embraced theological invocations against injustice in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., he nonetheless demonstrated a continued commitment to fighting structural racism in Memphis by the actions of his administration. As his church gained prestige

¹⁴³ J.O. Patterson, Sr. "Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson Lays Out Vision For Progress Of Church," *The Whole Truth*, July 1969, 6, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

and an ever-larger ecclesiastical constituency, the Bishop used his new institutional power, carefully but firmly, to promote working-class economic empowerment, support black political power and encourage the local activities of national civil rights organizations like the NAACP.

“A Man the Common People Heard Gladly”: Expansion and Empowerment

By the mid 1970s, Patterson, Sr. had led the Church of God in Christ into a period of relative economic prosperity. Much of this resulted from fundraising and tithing within the denomination itself. In a 1984 interview with *The Whole Truth*, the Bishop claimed that COGIC had been hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt at the beginning of his administration.¹⁴⁵ Faced with this bleak reality, Patterson quickly began soliciting funds from his laity. Aside from the aforementioned “Lazarus” sermon at the 1970 convocation, the Bishop also urged his followers to reach into their pockets in a 1969 open letter in *The Whole Truth*. “If we could just have 200,000 folk, members of the Church of God in Christ, that would say ‘yes, I’m going to give my Church \$2.00’” he explained, “in 1969, we would collect \$400,000.”¹⁴⁶ While no internal record survives to show how much money this tactic of small-scale giving actually elicited, the Bishop’s fundraising efforts on the whole went remarkably well.¹⁴⁷ In 1983, A *Tri-State Defender* profile of the church suggested that 1969 had seen COGIC raise the largest income in its history.¹⁴⁸ By 1976, the denomination operated on an annual budget of over one and a half million

¹⁴⁵ Anonymous, “Exclusive Interview of the Whole Truth With Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson,” *The Whole Truth*, September 1984, 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁴⁶ Patterson, Sr., “Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr. Lays Out Vision for Progress of Church,” p. 7.

¹⁴⁷ In the above-mentioned 1984 interview with *The Whole Truth*, Bishop Patterson, Sr. claimed that he had raised the total worth of COGIC from three- to thirty-six million dollars between 1968 and 1984.

¹⁴⁸ “COGIC Celebrates Its 75th Diamond Jubilee,” *Tri-State Defender*, 11/13/82, 3, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

dollars.¹⁴⁹

These new funds, alongside the gift of Chisca Plaza in 1972, put the denomination in the position to expand both its physical eminence in Memphis and its presence in the city's black community. From the beginning, Patterson, Sr. also conceptualized this position as an opportunity to help improve the lives of his church's poorest members. By 1972, the Bishop had established the Charles Harrison Mason Memorial Scholarship Fund and Presiding Bishop's Benefit Fund, both of which gave COGIC students the opportunity to attend college.¹⁵⁰ He also created the Church of God in Christ Hospital Plan, providing members with an in-house health insurance alternative to the city's racist medical establishment.¹⁵¹ Finally, in collaboration with fellow COME veteran Bishop W.L. Porter, Patterson, Sr. led a series of initiatives in 1976 that used the church's bulk buying power to make the hallmarks of suburban life available to its largely working-class followers. These initiatives included the establishment of autonomous credit union intended to lower interest rates on houses and the "fleet buying" of automobiles at reduced price using the COGIC headquarters as a purchasing agent.¹⁵² On one hand, these programs used COGIC's size and money to move members toward a narrow, capitalistic vision of success. On another, Patterson, Sr.'s initiatives provided

¹⁴⁹ "Church Sets 1976 Budget," *The Commercial Appeal*, November 13, 1975, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁵⁰ "COGIC Celebrates Its 75th Diamond Jubilee"; *A Man the Common People Heard Gladly* (Memphis: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1989), 2, J.O. Patterson, Sr. Collection, 97/7/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri. Patterson funded this effort largely through the Presiding Bishop's Benefit Dinner, a mainstay event of convocations throughout the 1970s and 1980s that offered \$100/plate dinners to wealthier church members and used the funds to back college education initiatives for youth. cf. "79th Holy Convocation Announced," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. XVIII (sic) No. IV (September 1986), 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁵¹ "COGIC Celebrates Its 75th Diamond Jubilee," 3.

¹⁵² Ron Harris, "Church Aims at Economic Uplift of Its Members," *Press Scimitar*, November 16, 1976, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

unprecedented access to resources for the education and health care of poor black people in a city whose public institutions continued to exhibit tremendous racial discrimination.

Patterson only strengthened these resources through his use of the Chisca Hotel property, which he quickly put to work as the base for a series of ambitious projects intended to transform Memphis' downtown. First, COGIC opened a night school on the Chisca property in 1972 that provided both religious instruction and high school courses leading to the equivalent of a GED.¹⁵³ While Pentecostals preparing for the ministry made up a substantial part of the Chisca school's student body, it remained open to anyone with "a real thirst for knowledge and the Word of God." The school combined the church's evangelizing mission with its dedication to caring for its members' worldly needs, providing curious students with both a path to Christ and a means for potential employment.

By 1976, however, Patterson's goals for the property had expanded significantly beyond education alone. After receiving a third term as Presiding Bishop at the Church's annual Convocation, the pastor announced boldly that his "No.1 priority" between 1976 and 1980 would consist of a massive remodeling that turned the Chisca into a new, state-of-the-art COGIC Headquarters, complete with a 15,000-seat convention center, wax museum, performing arts amphitheater, offices, publishing house and 2,000-car garage.¹⁵⁴ For Patterson, Sr. the proposed expansions had unmistakable religious consequences: two years later, he told a *Press Scimitar* reporter that the Saints Center, as the proposed project soon became known, would become "a launching pad by means of which the

¹⁵³ "Church of God in Christ to Open School Monday," *The Commercial Appeal*, February 3, 1972, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁵⁴ "Bishop Cites Church's No. 1 Goal," *The Commercial Appeal*, November 19, 1972, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

Church of God in Christ will attack the world of sin.”¹⁵⁵ On a more earthly level, however, the project put a significant downtown development in Memphis visibly and autonomously into the hands of a predominantly black organization.

By 1980, Patterson, Sr.’s proposed project had grown to cover eight square blocks at a cost of over 25 million dollars.¹⁵⁶ This scope turned the Saints Center into a systematic transformation of Memphis’ downtown space, above and beyond the role it played within the denomination. Patterson, Sr.’s ambition did not go unnoticed by Memphis’ white press. A *Press Scimitar* article in November 1978 referred to the development as a “Downtown Asset”: “[The Saints Center will be] an important part of the long-range program for the rehabilitation of Downtown,” the paper reported, going on to assert that Patterson, Sr.’s work would “change what has been called a blighted area into a tourist attraction.”¹⁵⁷ The *Press Scimitar* gave Patterson, Sr.’s idea a civic purpose that went beyond its religious one: in beautifying the area surrounding Chisca Plaza, COGIC would convert a region most readily associated with criminality into a testament to Christian virtue and respectability. Patterson, Sr. accepted this charge readily and imbued it with theological weight. “The very fact that [the Center] is down there will have religious overtones,” he told *The Commercial Appeal* ten days before the 1976 convocation. “[It] will change the entire pattern of thinking of people downtown.”¹⁵⁸

As he had in the late 1960s, Patterson, Sr. fused the language of Christian

¹⁵⁵ Article Title Unknown, *Press Scimitar*, November 13, 1978, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁵⁶ “Plan for Saints Center Still Underway,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 8, 1980, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ “Church Complex is Announced for Downtown,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 7, 1976, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

salvation with notions of respectability to carve out his own rhetoric of racial justice in support of the Saint's Center. With its focus on ecclesiastical spaces like amphitheaters and auditoriums, the project did not provide housing, food or medicine directly to Memphis' poor. It did, however, discursively transform the role black people played in exerting ownership over Memphis' urban space. While the original land of the Chisca Hotel arose from Snowden's donation, all funds for the proposed project afterward came from within the church, making it an enormous operation funded more or less wholly by African Americans, and working-class African Americans at that.¹⁵⁹ Patterson, Sr. told *The Commercial Appeal* that he had regularly traveled "100,000 miles" to show fundraising slides to ordinary congregants across the South and suggested that the church had made all purchases with cash donations.¹⁶⁰ Land acquisition for the project also happened through Supreme Mortgage and Realty, a Memphis black-owned company.¹⁶¹ The political significance of COGIC's autonomy and local influence as an African-American church in initiating the project did not escape national civil rights leaders. After the project's announcement in 1976, NAACP President Benjamin Hooks declared that the Saints Center "shows the vital part that organized black groups can play in the city,

¹⁵⁹ To be fair, at least part of this grassroots fundraising strategy arose from the demands of COGIC internal politics, since many members of the Executive Board did not fully support Patterson's use of funds for the Saint's Center. Patterson later claimed in an interview with COGIC's newspaper *The Whole Truth*, for example, that the Board had authorized him to utilize the influence of his office to fund raise for the Saint's Center but forbid him from using money from the general treasury, meaning that he had to appeal to "individuals who loved the Lord" to raise new money for his idea. "Exclusive Interview of The Whole Truth with Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr." *The Whole Truth* Vol. XVII No. IX (September 1984) 4, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁶⁰ "Realty by 1980 Predicted for Saint's Center," *The Commercial Appeal*, November 16, 1977, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri; Cecelia Payne Wright, "Dream of Saints Center Expected to Come True," *Press Scimitar*, November 7, 1980, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁶¹ Cecelia Payne Wright, "Dream of Saints Center Expected to Come True," 1.

the state and the nation.”¹⁶²

By 1987, the Saints Center had stalled in controversy and infighting. Under allegations of funding mismanagement and broader financial strains on the church, Patterson, Sr. found himself unable to complete his proposed developments.¹⁶³ At his death in 1989, the Bishop had expanded his plan to include a COGIC-sponsored college called All Saints University, but building plans had indefinitely delayed.¹⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the project and its surrounding press coverage had brought COGIC all the more attention and prestige within the city of Memphis. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the church would use this prestige and influence to promote black candidates for local office and further the work of civil rights organizations like the NAACP.

J.O. Patterson, Jr. and the Campaign for a Black Mayor of Memphis

In a COGIC-commissioned, 1970 biography of J.O. Patterson, Sr, Mother Frances Burnett Kelley described the Bishop as a man without attachment to any one particular political party. “Bishop Patterson is active in politics to the degree that he exercises his voting rights,” she explained, “The responsibility [for good government] rests upon qualified voters...and the Bishop encourages the support of good government.”¹⁶⁵ Indeed,

¹⁶² “Church to Raise Funds for Strapped NAACP,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 12, 1976, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁶³ Penni Crabtree, “Funding Controversy Strains Church Coffers: Power Struggle Pits Assembly, Board,” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 8, 1987, A18-A19, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁶⁴ *A Man the Common People Heard Gladly: The Most Reverend James Oglethorpe Patterson, Sr. Presiding Bishop and Chief Apostle, Church of God in Christ* (Memphis: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1989), J.O. Patterson, Sr. Collection, 97/8/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁶⁵ Frances Burnett Kelley, *Here I Am, Send Me: The Dramatic Story of Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Challenging and Bold Leader of the Church of God in Christ* (Memphis: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1970) 35.

in accordance with his image of public moderation, Bishop Patterson rarely promoted explicit political platforms from the pulpit or endorsed candidates. As the 1970s moved on, however, and COGIC gained influence in Memphis, the Presiding Bishop would selectively put COGIC's numbers to work for the election of black candidates to local office. The 1982 mayoral campaign of J.O. Patterson, Jr., a lawyer and city councilman who happened to be the Presiding Bishop's son, provides one such example.

J.O. Patterson, Jr. had held a spot on the Memphis City Council during the strike of 1968. At the time, he stood as one of only three black members on the governing body and often spoke out powerfully in favor of the strikers' rights.¹⁶⁶ When a settlement in favor of their demands finally emerged from the chaos in April 1968, he even publicly criticized the city government for its failure to reach an agreement earlier.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, he also remained active in his capacity as a private citizen in the strike support efforts of his church and city. In mid-February, he spoke at a rally at the United Auto Workers Hall in front of 1,300 workers.¹⁶⁸ After King's assassination, he accompanied the Baptist minister's body to the airport alongside several local civil rights leaders.¹⁶⁹ In many ways, he occupied a rare position both inside and outside the Memphis status quo that allowed him to confront the government through protest during the strike while continuing to work toward gradual change from his chair on city council. As a practicing COGIC member and, after 1980, an ordained clergyman within the denomination, he also epitomized the figure of the socially engaged Pentecostal believer who reconciled

¹⁶⁶ Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 63-64.

