

## CHAPTER III

### THE BEGINNINGS OF THE WOMEN'S DEPARTMENT

“The Proper Place of women in the Church is an age-old debate and from all appearances, it seems that it perhaps will be an eternal one—for most mortals at least.” Bishop O. T. Jones, Dedication to the National Women's Convention of the Church of God in Christ<sup>1</sup>

After COGIC's legal division into two separate denominations was completed in 1909, led separately by Charles Mason and C. P. Jones, Mason traveled throughout the South, keeping headquarters in Memphis. As General Overseer, he ordained ministers and held evangelistic revivals, sometimes with whites and blacks in attendance. During this period, women were joining his denomination in large numbers, and Mason needed to find a woman capable of leading and organizing the loose bands of Bible-study groups that had been formed in various COGIC churches. Though it might have been easier simply to appoint his wife, they had young children, which probably prohibited her participation. The woman who would fill this vacant leadership role he found on an evangelistic trip to Dermott, Arkansas, in 1911.

Elizabeth Isabelle was born to Mose Smith and Elizabeth Jackson in Phillips County, Arkansas, on 5 April 1860.<sup>2</sup> Records do not indicate whether her parents were legally married. It is unclear whether she was born on a large plantation. In any case, in *A Slave Becomes an Organizer*, it is suggested that Elizabeth, later known as Lizzie, was born a slave.<sup>3</sup> Little is known about her early life, but by the time the war was over her father was dead and her mother was left with five siblings. She was forced to work in the fields. Her mother, herself unable to read, sent her children to school. Lizzie is reported to have begun reading the Bible at age eight,

---

<sup>1</sup>Chas.A Pleas Fifty Years Achievement: A Period in the History of the Church of God in Christ.(COGIC Public Relations, Memphis, TN. 1956, reprint 1991)

<sup>2</sup>See Soundex record # 27650, Death Certificate, Lizzie Robinson, December 13, 1945.

<sup>3</sup>This book, which I have been unable to locate, is cited in James Tinney's Black Pentecostal Bibliography and C.P. Jones Bibliography of Black Pentecostals.

reading for herself and for her mother's friends. When her mother died, Lizzie, at age fifteen, became a caretaker to her siblings'. In 1880 she married her first husband, William Henry Holt, with whom she had one daughter, Ida Florence. Holt died a short time afterward, and Lizzie remarried, this time to William H. Woods. It is during this marriage that she joined the Baptist church at Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1892.

The turning point in her religious life was when she began to read *Hope*, a monthly Bible study published by Joanna P. Moore, a white American Baptist missionary. *Hope* had its origins as a lesson plan for mother's training, but soon developed into a nondenominational magazine that included several Sunday School lessons, a guide for Bible bands, and "stories of self denial" to inspire the missionary cause. Lesson plans or mother's training included basic household and childcare duties with a Biblical slant. Moore traveled extensively throughout the South training black men and women, organizing women's societies, and helping prominent Black Baptist women like Virginia Broughton educate congregations on women's roles in the family and home and the race at large.<sup>4</sup> Advertised in black Baptist newspapers, *Hope* supplied information on the various women's-convention organizations of the black Baptist church, and served as a resource for those writing letters to Moore about temperance work and family life.<sup>5</sup> Moore's work with *Hope* and the training schools emphasized a woman's duties to her family. Mothers' training schools trained women in domestic duties, uxorial (wifely) duties, child-rearing, and cleanliness.<sup>6</sup> In addition, *Hope's* emphasis on the spiritual, especially on the sanctifying and empowering functions of the Holy Spirit, gave the magazine a theological dimension. Moore, influenced by the Holiness movement, encouraged readers to become sanctified.

*Hope's* concern with the spiritual and the practical touched a chord in Robinson. Recounting his experience of reading the magazine for the first time, Robinson claimed it made

---

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 98-100. Also, Joanna P. Moore, *In Christ's Stead*. (Chicago, Il. Women's Baptist Home Mission Society, 1902) 98

<sup>5</sup>Moore, 99

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 100

her realize that she needed a “deeper life.” In 1901, at the age of 41, she sought for and obtained the experience of sanctification. The terminology of “deeper life” or “higher life” was a hallmark phrase of the Holiness movement.<sup>7</sup> After becoming sanctified, Lizzie contacted Joanna Moore and began writing to her, which Lizzie recalls as follows; “Sis Moore said that there was something in me that touched her. She begged the Lord to take my hands out of the wash tubs and fill them with good books and bibles that I might go from house to house and teach God’s people that were lost sheep, that didn’t know the way.”<sup>8</sup>