¹⁶⁷ "Council Greets Agreement with Elation, Optimism," *The Commercial Appeal*, April 17, 1968, FBI File #157-1092-68, David Garrow, ed., *Centers of the Southern Struggle: FBI Files on Montgomery, Albany, St. Augustine, Selma and Memphis* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), Reel #18.

¹⁶⁸ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 160-161.

¹⁶⁹ Beifuss, *At The River We Stand*, 326.

sanctified theology with a strong commitment to civic action.¹⁷⁰

Over the course of the 1970s, Patterson, Jr. continued to hold various positions in local government, remaining active with City Council and also winning a seat in the Tennessee state legislature.¹⁷¹ In 1982, after Mayor Wyeth Chandler unexpectedly resigned from his position mid-term, he found himself elevated to the position of interim mayor.¹⁷² Within a few weeks, the city ordered a special election that pitted Patterson, Jr. against three white candidates--County Clerk Dick Hackett, Attorney General Mike Cody and City Council member Pat Vander Schaaf--for the last year of Chandler's term.¹⁷³

Almost immediately, Patterson, Jr. began campaigning intensely for the support of the city's black citizens. Through door-to-door campaigns, radio ads and speeches at union meetings in primarily African-American neighborhoods, he won a plurality of the total vote in the first primary, eliciting a runoff.¹⁷⁴ In this second round--which pitched Patterson, Jr. against white Dick Hackett--black voter mobilization became particularly important. As political scientist Sharon D. Wright notes, Patterson, Jr. stood to lose from the majority requirement of a runoff election: while the primary had split the white vote between three candidates, the runoff would unite the over sixty percent white voting bloc against Patterson, Jr. unless he could either gain crossover support in a racially polarized election or bring more black people to the polls.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, the prominent black Congressional Representative and machine boss Harold Ford, Sr. had refused to give

¹⁷⁰ "Attorney J.O. Patterson Jr. Memphis' First Black Mayor," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. XV No. X, 2, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁷¹ Charlie Cherokee, "Charlie Cherokee Says [Column]," *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 24, 1972, 5, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (494412234).

¹⁷² Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 103.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

Patterson, Jr. an endorsement during the second round.¹⁷⁶ Both of these facts forced the City Council member to look toward nontraditional means in gaining the votes needed to become Memphis' first black mayor.

Patterson, Jr.'s father and the Church of God in Christ supplied one such means. At the 1982 Convocation, Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr. told the assembled members of his church to go out and vote, using the language of religious obligation. "Cooperate with God, think less about material wealth and lend a hand to [Patterson Jr.'s] campaign," he demanded. "Both [Patterson and Dick Hackett] are qualified, [but] the conscience of Memphis should honor a black man with the office of mayor."¹⁷⁷ The Bishop's words, in typical form, display a political cautiousness that echoes his public relations strategies surrounding Black Power and the Saints Center. Nevertheless, they come closest of almost any Convocation speech in the era to utilizing theology in a direct invocation for racial justice. Patterson Jr. eventually lost the runoff by a narrow margin of just under ten percent.¹⁷⁸ Even so, COGIC support of his campaign demonstrates both the security and influence the church had won from a decade of careful moderation and its willingness to embrace openly political rhetoric when needed.

COGIC and National Civil Rights Organizations

In addition to its involvement in local politics, the Church of God in Christ maintained strong ties throughout the 1970s and 1980s to civil rights groups like the NAACP and Urban League. Indeed, Patterson, Sr. already held a membership in the local

¹⁷⁶ Sharon D. Wright, "The Impact of Harold E. Ford, Sr.'s Endorsement on Memphis Mayoral Elections, 1975-1991," *The National Political Science Review*, Vol. 7 (1999): 214.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Wright, *Race, Power and Political Emergence*, 105.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

chapters of both organizations in 1968 and even sat on the latter's Board of Directors during the early 1970s.¹⁷⁹ This position of leadership demonstrates the degree to which COGIC clergy had sought and attained acceptance within the city's formally educated, professional black community. Particularly given the long and tumultuous history of class divisions between Pentecostal churches and the black professionals who made up the Niagara Movement and early NAACP membership, Patterson, Sr.'s associations with such groups speaks to the church's social and economic advancement.

As the NAACP underwent leadership transitions and financial hardship in the late 1970s, COGIC stepped further into a proactively supportive role of the organization. In 1976, Roy Wilkins--the national leader who had participated in the 1968 strike--retired from his position, passing the NAACP presidency on to Memphis lawyer and minister Benjamin Hooks.¹⁸⁰ Hooks came to power during a period in which the NAACP faced both material hardship and popular criticism. In the words of one contemporaneous historian, he had to deal with rumors, particularly from black youth, that "the Association [was] too conservative...and outdated in its approach to handling current problems."¹⁸¹ Moreover, the organization had gone into financial trouble and had difficulty staying afloat.¹⁸² Nevertheless, it soon found an ally in the several million members of COGIC.

At the Convocation in 1976, Patterson, Sr. promoted and passed a resolution that pledged the collective support and membership of the church's entire laity to the

¹⁷⁹ Kelley, *Here I Am, Send Me*, 35-36. Patterson, Sr. also gave a lifetime achievement award to NAACP President Roy Wilkins at COGIC's 1975 Convocation, cf. Illustration, *The Whole Truth* Vol. VIII No. XI (November 1975), 6, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁸⁰ Yvonne Ryan, "Leading from the Back: Roy Wilkins' Leadership of the NAACP" in *Long Is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the NAACP*, Kevern Verney and Lee Sartain, ed. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 58.

¹⁸¹ Minnie Finch, *The NAACP: Its Fight For Justice* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1981) 250.

¹⁸² "Church to Raise Funds for Strapped NAACP," 1.

Association. In language similar to his later endorsement of Patterson, Jr.'s ticket, he insisted that all COGIC believers should “thoroughly, completely, devotedly and religiously support the programs, goals and aspirations of the NAACP and its newly selected executive.”¹⁸³ The Bishop remained upfront about the financial aspects of the decision. “The memberships are not as important as other finances,” he explained; “That only amounts to X number of dollars, but we can contribute any amount of money we want to.”¹⁸⁴ As much as it pledged monetary support, however, the resolution also symbolically and publically allied the Church of God in Christ with the moderate, non-violent wing of the civil rights movement. Just as Patterson, Sr.'s public statements against Black Power in the early 1970s had rejected one inheritor of the struggles of 1968, his actions at the 1976 convocation embraced another. The COGIC hierarchy refused to radicalize, but nonetheless remained devoted to the ongoing fight for racial justice through the legal means of lobbying, political positioning and the social advancement of black people through the acquisition and transformation of urban property.

In this way, COGIC emerged by the mid-1970s as a remarkably stable black organization in the City of Memphis and an advocate for the social promotion of African Americans via middle-of-the-road, assimilationist means. From his position as Presiding Bishop, J.O. Patterson, Sr. utilized moderate rhetoric to win local influence and fight for gradual change from within the increasingly integrated Memphis status quo. As the leader of a remarkably diverse and growing denomination, however, Patterson, Sr.'s experience and influence represented only one of many legacies of 1968. Leaving the

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Presiding Bishop temporarily in his Memphis board room and zooming outward from COGIC's Headquarters in Tennessee, the following two chapters look at these legacies as they manifest themselves in the culture and theology of the Church of God in Christ nationally. Shifting attention to a wider range of believers as they grappled with the changing social contexts and enduring racism of American culture in the 1970s and 1980s, these chapters ask the questions: What new experiences of faith emerged among COGIC laity, clergy and scholars under the Patterson Bishopric? How did the activist generation of Pentecostals bring their politics to bear on the culture of their conservative church? And what impact might the two decades after King's last speech in Mason Temple have on the diverse ways of practicing Sanctified Christianity today?

Chapter Three: Dreaming of a Church Without Rebellion

The Saints and Cultural Politics, 1968-1989

Seven years into his tenure as COGIC's Presiding Bishop, J.O. Patterson, Sr. felt the need to set his house in order. At the church's 68th Annual Convocation on November 15th, 1975, he delivered a fiery sermon aimed not at the vices of the secular world but at certain unsettling practices among the women of his own denomination. He began by reading from the rules that Mother Lizzie Robinson, a close female friend of COGIC founder C.H. Mason, Sr., had established for the church's Women's Department in 1926. As he ticked through them one by one, the regulations set forth a submissive, sexually conservative, and at times near-ascetic model for femininity. COGIC women could not wear short skirts, fancy hats with feathers or immodest apparel of any sort; they also could not remarry after a husband's death and had to have older Church Mothers with them at all times when evangelizing in the field.¹⁸⁵ Going forward, Patterson explained, he hoped to return to this "Old Time" model for COGIC practice. "[I] dream of a Church without rebellion," he explained. "The Devil wants the Church of God in Christ, he wants it bad...[and he] would like to infiltrate the Church with rebellious people."¹⁸⁶

Subsequent articles in the church's denominational newsmagazine *The Whole Truth* describe the words as "quite a blow" to many devout COGIC women in the audience, whose furs, feathers and flowered hats spoke to changes in the church's gender

¹⁸⁵ Anonymous, "Presiding Bishop Sets Landmark for 30,000 Delegates," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. VIII No. XI November 1975, 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

conventions since the time of Mother Robinson.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, like much of the United States in the wake of the turbulent previous decade, the Church of God in Christ in the 1970s faced a whole host of new battles regarding cultural norms, fought in the bedroom, classroom and home. What did it mean to be a sanctified woman in a country that had legalized abortion and sent a gender-based Equal Rights Amendment to the state legislatures for ratification, both within the first half of the 1970s? How did COGIC's longstanding prohibition on same-sex intercourse square with increasingly visible movements for LGBT equality, from the 1969 Stonewall Riots to the Gay Liberation Front? And how could Pentecostal parents send their children to schools that not only taught Evolution in place of the Biblical creation story but had also removed mandatory prayers from their morning agendas?

Patterson, Sr.'s 1975 reprimand to the convention's more liberally-dressed women typifies a larger denominational strategy of retreating from these questions to the traditional religious values of COGIC's early history. For the Bishop, the changing conduct of his denomination's women did not represent a legitimate challenge to the established church order. To the contrary, such behavior stood as mere rabble-rousing, against which church members should fight as they strive to maintain the principles of "Old Time Holiness."¹⁸⁸ Throughout the decade and into the 1980s, COGIC utilized conservative cultural principles--from sexual chastity to traditional gender roles and a Biblical understanding of human history--to craft its own internal world apart, looking toward a stringent interpretation of the Bible for solutions to the contemporary questions posed by secularism, women's movements and changing notions of sexual morality.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 2.

Far from embodying thoughtless backwardness, however, these alternative cultural discourses represented strategies for black survival in a country for which both the home and classroom remained sites for the perpetuation of structural, race-based inequality. Even in their most apparently condemnatory moments, COGIC pastors always had more than just moral degeneration to worry about. As urban schools remained *de facto* segregated and underfunded, COGIC's push to establish alternative venues for Christian education took on a significance that went beyond the battle against secularism. As working-class, black single-parent families struggled to put children through school, COGIC's emphasis on traditional marital values acquired shades of meaning that connected it to the Civil-Rights-era discourses about the nuclear family as a tool for social mobilization. In this way, even the most conservative cultural politics advocated by COGIC members in the 1970s embodied, in their own way, the legacies of the church's participation in protests for racial equality. While the strict culture of Old Time Holiness maintained by Patterson, Sr. and others silenced Pentecostals whose sexuality, gender expression or theological beliefs did not fit into the church's sanctified norms, it nonetheless represented an attempt to improve the lives of congregants facing racial oppression.

This chapter utilizes articles, letters to the editor, and editorials in COGIC's *The Whole Truth* magazine to reconstruct this cultural world apart, examining the various ways in which COGIC pastors and congregants used discourses of sanctified living to combat racism at home, in schools and in the public sphere. First, it examines controversies regarding Women's Liberation within the church, illuminating the tactics by which COGIC women in the 1970s and 1980s carved out space to lead in the struggle

against racism while tolerating and sometimes even embracing denominational policy that relegated them to submissive roles. Then, it examines COGIC's teachings on the importance of the nuclear family, with a focus on the ideological links between these conversations and similar, earlier arguments endorsed by 1960s activists in the fight against racial inequality. Finally, it looks at COGIC's late-1970s campaigns to fund Pentecostal schools, considering the ways in which the church's advocacy of Christianity in the classroom responded not only to the growing secularism of American life but also to ongoing inequalities in public education. While COGIC's commitment to creating and maintaining a culturally-isolated Christian world shared many exterior features with parallel efforts by the nascent, mostly-white Religious Right, this chapter will argue that it ultimately grew from different seeds; as much as the Church of God in Christ genuinely feared for America's moral degeneration during the 1970s and 1980s, its cultural concerns always remained simultaneously more worldly, grounded in a commitment to black survival in a white-racist society and influenced by discourses from the 1960s.

“We Love To Work For The Master”¹⁸⁹: COGIC Women, Activism and Women's Liberation in the 1970s

In April 1969, Mother M. McGregor Jones from New Orleans, Louisiana published a column in *The Whole Truth* entitled “The Woman's Viewpoint.”¹⁸⁹ Describing the extent of COGIC women's commitment to the affairs of the church, she used vivid language: “If we [women] were to be told that our services in the Church were no longer needed,” she claimed, “we would begin a fast that would only terminate in

¹⁸⁹ Jones, M. McGregor, “The Woman's Viewpoint,” *The Whole Truth*, April 1969, 5, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

death or re-employment.”¹⁹⁰ Despite the depth of this devotion to the church, Jones continued, women often received paltry recognition: “Many times,” she wrote, “our only reward is an uppercut or rebuff by those who misjudge our intentions. But does that stop a true leader and a consecrated worker? NEVER.”¹⁹¹ Finally, Jones’ article concluded with an unexpected turn. After extolling the critical contributions females had made to the vitality and works of her church, she insisted that women ought nonetheless rejoice in their subordination to men. “We are happy,” she explained, “to be led, protected and guided by the head that God gave us.”¹⁹²

Jones’ article speaks to a larger historical tradition within COGIC, where women long carried the burdens and responsibilities of leadership while leaving its titles and more public spoils to their male counterparts. As mentioned in previous chapters, women played an enormous role in organizing and distributing food to congregants during the Great Depression and led the way as picketers during the economic boycott that incapacitated Memphis at the end of the 1968 strike. In the field of education, COGIC women always played leadership roles as religious and secular instructors, from the “Bible Bands” of the early twentieth-century to institutions like Saint’s Industrial School, a Pentecostal Junior college founded in 1918 in Lexington, Mississippi.¹⁹³ Historian Anthea Butler, in her study *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, argues further that the early connections COGIC women like educator and Saints-Industrial President Dr. Arenia Mallory forged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Council of Negro Women paved the way for the church’s more

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹² Ibid., 5

¹⁹³ Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 34-40, 99-109.

extensive involvement with such civic groups in later days.¹⁹⁴ Nonetheless, despite their vital contributions to COGIC's political and religious history, many COGIC women remained publically committed during the 1970s to a model of traditional womanhood that emphasized deference to men. Even in 1969, at the height of the sexual revolution and a full six years after the release of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, COGIC women like Mother McGregor Jones often rejected the ubiquitous notions of feminine independence and empowerment circulating in American culture at the time.

For some, this rejection arose from a sense that much secular feminism failed to speak to the situation of COGIC women, whose black skin, charismatic religious beliefs and lower income level caused them to experience gender discrimination in a fundamentally different manner from suburban, white housewives. In a 1975 *Whole Truth* editorial entitled "A Saint's Answer to Women's Lib," a COGIC woman named E.M. Beverly articulated this position. "I am a housewife..." she proclaimed, "I have no college degree and am not a neurotic, I am not frustrated and do not take tranquilizers."¹⁹⁵ Beverly continued to explain that, in a lifetime of hardship, God had given her the encouragement to go on, even when options like a career remained beyond her grasp: "I have been ill, have had sick children, lost loved ones and stood by helpless as they pass into the land beyond, but...[God's] unfailing grace sustained me in time of trials." In reaction to secular feminist discourses that insisted women could only realize their potential through an upper-middle class professional existence, Beverly asserted her humanity and womanhood as a devout black Pentecostal without formal education. "I am

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 117-119.

¹⁹⁵ E.M. Beverly, "A Saint's Answer to Women's Lib: Price Above Rubies," *The Whole Truth*, March 1975, 3, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

perfectly content without many things I am told are necessary for me to lead a full life...” she insisted, “So what if I don’t have a college degree? The greatest University in the world is not enclosed by four walls.”¹⁹⁶ Without explicitly mentioning a husband, Beverly’s article used God-talk to rehabilitate housewifery as a legitimate position for COGIC women whose circumstances kept them from other options, even in the face of influential arguments that had cast traditional marriage as a repressive institution.

For other Saints, the tradition of women’s informal leadership in COGIC proved strong enough to demand no alteration, even in the face of a broader religious world in which other denominations had given women formal leadership positions as clergy. Despite the fact that women had preached at Azusa and several other early Pentecostal gatherings, the Church of God in Christ never extended the office of Pastor to its women.¹⁹⁷ By the end of the 1970s, this tradition of exclusively ordaining men came up for debate within the church. In 1983, Elder Jerome Chambers wrote about the controversy in a guest editorial for *The Whole Truth*, entitled “To Speak or Not To Speak: The Plight of Women in the Ministry.”¹⁹⁸ Looking at liberal Protestant communions like United Methodism and Pentecostal bodies like the Fire Baptized Churches, he noted that many Christian denominations had already been ordaining women for fifteen years.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, like Mother McGregor Jones, Elder Chambers recognized the historically vital role that women had played within the Church of God in Christ. “My concern...” he asserted, “is to give credibility to the effort made by the female counterparts to [COGIC

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹⁷ Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 32-33.

¹⁹⁸ Jerome Chambers, “To Speak or Not To Speak: The Plight of Women in the Ministry,” *The Whole Truth*, September 1983, 2, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 2.

clergy]...We must not overlook the sincerity, fervor and dedication that we have come to love and appreciate and depend on.”²⁰⁰

When it came to bestowing the title of Bishop or Elder on these Church Mothers, however, Chambers recognized that such titles remained fraught, even for some of the women themselves. He asserted, for example, that it would be “absurd” to suggest that COGIC pioneers like Mother Lizzie Robinson and the current leaders of the COGIC’s thriving Women’s Department, did not deserve the title of Bishop; nevertheless, he claimed that such past and present women would not have wanted such honorifics or titles.²⁰¹ At least in Chambers’ view, Robinson and many other older COGIC Mothers took the work of educating, homemaking and community organizing as their own rewards, even divorced of institutional recognition in the form of ordination. Rather than commend their efforts, he believed that more formal leadership positions would have undercut the spaces that COGIC women had long carved out for themselves.

Regardless of the reason, COGIC’s endorsement of traditional gender roles during the 1970s and 1980s did not stop women from involving themselves, vehemently, in the political affairs of the church. Indeed, the Women’s Department, an organization that had developed out of a partnership between C.H. Mason and Lizzie Robinson in the early twentieth century, continued to thrive in the 1970s.²⁰² Throughout that decade and the next, under the leadership of a new supervisor names Mother Mattie McGlothen, it expanded to its largest historical size and hosted annual conventions in rotating cities

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰² Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 40-43.

around the U.S.²⁰³ In the early 1970s, these conventions served as sites for indoctrinating participants in traditional concepts of womanhood. A 1973 *Whole Truth* reporter remarked that women at that year's convention displayed a brand of "Christian behavior" rare in the era's "changing, modern and complex world," while a panel entitled "Christian Women In Light of Today's Freedoms" advocated chastity and subservience.²⁰⁴ Even as they reinforced COGIC's culture of strict, sanctified femininity, however, the Women's Department Convention allowed women a venue to exert increasing amounts of leadership and influence, both in issues related to the church and in the political realm beyond it.

Indeed, while J.O. Patterson, Sr. and other male Bishops in Memphis remained cautious in their statements against economic injustice through the 1970s, the Women's Department rarely hesitated to proactively agitate against poverty at their conventions. In contrast to 1973's focus on gendered behavior, the 1975 convention featured an openly civic theme: christened "Better Homes, Better Schools, Better Community, Better World," it encouraged women to affect positive change in society at large by wielding the power of their domestic roles.²⁰⁵ Meanwhile, COGIC women's programs like Sewing Circles, in which volunteers hand-sewed clothing for impoverished congregants using the Biblical example of the early Christian woman Dorcas for inspiration, put such ideals in

²⁰³ Fran Miller, "A Women's Convention Like No Other!" *The Whole Truth*, Vol. XX No. VI, June 1987, 1, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁰⁴ Mrs. C. Range, "International Women's Convention Held in Cleveland, Ohio," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. VII, July 1973, 1, 2, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁰⁵ Anonymous, "International Women's Convention Celebrates 25 Years," *The Whole Truth* Vol. VIII No. V, May 1975, 1, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

action in communities around the country.²⁰⁶ By 1984, the Convention in Atlanta maintained its focus on the quartet of homes, schools, community and world but had added a subtitle, speaking to the tireless nature of COGIC Women’s labor in both the household and the public square: “Choice, Not Chance, Determines Destiny.”²⁰⁷

Through the rhetoric of COGIC Women’s Conventions, which politicized domesticity and rendered the home as a site of social transformation, sanctified women claimed traditional gender roles as tools for dismantling racial oppression. Indeed, they did not stand alone in their creative re-appropriation of these norms. As historian Françoise Hamlin asserts in her 2012 study *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, African-American women throughout the South frequently utilized their influence within the domestic sphere during the mass civil rights movement to promote activism and support those in need.²⁰⁸ With this tradition--which Hamlin refers to as “activist mothering”--in mind, COGIC women’s enthusiastic embrace of conservative models for femininity gains a genealogy entirely independent of contemporary white Christian anti-feminists like Phyllis Schlafly. As much as COGIC women’s discourse may have stood, both implicitly and explicitly, in opposition to the secular Women’s Liberation Movement, it also drew from a long tradition of black women who had used mothering as a means toward political empowerment; even as their denomination’s cultural norms confined them to the home, COGIC women politically activated these domestic roles through the civic action

²⁰⁶ Anonymous, “Evangelist Rosie C. Davis,” *The Whole Truth* Vol. VIII No. V, May 1975, 6, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁰⁷ Elder J. Drew Sheard, “Women’s Convention Leaves Impact on Atlanta”, *The Whole Truth*, Volume XVII No. VII, July 1984, 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁰⁸ Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012) 60-63.

of the Women's Department and took the lead their church's struggle against racial inequality.

Moreover, while many COGIC women embraced domesticity and infused it with political power, others found quiet ways to clear space for more diverse models of womanhood within the denomination throughout the 1970s and 1980s. A 1983 issue of *The Whole Truth* carries advertisements for a nascent COGIC Business and Professional Women's Association, suggested that the increasing prosperity of many Pentecostal believers in the era had created a demographic of women who no longer embraced stay-at-home motherhood as a full-time occupation.²⁰⁹ By 1985, women working in the administrative side of the church hierarchy even encouraged higher education and employment for women of the denomination. The Deborah Patterson Mason Scholarship Fund, for example, established that year by COGIC's Executive Director for Scholastic Aid Programs Mrs. Julia Mason Atkins, guaranteed significant financial aid to a COGIC woman pursuing a graduate degree.²¹⁰ Such programs demonstrate the church's eventual receptiveness to career-oriented women, even as many of the principles officially espoused by the hierarchy exalted, encouraged and insisted upon a subservient notion of the female social role.

In this way, even as they constructed and maintained an apparently anti-feminist public discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, COGIC women exerted power over their church and fought for justice within the political world beyond it. At times, this power came

²⁰⁹ "Business and Professional Women's Association" (Advertisement), *The Whole Truth*, May 1983, 2, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²¹⁰ Anonymous, "Announcing Deborah Patterson Scholarship Fund," *The Whole Truth* Vol. XVIII and XVIII, No XII and I, Dec. 1985-Jan 1986, 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

about as women used their influence within domestic positions to strengthen all-female groups like the Women's Convention and buffer lower income black women against secular feminist discourses that ignored or trivialized their situations. In other cases, COGIC women quietly broke from their churches more dogmatic teachings, pursuing opportunities in higher education and eventually winning space for themselves within their otherwise male-dominated denomination. At no point, however, did these women ever submit to silencing, even as their church's culture encouraged them to veer away from the secular Women's Liberation Movement. In their most conservative commitments to Christian family values, the women of the Church of God in Christ in fact gave themselves an alternative ideological frame in which they could consider questions of women's empowerment, civic responsibility and black equality in America while remaining authentic to their beliefs as Pentecostals.