As a result of their correspondence, Moore prevailed on the missionary society of the American Baptists to send Robinson back to school for two years, to a Baptist training academy in Dermott, Arkansas. When she had completed her studies, she was appointed matron of the academy. She describes her duties of praying and teaching children from the Bible: “There I prayed and taught the children out of the Bible. I told them when we read the Bible God is talking to us. Sometimes in our prayer and bible reading the children would cry and refuse to eat their breakfast.”<sup>9</sup> The holiness teaching Moore transmitted through the pages of *Hope* was an important influence on Robinson’s life. Years after joining COGIC, Robinson continued to use the magazine, until the Women’s Department began to produce their own pamphlets on Holiness and domestic duties. The sanctification experience, coupled with her matron training, prepared Robinson for her introduction to Mason and the Pentecostal movement.

### Robinson and Mason Meet

In May 1911, General Overseer (Bishop) Mason conducted a meeting at the Baptist academy in Dermott, Arkansas where Robinson (née Woods) was matron. It is unclear whether Mason was holding an evangelistic meeting or had come to Dermott purposely to seek out

---

<sup>7</sup>Donald W. Dayton. *The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*. (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1987) 104, 173-174

<sup>8</sup> "Church of God in Christ 's 37th Annual Women's Convention." COGIC, 1988. Reprint of *Christian Hope Magazine*, April 1937. “History of the Bible Band, #334”, by Mother Lizzie Roberson (Robinson)

<sup>9</sup>"The Voice of Mother Robinson-First General Supervisor of Women, Churches of God in Christ, Inc." *The Whole Truth*, 1968, p.3. col 2.

Robinson.<sup>10</sup> Several accounts suggest that in his search for a woman capable of organizing the women of COGIC, he had heard Robinson's name mentioned several times by those who had heard her teach in the Dermott area. Others who have studied COGIC speculated that Bishop Mason was unmarried, and that pressured him to find a leader for the women of COGIC. That analysis is unfounded, since Mason had remarried in 1905.<sup>11</sup> Robinson recounts their meeting:

I was sanctified in the Baptist School but did not have the Baptism of the Holy Ghost. Elder Roach was pastoring the Church of God in Christ at Dermott at that time and Bishop Mason came there to preach and came to the school. There was a teacher in the school who would go where Brother Mason was when he would come. That time he came on a Saturday and it was the day I would always go down to pay my grocery bill, but I saw him coming and I didn't go, I sent an errand boy. When Brother Mason came in he asked me where was the other lady. They were upstairs. Mrs. Crow, Mrs. Jones, and Mrs. Cora came downstairs and he began to teach us, I told him that I had been living right for six years but I hadn't been baptized with the Holy Ghost. So, I received the baptism of the Holy Ghost that day, and Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Crow, and Mrs. Stewart looked on and were amazed.<sup>12</sup>

Robinson received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and that marked the end of Robinson's relationship with the Baptist school and Baptist preachers. Reception of the "gift", "speaking in tongues," or *glossolalia*, meant swift disfellowship from Baptist circles.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Pleas, 12. Pleas account indicates that Robinson's name had been brought to Mason, and he inquired after her, subsequently forming an acquaintance. In true COGIC fashion however, other reports, even Robinson's, tend to be more spiritually oriented and hagiographical rather than factual.

<sup>11</sup>In the Cheryl Townsend Gilkes article, "Women in the Sanctified Church", *Signs*, Summer 1985, Gilkes refers to Mason's leadership of COGIC as a historical accident, because he had been previously divorced from his first wife Alice Sexton in 1893. However, Sexton died in 1904-05, clearing the way for Mason to remarry Lelia Washington, mother of his eight children, sometime in 1905. She died in 1936, after 31 years of marriage. Mason then remarried to Elsie Washington in 1943. See, Mason, Charles Harrison, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, 586, also, Profile of Charles Harrison Mason, n.p. N.d.

<sup>12</sup>"Women's Page", *Whole Truth* Feb, 1968. 3.

<sup>13</sup>Most Baptists of the day were cessationists, meaning that the charisma, or gifts had ceased after the apostle's death. These gifts were for the early church, not the modern era.

Robinson relates that “two of the Baptist preachers said they would go down yonder [to hell] before they would let me stay in the school.”<sup>14</sup> It was permissible to be sanctified and to live a holy life, but not to speak in tongues. Although Baptists initially shunned holiness teachings, they found them far less unacceptable than the “fanatical” speaking-in-tongues that Pentecostals claimed accompanied baptism in the Holy Spirit and served as evidence of sanctification. Finding herself disfellowshipped, Robinson returned to her children in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. She relates that by this time her husband Woods was dead, and that she received an offer from Elder Frank O’Brien to teach in the Baptists’ central district. When the Baptists heard that she had been baptized with the “Holy Ghost and Fire,” as she put it, they were “so sorry, they hated to give me up.”<sup>15</sup> The opportunity lost, she soon had another opportunity to use her abilities.