“The Spread of Social Diseases Is at an All Time High”: COGIC and the Politics of the Family

Beyond advocating for traditional gender roles, many preachers within the Church of God in Christ adopted an increasingly fierce rhetoric throughout the 1970s and 1980s in support of preserving the two-parent, heteronormative family unit. Responding to the sentiment that the sexual revolution had irrevocably challenged this traditional structure, clergymen like COGIC Elder David Hall wrote fiery editorials in *The Whole Truth* claiming, among other things, that those who spoke of the “deinstitutionalization of marriage” represented nothing less than “tools of Satan.”²¹¹ On a surface level, this type

²¹¹ Elder D. Hall, “Help For The Family,” *The Whole Truth* Vol. XX No. II, February 1987, 5, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

of discourse drew from mainstream COGIC theology that read same-sex intercourse and adultery as unequivocally sinful; like many of their white Pentecostal and black mainline Protestant peers, the majority of COGIC preachers remained staunch in their doctrinal opposition to homosexuality throughout the twentieth century.²¹² Behind their purely theological condemnations of non-traditional sexual relationships, however, COGIC pastors' concerns with the family represented an attempt to wield the home as a site for attaining economic equality, pulling on strains of thinking with roots in political conversations from the 1960s civil rights movement.

From the early 1970s onward, the Church of God in Christ used its official publications to promote a clear doctrinal stance against homosexual relations. Advocates of this sentiment within the church looked to a variety of different scriptural and theological sources to justify their position. Elder Charles E. Blake, a COGIC pastor based in California and future Presiding Bishop of the denomination, read same-sex attraction as a basic result of humankind's alienation from the divine. "When men are separated from God, they become separated from themselves," he wrote in a 1974 issue of *The Whole Truth*, "and their relationships with one another become perverted."²¹³ Others interpreted homosexual intercourse as a violation of the covenant of marriage, since scriptural sources suggested Christians could only wed members of the opposite sex. "There are two ways to be sexually human," wrote Elder Jerome Chambers in 1983, "(1) is to be a chaste single man or woman, or 2) to be a faithfully-dedicated man or

²¹² With a few very major exceptions, including the understudied Pentecostal Theologian and Howard University Professor James Tinney, who wrote theology openly from a homosexual perspective. He is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

²¹³ Elder C.E. Blake, "Is There Hope for the Homosexual?" *The Whole Truth* Vol. VII No. V, June 1974, 7, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

woman married in a life-long covenant between one man and one woman.”²¹⁴ Regardless of the specific cause, COGIC pastors and lay members often expressed purely theological reservations about the practice of sex and love between two members of the same gender during the 1970s and 1980s.

When it came to the institution of marriage above and beyond mere sex, however, many arguments within the church tended to look beyond Scripture for sociological and economic justification. In his aforementioned editorial for *The Whole Truth* regarding the deinstitutionalization of marriage, for example, Elder David Hall made precious few explicit connections between theology and sexual practice. To the contrary, he grounded his anxiety about crumbling marriages in more broad concern for the political and economic disenfranchisement of black Americans. Rather than homosexuality, Hall identified single-parent households subsisting on welfare as the targets of his critique: “The husband is displaced, and often does not reflect what his progenitor of yesteryear was...” he asserted, referring to families affected by divorce or long-term separation of parents. “The state is the daddy, and eventually becomes the mother through day care.”²¹⁵ As the article went on, Hall couched this argument in increasingly racial terms. “What has the welfare state done to the family,” he wondered, “and to the black family especially?”²¹⁶

In relating the crumbling Christian sacrament of marriage to black poverty, COGIC pastors joined an argument that went back to sociologists like Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the mid 1960s, crafting a discourse of the family with many more

²¹⁴ Elder Jerome Chambers, “What Jesus Says About Homosexuality,” *The Whole Truth* Vol. XVI No. VI (June, 1983), 7-8, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²¹⁵ Hall, “Help For The Family,” 5.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

dimensions than sexual morality alone. Moynihan had ignited the political world with his widely publicized 1965 policy report *The Negro Family: A Cause For Action*.²¹⁷

Researched and written while he worked as Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Johnson administration, Moynihan's document argued for the "breakdown of the black family" as a principle cause for the urban poverty and violence that had crystallized in a series of riots throughout the nation at the time.²¹⁸ In parallel with Hall's later reasoning, the report put an especially large share for this blame on changes in marriage patterns: among other things, it claimed that the so-called "matriarchal" structure of many black families had "seriously retarded the progress of [black people] as a whole" while welfare policies directed at single-family homes had incentivized separation and thereby created a culture of perpetual unemployment and divorce.²¹⁹ While Moynihan never used theological argument, his popular social-scientific study gave the false credence of empiricism to the idea that cultural factors within the home and marriage could significantly impact the possibilities of social advancement for African American families.

By the mid 1970s, Moynihan's report faced serious criticism from many academic corners, including black feminists who believed that he placed an undue burden on black women and underplayed the larger structural dimensions of poverty.²²⁰ Nonetheless, the ideas he introduced gained the vocal support of several well-respected clergymen and activists. A few years after the report's initial circulation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. issued a statement agreeing that "the progress in civil rights [could] be negated by the

²¹⁷ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!: Race, Manhood and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 107-108.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

dissolving of family structure.”²²¹ As historian Steve Estes notes, the pastor went to great lengths to add that the black family had exhibited tremendous resilience as well, thereby resisting the extremity with which Moynihan seemed to blame African Americans for their own predicaments.²²² Nevertheless, the fact that such a famous minister, whose ideas about theology and poverty had elsewhere influenced COGIC quite visibly, endorsed Moynihan’s chief claims shows the staying power that such notions had in American public discourse surrounding the intersection of race, marriage and family. Regardless of the validity, or lack thereof, of Moynihan’s assertions, they remained influential in a variety spheres decades after the 1960s came to a close.

In this sense, as COGIC argued for the preservation of the nuclear family, it gestured rhetorically toward theories and ideas that had already long circulated regarding the importance of traditional marriage for black social advancement. Indeed, some church members went so far as to repeat Moynihan’s reasoning almost verbatim, although they never cited the sociologist explicitly. In a 1984 guest article for *The Whole Truth*, Ezell Pittman quoted from a contemporaneous *Essence* article that, like *The Negro Family* two decades earlier, put the onus for black poverty on African American mothers. “[The article] points out that a great deal, but not all, of the breakdown of the black family structure can be attributed to struggling black mothers,” she remarked, “who raise children alone as the result of divorce, separation, death or choice.”²²³ While Moynihan proposed state welfare reform as a solution to this perceived problem, however, Ezell insisted that religious groups should play an active role in change. “A wide range of black

²²¹ Ibid, 119.

²²² Ibid, 119-120.

²²³ Ezell Pittman, Ph.D, “Involvement and Mutual Care: Directions for Black Family Stability,” *The Whole Truth* Vol. XVII No. VII, July, 1984, 6, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

community organizations must provide support services [to mothers]...” she insisted “especially the black Church.”²²⁴ Pittman’s article showed the complexity of COGIC’s reactions to the perceived idea of marital decay. David Hall had responded to his perception of the “deinstitutionalization” of families with theological condemnation of those who would challenge marriage with homosexuality or divorce. Pittman, by contrast, envisioned a church that played a more nonjudgmental, supportive role.

Nevertheless, arguments linking the decline of traditional family life to black poverty remained ubiquitous in the Church of God in Christ, leading to a discourse on family values that combined opposition to changing sexual mores with older conversations about the nuclear family’s role in black material advancement. J.O. Patterson, Sr. himself embraced this discourse sincerely. In a 1987 speech to the Atlanta COGIC Bishop’s Conference, he insisted that “the spread of social diseases is at an all-time high” specifically because the “family unit is of little importance and even those homes where there ‘seem’ to have been marital bliss are now shaky.”²²⁵ In combining an endorsement of traditional marriage with a commitment to overcome black poverty and “social disease,” Patterson and others joined a conservative rejection of cultural liberalism to a progressive commitment to black uplift.²²⁶ This tension--whereby COGIC put conservative notions of religious virtue to work toward the ultimate goal of improving the material reality of African Americans--remained vividly evident in the church’s contemporaneous endorsement of Christian schools as an alternative to public education.

²²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²²⁵ “Atlanta Site for Bishop’s Conference,” *The Whole Truth* Vol. XX No. II, February 1987, 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²²⁶ Albeit through the endorsement of theories, like Moynihans, that many found deeply troubling.

“A Child Saved Is A Soul Saved Plus A Life”: Secularism, Education and COGIC’s Push for Christian Schools

In the fall of 1976, Charles E. Blake began an ambitious secondary school in connection with his congregation, West Angeles Church of God in Christ.²²⁷ Enrolling sixty students by its September opening, the institution offered instruction at elementary, junior high, and high school levels and established connections beyond COGIC through the interdenominational Western Association of Christian Schools. In its feature on the project, *The Whole Truth* asserted the academic benefits of establishing such an institution for Pentecostal children. “Students at Private Christian Schools are on average two years beyond the national average educational scores,” the reporter pointed out.²²⁸ As Bishop Blake further explained in remarks to the paper, the West Angeles School also carried a moral significance. “[Our students] will be better protected,” he insisted, “from the immoral, drug-oriented, violent plagued aspects of our contemporary culture.”²²⁹

Blake’s impulse to protect COGIC children from the supposed vices of modern American culture paralleled trends in white conservative Christian educational thinking at the time. As historian Daniel K. Williams notes in his study of the Religious Right, *God’s Own Party*, the early 1970s saw theologians from several traditions criticize American public education for its sex education philosophy, increasingly experimental pedagogy and secular values.²³⁰ By the middle of the decade, this criticism had crystallized on several fronts into organized campaigns against supposedly amoral aspects of public

²²⁷ “West Angeles Church Establishes Christian School,” *The Whole Truth* Vol. X No. II, February 1977, 4, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²³⁰ Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 134.

schools. In 1974, a white Pentecostal Preacher's wife named Alice Moore in Kanawha County, Virginia, began protests in response to the school board's curricula on human sexuality, while a 1975 article in the *Baptist Bible Tribune* described "an organized effort to take over the public schools in the United States" that it termed, nonspecifically, "Secular Humanism."²³¹ For many white conservative Christians, the establishment of alternative schools in connection with churches provided a feasible means to escape what they read as a nationwide moral degeneration in the wake of the era's changing sexual and religious mores.

Within the Church of God in Christ, many Christian educators expressed views that echoed this widespread cultural anxiety. In a 1979 *Whole Truth* editorial, a church member named L. Whitsett identified the curricula of public schools as an explicit motivator for parents to enroll their children in Christian institutions. American public classrooms, he explained, taught "that man is the center of existence and all things are explained in natural terms;" if parents hoped to guard their children from such secular ideas, they needed to push for the creation of schools, like Blake's, associated with congregations.²³² Elsewhere clergy and laity expressed discomfort with the sexual liberalism of science curricula. One month after Whitsett's editorial, *The Whole Truth* ran a front-page article that encouraged COGIC laity to unite with the ultra-conservative Christian Defense League to combat sex education that encouraged premarital intercourse and abortion.²³³

²³¹ Ibid., 134.

²³² L. Whitsett, "Public Schools No Longer Safe For Christian Youth," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. XII No. VI, June 1979, 1, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²³³ Anonymous, "Christians Unite Against Sex Education Philosophy in Public Schools," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. XII No. VII, July 1979, 1, *The Whole Truth* [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower

When it came to COGIC's explicitly-stated organizational objectives in establishing its own Christian education system, however, the church always sought more than just curricular piety. *The Hourglass Report*, a 1979 pamphlet on the internal workings of COGIC published by the denomination's Public Relations department, gives a far more diverse set of arguments for establishing Christian schools than purely combatting secularism. Out of its seven stated objectives, three focused on religious instruction explicitly: teachers at a government-funded institution might not be Christian, it warned, while a faith-based school guaranteed a Christian curricular emphasis and no conflict "on the homosexual question."²³⁴ The report also asserted explicitly, however, that Christian schools guaranteed a more positive learning environment than that which students might encounter in underfunded public districts. At a COGIC high school, it assured, parents would not have to worry about unexpected expenses and after-school violence. Moreover, it argued, drug-free church policy would allow teens to avoid gang activity and substance abuse.²³⁵

In this way, COGIC's denomination-wide endorsement of Christian schools in the late 1970s had as much to do with the material realities of ongoing inequalities in public education for black children as it did with cultural shifts that put Christianity on the defensive. By the mid-1980s, several individual pastors around the country had successfully established predominantly African-American Pentecostal schools, which they trumpeted as havens of academic excellence, above and beyond their religious value alone. A 1984 article in *The Whole Truth* discussed several of these schools individually.

Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²³⁴ W.L. Porter, *The Hourglass Report: Reflections on Past and Present* (Memphis: COGIC Public Relations Department, 1979), 43, J.O. Patterson, Sr. Collection. 97/7/2; 97/8/1-97/8/2. Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

Speaking with the denominational newsmagazine, Reverend Norman Quick, who founded the COGIC-affiliated Childs Memorial School in New York City, insisted that the constantly declining quality of public education in the city necessitated a church-based option.²³⁶ Another COGIC clergyman, Bishop Carlis L. Moody, noted that he had established Faith Christian Academy in Evanston, Illinois with the stated goal of preparing students to continue their studies at an institution of higher learning, Christian or otherwise.²³⁷ In summing up the achievements of these and other educational pioneers, *The Whole Truth* concluded with a telling phrase: “A Child Saved Is a Soul Plus a Life.”²³⁸ In the classroom as in the marriage and home, COGIC’s theological commitment to saving souls dovetailed with its more earthly concern with the material lives of its flock to create a discourse that merged Christian purity and sanctification with a push for black equality on earth.

While secularism and moral decay remained pressing concerns for the Church of God in Christ, they operated differently for the black denomination than they did for many white Christian conservatives at the time. As Steve Bruce has argued in his 1988 sociological study, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right*, white Christian activists in the period constructed Secular Humanism as a sort of reverse panacea, or, as he states, “a reasonably coherent story about what is wrong and what can be done about it.”²³⁹ White evangelicals like Francis Schaeffer popularized the notion that legalized abortion, shifting American sexual mores and the growth of big government in the wake

²³⁶ Delores Johnson, “Christian Education: Three Pastor’s Views,” *The Whole Truth*, October 1984, 6, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³⁹ Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 76-77.

of the mass civil rights movement had all sprouted from a more-or-less unified and society-wide “Secular Humanist” rejection of theistic beliefs.²⁴⁰ Meanwhile, self-identifying “Secular Humanists”--a term that first entered circulation after the Pro-Life Family Forum culled it from the name of a low-membership atheist organization active in the early twentieth century--remained clustered in small anti-religious fringe groups and lacked substantive political influence.²⁴¹ In this sense, white evangelical political organizing in the era held itself together through the invention of an ideological straw man. Changes on a variety of cultural fronts in the 1960s had left Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals and many Catholics legitimately nervous about the loss of religious influence in modern American life. The notion that these cultural shifts represented a unified, identifiable force that activism could overcome, however, remained carefully constructed fiction, intended to unify ecclesiastical constituencies politically but without much factual basis.²⁴²

For COGIC’s largely black membership, however, the ongoing material realities of racial inequality were anything but fictional. When COGIC pastors founded schools, they had to contend not only with the abstract notion of public education’s moral impurity but also with the very concrete failure of schools to serve poor African American children. In this way, while COGIC educators and activists often adopted the same language to white Christian conservatives and fought parallel battles, the stakes of their struggle remained essentially different due to the entry of race into the equation. If white Pentecostal reformers like Alice Moore failed to win their battles with school boards like those in Kanawha County, their children would attend a sacrilegious biology

²⁴⁰ Williams, 139-140.

²⁴¹ Bruce, 78.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 77.

lesson. If black Pentecostal educators failed to establish schools in which African-American children could hope to gain adequate college preparation without the influence of violence and drugs, it may be that no one else in their communities would. This essential difference of stakes linked COGIC's conservative cultural politics in the 1970s and 1980s to the legacies of 1960s battles for civil rights. It may also help account for the fact that the Church of God in Christ did not consistently participate in the Republican political organizing of Jerry Falwell and other white Conservative Christian compatriots, despite the fact that the two groups ostensibly held much in common.

COGIC, Activism and the Christian Right

In their 2012 study of race, religion and voting behavior, sociologists Robert P. Jones and Robert D. Francis encountered some startling results about the “God gap”--the commonly-held belief that conservative religious identity leads to support of right-wing politics.²⁴³ Factoring race into an evaluation of religiosity and voting patterns, they discovered that self-identifying black Protestants, even when nearly identical to white evangelicals in their theological beliefs, vote overwhelmingly Democrat rather than Republican.²⁴⁴ As a case study in religion, race and politics, COGIC's relationship to the activist efforts of its white Christian compatriots in the late 1970s and 1980s reveals many of the historical forces at the heart of shaping this racially-divided reality. The turn of the 1980s, after all, saw white conservative Christians of many denominations mobilize in favor of Ronald Reagan through organizations like Jerry Falwell's Moral

²⁴³ Robert P. Jones and Robert D. Francis, “The Black and White of Moral Values: How Attending to Race Challenges the Mythology of the Relationship between Religiosity and Political Attitudes and Behavior” in *Faith and Race in American Political Life*, ed. Robin Dale Jacobson and Nancy D. Wadsworth, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012) Kindle edition.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Majority, developing what historian Daniel K. Williams calls an enduring “partisan commitment” to the Republican party.²⁴⁵ As white Evangelicals, Fundamentalists and traditionalist Catholics began to solidify a voting bloc that would help put culturally right-wing Republicans in office for over two decades, where were black conservative Christians like COGIC members?

The answer, like many in the study of a church as large as COGIC, remains multifaceted, borne out in the contradictions of a diverse denomination whose members did not always agree. On the one hand, COGIC members fought against educational secularism, sexual liberalism and Women’s Liberation on many of the same fronts as white Christians and often developed coalitions across boundaries of race on individual issues. In fighting public school sex education curricula, for example, *The Whole Truth* encouraged its readers to partner with the largely white Christian Defense League and combat the influence of progressive groups like the Sexuality and Information Education Council of the United States and Planned Parenthood.²⁴⁶ When it came to participating in more sweeping organizing efforts that channeled denominational support to particular Republican politicians, however, COGIC pastors remained ambivalent and sometimes outright opposed. Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr. himself, for example, treated Falwell and other so-called Christian “Rightists” with a mixture of contempt and condescension. In a 1980 interview with *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, he expressed “total disagreement” with the goals of the Moral Majority but also said that he did not believe the movement would

²⁴⁵ Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 2.

²⁴⁶ “Christians Unite Against Sex Education Philosophy in Public Schools,” 1, 7.

survive. “I think [the Moral Majority] could be dangerous if it gathered enough momentum,” he said, “but I don’t think it will.”²⁴⁷

Part of this contempt must have come from an awareness of the outwardly racist past of many Moral Majority members. Falwell himself, not unlike the press of Memphis, had frequently condemned nonviolent civil rights protestors for inciting police brutality and stirring up violence. His contemporary, the Baptist preacher and organizer John R. Rice, had even held King responsible for his own assassination, insisting publicly that the preacher had merely “reaped” the “lawlessness” he had elsewhere sowed.²⁴⁸ Steve Bruce further notes that many of the politicians who first benefited from the mobilization of Falwell’s “New” Christian Right, including most notably Senator Jesse Helms, had themselves earlier opposed integration.²⁴⁹ These and other ties to white racist political movements may have trumped any theological commonalities between COGIC and their increasingly active white peers, making substantive cooperation along political lines impossible.

At a deeper level, however, COGIC’s cultural commitment to notions like traditional womanhood, the sacrament of marriage and Christian educational separatism always represented a more complicated political move than simple partisan alignment would permit. As a predominantly black religious organization in a white racist society, the Church of God in Christ had always dedicated itself to the material survival of its congregants in addition to their spiritual needs. In the early twentieth century, this meant the distribution of food to the hungry at convocations and the establishment of Mason

²⁴⁷ Cecelia Payne Wright, “Patterson Chides Rightists,” *Press Scimitar*, October 25, 1980, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁴⁸ Williams, *God’s Own Party*, 86-88.

²⁴⁹ Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right*, 88.

Temple as a substantial black-owned space in Memphis. In the 1970s and 1980s, it meant the fostering of a sanctified culture apart where black women found dignity within traditional roles, working-class families worked toward social advancement within the frame of sacramental marriage and children obtained effective education, leading hopefully to an eventual college degree. In contrast to the agenda of the white Moral Majority, COGIC's cultural politics had more to do with the immediate needs of its ecclesiastical constituency than they did with changing American society via politics. They fostered self-sufficiency and pride within the denomination, rather than attempting to export COGIC's cultural norms and crystallize them into policy for the whole nation.

Of course, the circumstances in which COGIC's sanctified culture could provide this self-sufficiency and pride to its members remained narrow and at times even oppressively exclusive. For working women, gay Christians and those Pentecostals whose beliefs did not align with COGIC's literalist reading of the Bible, the Church of God in Christ's rigid cultural world became a lonely, dark and hostile place for much of the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, believers from these demographics, many of whom would gather in the denomination's seminaries and institutions of higher learning in the 1970s, continued to find resources within their faith for the construction of their own theologies of liberation. Their stories form the subject of our next and final chapter, as we move into the world of Pentecostal higher education and examine one final group of COGIC members for whom the legacies of the 1960s proved inarguably significant.

Chapter Four: Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Liberation

COGIC Higher Education, Marginal Voices and the Intellectual Legacies of 1968

In 1985, four years before his death, J.O. Patterson, Sr. granted a rare extended interview to *The Whole Truth* in which he evaluated the influence he had exerted on COGIC throughout his near-two-decade tenure. When asked to list the achievements he held most dear, the Presiding Bishop spoke immediately about education. “Any religious organization thrives and is cemented through its program of indoctrination,” he explained.²⁵⁰ In order to legitimize COGIC alongside older churches, therefore, the Bishop had found it necessary to establish institutions, including the C.H. Mason Theological Seminary in Atlanta and the C.H. Mason system of bible colleges, for teaching clergy and laity specifically Pentecostal doctrine. Prior to Patterson’s efforts, COGIC clergy often received instruction from “untrained ministers” or Lutheran, Baptist and Methodist schools of religion. Now, the Presiding Bishop noted, Ph.D. theology students and storefront preachers alike could access the same doctrinal curriculum through degree programs catering to students from a wide range of educational backgrounds.²⁵¹

For Patterson Sr. and other pastors of his generation, higher education always remained intimately tied up in COGIC’s quest for ecumenical legitimacy and socio-economic respectability. Indeed, the Presiding Bishop’s 1984 interview represented only one of many instances in which he and other church leaders held out the denomination’s scholastic achievements as a point of pride. In journals throughout the 1970s and 1980s,

²⁵⁰ Anonymous, “Exclusive Interview of the Whole Truth With Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson,” *The Whole Truth*, September 1984, 1, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

COGIC academics like Dr. James Tinney could assert with satisfaction that, by way of Patterson, Sr.'s efforts with the C.H. Mason Seminary, their denomination had founded the first accredited Pentecostal theology graduate school in North America.²⁵² In a 1985 article describing his efforts to raise funds for Downtown Memphis' Saints Center, J.O. Patterson, Sr. cited his church's increasingly educated laity as a sign of COGIC's importance to Memphis and the nation. "No one can look down on us," he explained, "We have many educated people...with masters and Ph.D.'s."²⁵³ For a denomination whose founder, C.H. Mason, had once lost his accreditation with the Baptist Church due to his own lack of formal schooling, Patterson, Sr.'s efforts in the academic realm represented the culmination of a half-century-long search for reputability.

If higher education provided Patterson, Sr. with a means to bestow mainstream cultural legitimacy on his church, however, it also gave his constituency a venue for exploring more self-consciously counter-cultural ways of practicing Pentecostalism. Indeed, as COGIC clergy from all walks of life attained collegiate and graduate school credentials, they also found resources in the world of academic theology that challenged and expanded their conceptions of faith and its relationship to socio-economic, racial and sexual injustice. With the support of J.O. Patterson, Sr., these clergy and thinkers--many of them veterans themselves from the frontline of civil rights activism--established an academic world of seminaries, journals and theological associations that existed both inside and in tension with the church's mainstream culture well into the 1980s. While the discourses regarding race, class, gender and sexuality fostered within this academic world

²⁵² James S. Tinney, PhD., "Black Pentecostals: The Difference Is More Than Color," *Logos*, May/June 1980, 1, LOGOS: LESSONS FROM BLACK PENTECOSTALS, 28/5/4, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁵³ David Hall, "To Be Or Not To Be," *The Whole Truth*, May 1985, 2, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

often broke and even clashed with conversations pursued by the majority of lay-believers, they nonetheless crystallized the legacies of the countercultural 1960s into religious thought and thus lay the foundation for a more diverse Pentecostal politics among future generations of COGIC members.

This final chapter examines this scholarly culture within COGIC during the 1970s and 1980s, interrogating the ways in which the politics of protest informed the church's attempts to enter the world of theological academia. Utilizing the work of two influential COGIC thinkers--- Dr. Leonard Lovett and Dr. James S. Tinney--as a case study, the chapter examines both the capacity and failures of COGIC's incipient theological world to sustain political impulses that challenged and expanded discourses on injustices within the church. The first half of the chapter looks at Lovett's career as a self-declared "radical" theologian and the first dean of COGIC's C.H. Mason Theological Seminary, examining the ways in which he held power in the denomination while producing work that openly attacked racial and economic injustice.²⁵⁴ The second half considers Dr. James Tinney, a COGIC theologian whose work turned Pentecostal doctrine against not only racism but also sexism and homophobia. Both men self-consciously referenced the experience of protest in the 1960s as an inspiration for their interpretations of their faith. While Lovett remained close with the COGIC hierarchy well into the 1990s, however, Tinney found himself excommunicated for his efforts. By reading COGIC intellectual history through their parallel stories, this chapter highlights both the enduring legacies of protest on COGIC's theology as it continues to exist to this day and the limitations of the church to support the full range of its members political and religious experiences.

²⁵⁴ For his own use of the term "Radical," cf. Leonard Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode: Confessions of an Afro-Pentecostal Radical" in *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, ed. Amos Yong and Estrela Alexander, (New York: New York UP, 2011) 153-69.

Need for Indoctrination, Room for Radicalism: J.O. Patterson, Sr, Leonard Lovett and the Creation of the C.H. Mason Theological Seminary

While the idea for a seminary had first surfaced under his predecessor Bishop O.T. Jones Sr, J.O. Patterson, Sr. nonetheless envisioned theological education as a critical part of his program for COGIC during the first years of his tenure.²⁵⁵ Much of this had to do with the perceived necessity of training ministers in a unified doctrinal curriculum. Religious education had long existed informally in COGIC, often through the efforts of women who led didactic groups called Bible Bands at the level of individual congregations.²⁵⁶ By the mid twentieth century, COGIC had also established a vocational and religious institution called Saint's Technical College in Lexington, Mississippi, which grew significantly under the efforts of the prodigious Pentecostal educator Arenia Mallory.²⁵⁷ While Saint's Technical and the Bible Bands provided believers with instruction in doctrine and the cultural norms of sanctified living, however, neither encompassed any formal training in systematic theology.

By the 1960s, the few COGIC clergy with academic backgrounds in religion had gained them entirely outside the church. O.T. Jones, Jr., for example, the first COGIC Bishop to hold a doctorate, had completed it at the liberal Protestant Union Theological Seminary.²⁵⁸ In the early 1970s, J.O. Patterson, Sr. sought to create an intra-denominational system of education such that other ministers could attain the same level of training within a curriculum that focused on theology that spoke to the Pentecostal

²⁵⁵ Leonard Lovett, phone interview with the author, March 3, 2014.

²⁵⁶ Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 97.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 101-109.

²⁵⁸ Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode", 156; Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

experience.

With this goal in mind, Patterson began raising money for an ambitious series of educational projects as early as 1970. The first, the C.H. Mason Theological Seminary in Atlanta, emerged as part of the Interdenominational Theological Center, an educational experiment initiated ten years earlier that unified a variety of different predominately African-American denominations under the banner of a single theological institution.²⁵⁹ As part of the ITC, the Church of God in Christ pioneered its own courses on Pentecostal doctrine and history, while sharing core curriculum with other, more theologically liberal religious bodies, including the AME and Presbyterian Churches.²⁶⁰ In a manner that anticipated the Saint's Center Project nearly a decade later, Patterson, Sr. funded this effort largely from the donations of his own congregants. At the 63rd Annual Convocation in 1970, the year of the seminary's founding, he held a \$100/plate dinner at Memphis' Peabody Sheraton Hotel with hopes of contributing \$300,000 to his new seminary's dormitories and administrative buildings.²⁶¹

While Patterson, Sr. intended the C.H. Mason Seminary to serve as a venue for the education of young clergy, it also provided opportunities for the employment of a smaller vanguard of COGIC preachers who had already completed graduate theological education outside of the denomination. Leonard Lovett, who became the first dean of the C.H. Mason Seminary on April 8, 1970 and designed its landmark doctrine and history

²⁵⁹ Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ "Record Breaking Crowds Attended the 63rd Annual Convocation of the Church of God in Christ Held at the International Headquarters, Memphis TN," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. X, December, 1970, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

courses, represents one of the most influential members of this group.²⁶² Raised in a small town in Florida under oppressive Jim Crow laws, Lovett had attended Saints Technical College before transferring to Morehouse College in Atlanta as a sophomore and completing graduate work at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *alma mater*, Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.²⁶³ With both the pious commitments of a lifelong COGIC member and the rigorous intellectual training of a Black Studies scholar, Lovett stood qualified to both engineer COGIC's incipient theological curriculum and challenge his denomination's political norms.

By his own admission, Dr. Leonard Lovett's education and religious background put him in a position that defied straightforward political and theological labels.²⁶⁴ At Saint's in the late 1950s, he had mingled freely with COGIC's Women's Department leaders, reading Howard Thurman under the tutelage of Dr. Arenia Mallory and even working at Lillian Brooks' Coffey's chauffeur.²⁶⁵ With his acceptance to Morehouse in January of 1960, however, he found himself quite suddenly plunged into the bustling center of left-wing Black secular intellectual life and student movements against segregation. In his first semester, he encountered both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X on campus, with the former teaching a course on social philosophy and the latter coming to Morehouse for a public debate with the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.²⁶⁶ He also participated in protest actions himself, joining other students in a successful

²⁶² W.L. Porter, *The Hourglass Report: Reflections on Past and Present* (Memphis: Department of Public Relations, Church of God in Christ, 1979) 47, J.O. Patterson, Sr. Collection. 97/7/2; 97/8/1-97/8/2. Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri; Lovett, interview, 3/3/2014.

²⁶³ Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode", 154-156. King obtained his Bachelor of Divinity at Crozer over a decade earlier, in 1951. The two men actually followed identical undergraduate paths as well: King had attended Morehouse prior to Crozer and obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology.

²⁶⁴ Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

²⁶⁵ Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode", 154-155.

²⁶⁶ Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

effort to integrate Atlanta's Davison-Paxon shopping center.²⁶⁷ In this way, Lovett witnessed the formative years of the 1960s mass freedom movement and, in so doing, gained intellectual and political experience atypical of a COGIC preacher of his generation. He recalls encountering few other Pentecostal students on Morehouse's middle-class and relatively secular campus, but nonetheless continued ardently practicing his faith.²⁶⁸

As a graduate student in theology, Lovett encountered strands of secular and religious thought that challenged and expanded his approach to social issues. During his time at Crozer he studied with Kenneth Smith, an ethicist who had taught Martin Luther King worked closely with Liberal Protestant social critic Reinhold Niebuhr.²⁶⁹ He also enrolled in the nearby Bryn Mawr School of Social Research, where he read W.E.B. DuBois and the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker.²⁷⁰ Finally, in 1970 he started a doctoral degree in Ethics at Emory, with a double minor in systematic theology and American Christianity, at which time he received an invitation from J.O. Patterson, Sr. to take the reigns of his denomination's new ITC seminary initiative.²⁷¹

Lovett's extensive background in social criticism, liberal philosophical theology and American politics allowed him to infuse Mason Seminary's curriculum with courses that interrogated the intersection of faith and social action. By 1973, the school hosted an annual workshop on the ministry that offered seminars for COGIC preachers on issues like "Pentecostalism and Social Issues" and "Black Religious Experience and Black

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode," 156; Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

²⁷⁰ Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode," 157.

²⁷¹ Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

Preaching.”²⁷² As early as 1971 Lovett had also instituted an extension program that offered classes on “Prophetic Theology” and “Black Theology” to laity without formal undergraduate qualifications.²⁷³ Through these and other efforts, Lovett brought explicit theological conversations about racial and economic inequality to an audience of average COGIC pastors and believers.

If Lovett’s work with the seminary initiated a new grassroots discourse within COGIC on the relationship between Pentecostalism and racial justice, his own scholarship helped carve out space for this discourse in the broader world of theological academia. In 1970, mere months prior to the founding of the C.H. Mason Theological Seminary, Swiss scholar Walter J. Hollenweger published a groundbreaking work, entitled *The Black Pentecostal Concept*, which encouraged religious studies and theologians to rethink Pentecostalism as a movement with primarily African American origins.²⁷⁴ Lovett, and the group of young COGIC thinkers with whom he worked at the ITC, promptly entered this academic conversation, producing a prodigious volume of work that highlighted African American contributions to the Pentecostal movement from an explicitly black Pentecostal perspective. Lovett added most immediately to this argument in 1973, with a paper entitled “Perspectives on the Black Origin of the Pentecostal Movement” and published in journal of the Interdenominational Theological

²⁷² “C.H. Mason Theological Seminary Holds Its 1st Annual Workshop on the Ministry, August 1-3 1973” *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. VII, July 1973, 1, *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. X, December, 1970, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁷³ Advertisement, *The Whole Truth*, Vol. V No. IV April 1971, 6, *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. X, December, 1970, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁷⁴ Lovett, “Ethics in a Prophetic Mode”, 157.

Center.²⁷⁵ Over the following decade, many of his COGIC colleagues expanded the black origins thesis. In 1982, for example, Ithiel Clemmons---a COGIC historian and theologian who had led workshops at the ITC in the early 1970s---published a harsh rejoinder to the white racist biases of scholarship on Pentecostalism in *The Whole Truth*.²⁷⁶ In these and other works, Lovett and his contemporaries both asserted themselves as black Pentecostal voices in a largely secular, white academic world and actively fought to dethrone its racist epistemologies.

In this way, by funding the C.H. Mason Seminary, J.O. Patterson, Sr. underwrote the creation of an academic subculture far more explicitly focused on analyzing and deconstructing American racism than any previous generation of COGIC clergy. He also facilitated new Pentecostal explorations in the realm of political praxis. If COGIC's nascent scholars in the 1970s began their work focused on the biases of the academy, they quickly expanded their concerns to address larger structural inequalities. In addition to leading him toward the historical work of Hollenweger and others, Lovett's time at Emory had brought him into contact with black Baptist theologians like James and Cecil Cone.²⁷⁷ By the early 1980s, Lovett frequently cited both thinkers in arguments for black Pentecostal political action. His 1979 address to the Society for Pentecostal Studies, entitled "Liberation: A Dual Edged Sword", epitomizes this type of call to arms: after examining the role of the Black Church in African-American survival from slavery to the

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 158.

²⁷⁶ Ithiel Clemmons, "Insidious Racism in American Religious Statistics," *The Whole Truth*, Vol. XVI No. II, Feb. 1983, 3, *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. X, December, 1970, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.; for Clemmons' involvement in the C.H. Mason Seminary in the early 1970s, cf. "C.H. Mason Theological Seminary Holds Its 1st Annual Workshop on the Ministry, August 1-3 1973, *The Whole Truth*, Vol. IV No. X, December, 1970, The Whole Truth [Record Group], 22/1/5 O.S.; 31/1/2, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁷⁷ Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode," 158.

present and cataloguing a litany of thinkers who applied faith to the problem of racism, Lovett ended his essay insisting that Pentecostal Christians should open themselves up across denominational lines to dialogue with social scientists, theologians, policymakers and activists fighting structural inequality.²⁷⁸ “[Pentecostals] must now be willing to joyfully celebrate the death of rigid ecclesiastical structures and renew themselves by involvement in the liberating activity of God,” he wrote, “The movement can now [defy] the chaos and social disruptions plaguing our world, by radical obedience to the lord of the church.”²⁷⁹ Without sacrificing COGIC’s claims to experiential religious truth, Lovett’s work creatively re-conceptualized the mission of his church to meet the demands of the fight against racial oppression.

In this way, Patterson, Sr.’s dedication to theological education and initiation of the C.H. Mason Theological Seminary created a forum in which COGIC members like Lovett could work out the intellectual consequences of civil rights activism within a Pentecostal frame. While the scope of Lovett and his colleagues’ work remained relatively small---the theologian estimates that, at its height, the C.H. Mason Seminary had graduating class sizes of about thirty-five--it nonetheless carried enormous consequences in the possibilities that it opened for black Pentecostal political self-definition.²⁸⁰ Starting in the early 1970s, COGIC members could find support and intellectual backing in their church for an increasingly diverse set of political worldviews. Particularly as the average educational level of lay members increased, the work of COGIC’s pioneering scholars allowed for more nuanced conversations about race than

²⁷⁸ Leonard Lovett, “Liberation: A Dual Edged Sword,” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting for the Society of Pentecostal Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, November 18-20, 1982), 14/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 15.

²⁸⁰ Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

those found within the church's often conservative mainstream discourses. By the late 1970s and 1980s, as an increasing number of talented young thinkers entered the academic world built in its earliest stages by Patterson's educational efforts, they began to seek means to continue these dialogues beyond the limits of COGIC's official doctrine and denominational purview. In journals like *Spirit* that operated without formal ecclesiastical funding or sanction, writers like James Tinney proposed radically new visions for Pentecostalism that tested the limits of COGIC's tolerance for heterodox political views.

“Shall We Call This Dream Progressive Pentecostalism?”: *Spirit*, James Tinney and the Outer Limits of Tolerance

In spring of 1977, *Spirit* put out its first issue, proudly declaring itself the *Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*.²⁸¹ Proceeding under a ten-person, interdenominational editorial board with four COGIC members, the publication sought to establish a forum for interdisciplinary inquiry and interdenominational dialogue on aspects of black Pentecostal experience.²⁸² “We are unapologetically racial, although not racists, in our orientation...” wrote James Tinney, a Howard University doctoral candidate and COGIC member who served as the editor-in-chief of the new enterprise. “While theoretically there exists no subject beyond our purview, in practice subjects incident to the African diaspora will receive the most attention.”²⁸³ Beyond merely creating one more venue for academic discourse, Tinney and the founding editors of

²⁸¹ *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*. Vol. I, No. I (1977), 3, *Spirit: A journal of issues incident to black Pentecostalism*, 54/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸³ James Tinney, “Editorial,” *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*. Vol. I, No. I (1977), 10-11, *Spirit: A journal of issues incident to black Pentecostalism*, 54/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

Spirit also sought to make room for contentious conversations that had no other forum. From the first issue onward, the magazine's call for submissions explicitly stated that journal would consider "controversial subject matter."²⁸⁴

While *Spirit* involved many members of the Church of God in Christ as both writers and editors, it also existed, in a historically unique fashion, with complete independence from the church hierarchy. As Tinney wrote in his editorial in the magazine's third issue, he had feared in 1977 that denominational affiliation would restrict the magazine's editorial freedom. Consequently, *Spirit* covered its costs with a combination of subscription fees and grassroots donations.²⁸⁵ In this sense, the journal asserted a vision, or rather plurality of visions, for Pentecostalism that arose from COGIC and the experience of civil rights involvement but never fully confined themselves to the social and political norms asserted from the center of the denomination. The ultimate fate of these marginal visions, which creatively reinterpreted Pentecostalism to apply not only to racial discrimination but also to an intersectional network of class, gender and sexual oppressions, speaks volumes to the challenges that continued to face COGIC in its fight for the equality of its members, even two decades after the church's involvement in 1960s political action.

Much like his colleague Leonard Lovett, James Tinney approached his work with *Spirit* from an eclectic background that combined devout participation in COGIC with political and intellectual engagement beyond the church walls. Born in the 1950s in Kansas City, Missouri, he survived a broken home and alcoholic father, converting to

²⁸⁴ *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*, Vol. I No. I, 3.

²⁸⁵ *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*, Vol. III No. I (1979), 1. *Spirit: A journal of issues incident to black Pentecostalism*, 54/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

Pentecostalism at a youth rally when he was ten.²⁸⁶ After piecing together an eclectic living as a young man as a high school teacher, editor of local newspapers and storefront preacher, he left the Midwest for Washington, D.C. in 1973 and enrolled in a Masters Program at Howard University focusing on Interdisciplinary Black Studies.²⁸⁷ Even as his interests veered toward secular political and social theory, however, he never lost sight of his religious upbringing, completing graduate work at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Springfield during early 1970s and remaining a devoted member of COGIC after moving to the East Coast.²⁸⁸ By the time he began soliciting contributions for the first issue of *Spirit* in 1977, he had gone on to attain a Ph.D. in Journalism and was working full-time as a tenure-track Professor at the Howard University School of Communications.²⁸⁹

While his academic background came from a field other than religion, Tinney nonetheless published articles frequently concerning Pentecostal history and theology, often engaging in the same debates as Lovett, Clemmons, and other COGIC theologians. In the early 1970s he joined the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS), an interracial academic association devoted to the study of Charismatic and Pentecostal movements.²⁹⁰ There, he encountered the Black origins controversy initiated by Hollenweger and began to complete his own research concerning African American contributions to Pentecostal history. In a 1980 issue of the SPS's official journal, *LOGOS*, he published an article entitled "Black Pentecostals: The Difference Is More Than Color" that drew attention to understudied Afro-Pentecostal contributions to missionizing, doctrine and social

²⁸⁶ Dr. James S. Tinney: Biographical Summary, 1, 18/8/3, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁸⁷ Biographical Summary, 1; *Spirit* Vol. 1 No. 1 (1977), 8.

²⁸⁸ "About the Editor..." *Spirit* Vol. 1 No. 1 (1977), 8.

²⁸⁹ Biographical Summary, 1-2.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

justice.²⁹¹ Like Lovett, Tinney also quickly branched out to address structural inequality in addition to academic racism. Citing J.O. Patterson, Sr.'s involvement in the 1968 Memphis strike alongside other examples of Pentecostal political action, he ended his *LOGOS* essay with a celebration of the potential for religious fellowship to bring about social change.²⁹²

While Lovett and the hierarchy-backed faculty of C.H. Mason Theological Seminary tended to focus primarily on race and class, however, Tinney also sought to draw connections between the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s battles for gender equality and gay rights. As much as Tinney's *LOGOS* article celebrated the underappreciated historical contributions of his church to the black freedom struggle, it also drew attention to COGIC's hesitance, alongside other black Pentecostal fellowships, to openly endorse women's liberation.²⁹³ Tinney's work elsewhere demonstrated a strong personal commitment to fostering a dialogue on gender more open than the one typically permitted in COGIC official publications. In selecting both editors and the content for *Spirit*, he made an unusual amount of space for female voices, at least as compared with the standards of his male-controlled denomination. As of the magazine's second issue in 1977, its editorial board boasted several women with Masters degrees or Ph.Ds., including Professor Naomi Williams of Daytona Beach Community College and Eva Rousseau, a high school principal.²⁹⁴ The same issue also ran an article by educator Pearl Williams-Jones, entitled "Black Pentecostal Women: A Minority Report," which utilized historical, sociological and theological analyses to draw attention to the vital work of

²⁹¹ Tinney, "Black Pentecostals: The Difference is More Than Color," 16-29.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹⁴ *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*, Vol. I No. II (1977), 3, *Spirit: A journal of issues incident to black Pentecostalism*, 54/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

women in COGIC and other charismatic churches.²⁹⁵ In these ways, *Spirit* gave explicit leadership positions and theological influence to women in a religious tradition whose cultural norms otherwise frequently confined them to domestic roles.

If *Spirit* provided the setting for a more multi-vocal conversation about womanhood than most COGIC churches allowed, Tinney himself became increasingly devoted to establishing the same sort of venue for discussions of homosexuality. For Tinney, the issue proved personal: after the consecutive failures of two different early-life marriages, he came out to his closest friends at age twenty seven, just prior to his relocation to the East Coast.²⁹⁶ For ten years, Tinney kept his sexuality private, gaining influence in his academic and pastoral careers while avoiding the issue of gay rights. By the late 1970s, however, he began exploring homosexuality more openly in his theological writing. In a 1977 *Spirit* article entitled “Homosexuality: A Pentecostal Phenomenon” he made the doctrinal argument for greater inclusion of homosexuals in the black Pentecostal community, with a postcolonial-epistemological bent: “Hopefully,” he wrote, “this article will...promote a Black Pentecostal perspective which avoids...the white Puritan assertion that sexual sins are pre-eminently worthy of condemnation.”²⁹⁷ Rather than contradicting his earlier work on the specifically black character of Afro-American Pentecostalism, Tinney’s arguments for Pentecostal tolerance of homosexuality pulled on the same theoretical threads. Gay equality and black equality, both in the Church and in the broader world, represented two sides of the same coin.

²⁹⁵ Pearl Williams-Jones, “Black Pentecostal Women: A Minority Report,” *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*, Vol. I No. II (1977), 31-43, *Spirit: A journal of issues incident to black Pentecostalism*, 54/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁹⁶ Biographical Summary, 1.

²⁹⁷ James S. Tinney, “Homosexuality: A Pentecostal Phenomenon” *Spirit: A Journal of Issues Incident to Black Pentecostalism*, Vol. I No. II (1977), 46, *Spirit: A journal of issues incident to black Pentecostalism*, 54/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

As Tinney became simultaneously recognized for his academic achievements and open about his sexual orientation toward the end of the decade, he put his conservative denomination's tolerance to the ultimate test. In 1980, he announced his homosexuality publicly and founded the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights (PCHR), a Howard-based support group and newsletter for gay minority Pentecostals in a variety of black and Latino denominations.²⁹⁸ Shortly thereafter he found himself subjected to a wide variety of attacks. Harold Hostetler, a white Pentecostal theologian and managing editor of *LOGOS*, urged COGIC to punish Tinney with excommunication.²⁹⁹ Meanwhile, *Spirit* contributors like Howard University's Pentecostal Chaplain Stephen N. Short wrote to Tinney calling his support of PCHR "offensive and destructive."³⁰⁰ Finally, at COGIC's 1980 annual convocation, O.T. Jones, Jr.--the first Bishop of the church to hold a doctorate and a founding architect of J.O. Patterson, Sr.'s educational efforts--publicly embarrassed Tinney in front of an audience of over 2,000, calling his sexuality a "weakness."³⁰¹ In spite the criticism directed against him, however, Tinney refused to renounce his statements.

Finally, in 1982 the Church of God in Christ excommunicated Tinney in connection with a gay and lesbian revival he organized in Washington, D.C.³⁰² Soon after during the same year, he lost his membership with the Society for Pentecostal Studies.³⁰³

²⁹⁸ Biographical Summary, 2; Newsletter for the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights, Vol. I, No. I (1980), 1 53/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

²⁹⁹ Harold Hostetler, "Editorial: Dealing with Immorality Among the Saints," *LOGOS*, May/June 1981, 4, 53/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

³⁰⁰ *Newsletter for the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights*, Vol. I, No. 2 (1981), 2, 53/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰² "Profile: James S. Tinney," The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Religious Archives Network, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=66>; "About Faith Temple," Faith-Temple.com, accessed March 9 2014, <http://www.faith-temple.com/>,

³⁰³ Biographical Summary, 2.

Nonetheless, he continued to fight for the rights of homosexual and minority Pentecostals outside the formal structures of the church. Over the course of the early 1980s, the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights evolved from a support group for gay Christians into an increasingly well-orchestrated activist organization attacking intersecting gender, racial and sexual oppressions. “Our Pentecostal oppressors,” Tinney wrote in an informational pamphlet for the nascent association, “would prefer that we become a Pentecostal coalition for Gay Rights [so that] they could more solidly and comfortably attack us on one issue. But we refuse to let them separate homophobia or sexism from racism.”³⁰⁴ The organization also gained news coverage outside the church throughout the early decade. A 1981 feature in Chicago’s *Gaylife* magazine described the group as a “religious task force combating racism, sexism and homophobia” and quoted Tinney as he decried the “fascist” character of budding alliances between Pentecostals and rightwing politicians.³⁰⁵ Finally, Tinney himself, having lost his credentials within COGIC, founded his own non-denominational, gay-affirming Pentecostal church in Washington, D.C. under the name Faith Temple.³⁰⁶ In this way, Tinney’s vision of a politically left-wing, sexually-open and theologically-diverse Pentecostalism survived, even as it found itself silenced within COGIC’s mainstream culture.

In 1988, James Tinney passed away from complications related to AIDS, leaving behind Faith Temple as a gay-affirming Black Pentecostal congregation still active to this day.³⁰⁷ While Tinney’s independent church experiment demonstrates the endurance of

³⁰⁴ Dr. James Tinney “Answers to Questions About the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights,” (promotional pamphlet, undated), 4, 53/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

³⁰⁵ “Pentecostal racial and sexual minorities form national organization,” *Gaylife*, Friday, February 27 1981, 53/6/1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

³⁰⁶ Biographical Summary, 2.

³⁰⁷ “About Faith Temple”; Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

marginal voices within the tradition of Black Pentecostalism broadly conceived, his own career trajectory speaks to enduring challenges faced by COGIC in the 1980s as it grappled with the legacies of the 1960s in their many, conflicting variations. As argued in the previous chapter, the church's culturally conservative discourses on gender, sex and the family represented, in some respects, one inheritance of the black freedom struggle, as they fused concepts of Christian virtue with notions of economic uplift. Nonetheless, even as COGIC's cultural world apart sought to provide a means for the survival and liberation of its members, it actively excluded and further marginalized many of its gender and sexual minorities, of which Tinney serves as only the most visible example. Reading COGIC's post-1960s intellectual history through the contemporaneous but divergent stories of Lovett and Tinney, then, begs a final question: twenty years after Patterson, Sr. marched alongside King in Memphis, when the activist generation of COGIC laity and clergy had matured into leaders and pioneering thinkers within the ever-growing denomination, what impact did the experience of protest in the 1960s finally leave?

Conclusions: Dreams Realized, Dreams Deferred

When asked to reflect on his life work in 2014, Dr. Leonard Lovett describes his mission in prophetic, critical terms. "At this stage in my life...I see my primary mission as that of an apologist..." he explains. "I see the latter part of my life being spent calling the Church to live under the reign of God."³⁰⁸ Today as much as in 1979, when he first exhorted black Pentecostals to intellectually interrogate American racism, COGIC on the whole has hesitated to engage in critical theological discourse: young Pentecostal

³⁰⁸ Lovett, interview, March 3, 2014.

thinkers like Harold Bennett, David Daniels III and Bennie Goodwin have embraced the work of liberation theology, Lovett admits, but for the most part COGIC clergy have remained uninterested in systematic religious thought.³⁰⁹ Nevertheless, even in his later days, he remains devoted to fostering dialogue between Charismatic-Pentecostal churches on social justice. In the last decade, he has become COGIC's Ecumenical Officer for Urban Affairs and spends many of his days on the road, lecturing to ministers and laity in locations ranging from Texas to Ghana, Switzerland and Brazil.³¹⁰

Lovett's contemporary position and Tinney's ultimate fate demonstrate both the promises and failures of COGIC's academic culture to capture and support the liberating impulses of Pentecostal clergy as they emerged from the political furnace of the 1960s. On the one hand, Patterson, Sr.'s support of the C.H. Mason Seminary gave Lovett, Ithiel Clemmons, and other young academic minds the opportunity to work out a new theology of liberation in the context of a Pentecostal community years into the 1970s. While this theology often existed outside the mainstream of the church's sanctified culture, it nonetheless created resources that subsequent generations of clergy could draw upon as they explored the interface between their faith and an oppressive world. As Lovett's ongoing work demonstrates, these intellectual resources remain strong in COGIC to this day, despite the fact that church leaders and lay believers engage them to varying degrees.

Tinney's story, on the other hand, suggests a more bleak view of the church's past, albeit not necessarily of its present or future. Even as the prodigious young theologian's expulsion from COGIC highlights unresolved anxiety surrounding sexuality

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid; Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode", 162.

in the denomination at large, the very fact that he came to the conclusions he did from a Pentecostal perspective speaks to the unrealized political potentials of the religious movement. If Tinney's theologizing in 1977 could successfully theorize at the intersection of gender, race and sexual oppression from an unabashedly Pentecostal background, how much further might contemporary thinkers take his work? Particularly as Pentecostal-Charismatic organizations like the Church of God in Christ continue to grow, Tinney's story gives underappreciated precedent to future generations of socially engaged believers working on the development of liberation theologies that treat the full range of human experiences.

In the wide scope of the church's history, moreover, Tinney, Lovett and the many other members of COGIC's academic vanguard represent only a tiny sliver of experience. For all members, regardless of social class, gender or educational background, the church's engagement with racial and economic injustice in the 1960s carried enormous, albeit sometimes conflicting, significance. Whether fighting structural inequality through transformation of Memphis' public space, constructing a Christian cultural and educational alternative to the frequent racism of American secular society or creating space for the development of academic work that galvanized political praxis, COGIC remained dedicated throughout the 1970s and 1980s to the survival and liberation of its members in all of their diverse situations. In a manner that both honored and expanded upon the legacy of Mason Temple's marchers in 1968, the Church of God in Christ by 1989 had firmly established itself as a key player in the struggle for black freedom.

**Conclusion:
Salvation, Testimony, Freedom**

In December 1989, James Oglethorpe Patterson, Sr. passed away after a valiant eight-month battle with pancreatic cancer.³¹¹ Throughout the months leading to his death, the Bishop had chosen not to engage in chemotherapy, requesting instead that the 3.7 million members of the Church of God in Christ pray for his health.³¹² Nonetheless his condition worsened as the weeks wore on. In November the ailing seventy-six-year-old minister stood proudly at the front of COGIC's Annual Convocation and offered stoic words to close his twenty-year tenure as the denomination's second Presiding Bishop: "Everything here is fleeting and transitory, and will pass," he proclaimed, looking out on the crowd from a pulpit that had played host to C.H. Mason, Sr., Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy and an enormous range of clergy and activists in the decades since, "Only what we do for Christ will last."³¹³

Patterson, Sr.'s death elicited a wave of public condolences from a wide array of locally prominent figures. Dick Hackett, Memphis' fiscally conservative white mayor, offered kind words regarding Patterson Sr, despite the fact that the Bishop had vehemently opposed his candidacy just seven years earlier in the 1982 race against J.O. Patterson, Jr.³¹⁴ Following a tradition that harkened back to Henry Loeb's letters to COGIC members in convocation yearbooks, Hackett offered a face-saving commendation of the denomination as an asset to the city of Memphis and held Patterson,

³¹¹ Tom Bailey, Jr, "Bishop Patterson dies; COGIC leader 21 years," *The Commercial Appeal*, December 30, 1989, A1, Folder 2, Articles, News Clippings, etc. [1936-2006], C/6/6, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ "COGIC Classics: Bishop J.O. Patterson, Sr.," last modified October 7, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wL9CI0r_45s.

³¹⁴ See page 65 of this thesis.

Sr. up as an “effective leader” who would be “sorely missed.”³¹⁵ Harold Ford, Memphis’ influential black Democratic Representative, claimed that the “J” in Patterson, Sr.’s name should stand for “Jesus-like” and praised him for his courage, vivacity and civic commitment.³¹⁶ Within a year of the Patterson, Sr.’s death, local businesses like Withers Photography and Saul’s Memphis Furs sponsored commemorative booklets that documented the Bishop’s life and times, speaking to the strong connections that the Bishop had made between the Church of God in Christ and downtown companies.³¹⁷

Such responses to Patterson, Sr.’s death demonstrated the fruits of his work in the secular realm as a bridge-builder who connected COGIC to Memphis’ economic and political establishment. When it came to memorializing the Bishop directly, however, Memphis local media often focused on his spiritual accomplishments more than his secular ones. Patterson’s obituary in *The Commercial Appeal* concluded with a litany of quotations culled from the most memorable sermons of his career. One in particular, taken from a 1980 speech, speaks to the intensity of the Bishop’s personal religious devotion. Without explicitly mentioning the political or social injustices of his home city, the Bishop’s words described the experience of salvation in vivid term, using the metaphor of a renter’s relationship to the owner of a house: “When we become saved,” he explained, “We don’t own. We just pay rent and take reasonable care. God is responsible for us. He takes care of all your needs.”³¹⁸

³¹⁵ Bailey, “Bishop Patterson dies,” A2.

³¹⁶ Ibid., A2.

³¹⁷ For example: Teddy Withers, ed, *Reflections in History: A Corporate Salute to COGIC* (Memphis: Withers Photography, 1990), J.O. Patterson, Sr. Collection. 97/7/2; 97/8/1-97/8/2. Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, Missouri.

³¹⁸ Bailey, A2.

Indeed, through all of its diverse public activity during the Patterson Bishopric, the Church of God in Christ continued to thrive on the ecstatic energy of its members' spiritual experiences. Over two decades after Bishop Patterson, Sr.'s death, in a 2011 autobiographical essay reflecting on his own lengthy career, Dr. Leonard Lovett also insisted upon the importance of witnessing God's power firsthand. "Afro-Pentecostals experience a sense of wholeness and healing through the divine vehicle of testimony," he explained. "It is that portion of worship where converts are encouraged to share with the body of believers what 'the Lord has done for me.'"³¹⁹ Even within his rigorous analyses of structural racism in the United States, Lovett never lost track of the centrality of personal experience to the workings of his denomination. Across differences of gender, class, educational background and sexuality, COGIC members throughout the church's existence shared this sense of intimate history with the salvific activity of the Holy Ghost. From C.H. Mason, Sr. to James Tinney, they all, in varying ways, lived their lives as renters in the house of the Lord.

In the final months of this project, I attended Fountain Temple, a contemporary COGIC church in St. Louis, Missouri, and began to comprehend the power of these personal religious experiences more completely. There, in a humble sanctuary less than one-tenth of the size of the Mason Temple auditorium, I witnessed the joyous, cacophonous reality of Pentecostal worship in a manner that no amount of archival reading could have anticipated. At the end of a series of testimonies describing congregants' experiences of God, the Elder stood up behind the podium and spoke

³¹⁹ Leonard Lovett, "Ethics in a Prophetic Mode: Confessions of an Afro-Pentecostal Radical" in *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, ed. Amos Yong and Estrela Alexander (New York: New York UP, 2011) 163.

directly to the congregation's small crowd. "If you don't have anything to testify about," he offered, "You can just take a breath, look up and say 'Thank you, Jesus. 2014 has come and I am still alive. Thank you, God; I am alive.'" The organ took off into a stirring improvisational solo, the crowd burst into a series of "Amen's" and, sitting in the third row, I felt as if I had written a thesis that functioned something like a dry neurological treatise on love. The preceding examination of COGIC during the Patterson years analyzes the church thoroughly with regards to the formal demands of academic historiography. I wondered, however, whether any amount of political analysis could accurately capture this enraptured, experiential core of Pentecostal worship.

In tracing the political, cultural, and theological trajectory of the Church of God in Christ after the 1960s, however, this thesis has demonstrated that even the most apparently otherworldly aspects of COGIC practice represent strategies for black survival and liberation in a hostile, white-racist society. In the late 1960s, these strategies took the form of explicit protest activities, pursued most saliently during the 1968 sanitation strike. As J.O. Patterson, Sr. took up the Presiding Bishopric and the church continued to evolve in subsequent decades, this protest impulse continued to manifest itself in less obvious ways. In Memphis, COGIC's public facade of moderation won it the sociopolitical influence necessary to impact local politics and protect working-class black interests. Throughout the country, the denomination's discourses regarding sanctified living established an alternative educational, sexual and familial culture that sought to counteract the racist conditions of modern American society. In Atlanta and Washington, D.C., the church's forays into theological education created a venue for marginal voices to explore new visions of Pentecostal religious experience. COGIC members may have

disagreed with each other regarding tactics. They all responded creatively to the earthly realities of American racial injustice, however, even as they continued to invest deeply in the experience of the immanent divine.

As COGIC continues to grow and thrive as the trend suggests, these responses demand even more attention from the academy, news media and religious world. The era of Martin Luther King, Jr. may have come to a close in 1968, when Ray's bullet shattered a Memphis evening's quiet, jovial chatter. The era of Pentecostal churches like COGIC, however, has only just begun. Whether or not its cultural, theological and political perspectives provide the most universally acceptable solutions to the multifaceted problems of injustice, COGIC has attained undeniable numerical significance and consequently deserves serious treatment as a participant on the American political scene. Moreover, as its historic members have shown--from J.O. Patterson, Sr. and W.L. Porter to Leonard Lovett, James Tinney and Pearl Williams-Jones--the range of possible conclusions arising from the Pentecostal witness remains vast and heterogeneous, giving promise to the future of the religious movement. Who can tell what new visions of liberation, materially and spiritually, may yet come to pass from within the ranks of black Pentecostalism? Who knows the extent of the unrealized impact the Church of God in Christ, as one of the nation's largest historically African-American denominations, can have? Without settling the conversation, this thesis hopes to refocus the historiographical lenses of future generations on a church whose members have rarely found the recognition they deserve.

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