Elder R. E. Hart, originally an A.M.E. minister and lawyer, had converted to Pentecostal beliefs and helped Mason and COGIC during the split between Jones and Mason over speaking in tongues. Hart also helped to reorganize the church in 1909 after the lawsuit was ended, and traveled in the tri-state area (Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee) preaching.<sup>16</sup> He asked Robinson to accompany him on one of his teaching trips in Tennessee. It was a meeting in Trenton. Robinson attended and under Hart’s auspices held services for integrated congregations consisting of blacks and whites. In Robinson’s estimation, the meeting was successful. Twenty were saved and some received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Robinson journeyed on to Brownsville, Tennessee and conducted evangelistic meetings there as well. Encouraged by her successes, she focused her sights on traveling to COGIC headquarters in Memphis. However, Dr. Hart encouraged her to do otherwise. “Daughter,” he told her, as she recounts, “the preachers will fight you there because they do not allow women to preach there.”<sup>17</sup>

Robinson’s reply to Hart lays a foundation for an important distinction in COGIC thinking on women’s roles and duties in ministerial capacities. Women were allowed to be

---

<sup>14</sup>Women’s Page, 3.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Pleas, 8

<sup>17</sup>Women’s Page,3

“teachers” but not “preachers,” said Robinson. Before becoming an appointed leader of the women of COGIC, Robinson accepted this distinction.

Dr. Hart thought all teaching was preaching. I said to him, I am not a preacher. I have not been called to preach. In Mark 26, he [Jesus] told the women to tell his disciples to meet him in Galilee. Judas killed himself but eleven were there and they came in and the last chapter of Mark, he told the Preachers to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He,[Jesus] never called a woman’s name. He never called a woman to preach.<sup>18</sup>

By making this distinction between preaching and teaching, Robinson could ascend to a position of women’s leadership without disrupting male leadership both inside and outside COGIC. Although the distinction was beginning to come into play in other Pentecostal denominations, the Baptist influence on Robinson died hard. Women were not allowed to preach in black Baptist denominations, and Robinson’s early training held fast. It is interesting, however, that Hart, coming from a different background, felt that what she was doing was essentially “preaching.” Women such as Jarena Lee and others had preached from A.M.E pulpits. Therefore, his interpretation of what she did as a speaker differed.

Using the word *teaching*, Robinson emphasized the educational function of Biblical training rather than preaching skills. One might describe the distinction between teaching and preaching as the difference between “learning the word” and “acting on the word.” The teaching monikers used for women, especially black women in male-dominated churches, allowed for women to take the side of the pulpit to address the congregation, rather than standing in the place of honor for the pastor, who was the preacher, anointed to do God’s work. As James Tinney notes, COGIC reserves the realm of preaching for men, while women are allowed only to proclaim or teach.<sup>19</sup> Others believe that the teaching office of COGIC simply sounds more feminine and ladylike, even though the content of the message taught by a woman may not be

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, col 3.

<sup>19</sup>James Tinney, quoted by Peter Goldsmith in “Woman’s Place is in the Church” The Journal of Religious Thought, 68, footnote #45

appreciably different from the content of the message preached by a man.<sup>20</sup> Gilkes refers to the emphasis that the sanctified churches place on educational roles as not just a form of female segregation, but as alternative structures for authority, career pathways, and spheres of influence.<sup>21</sup> In COGIC, the definition of teaching allowed women to take a leadership role that would not usurp the preaching role of pastors. Women who taught in the congregation were instructed to speak while standing to the side of the pulpit, not from the pulpit itself.<sup>22</sup> Robinson's use of the word *teaching*, therefore, rather than *preaching* may foreshadow the direction in which she would lead the women in the Women's Department of COGIC.

After her successful meetings, Robinson wrote to Mason expressing a desire to come to Memphis. Mason responded by extending her an invitation. He had not seen her since his visit to Dermott. She arrived in Memphis and stayed with a Sister Georgia Westfield, making house visits (missionary calls) and then returning to Mason's church to teach.<sup>23</sup> Robinson's teaching mission in Memphis was received with considerably less approval than were her evangelistic meetings. She writes that, when at one of her first teaching meetings the men realized she would lead, "Forty-five or Fifty people went out of that house in a solid Prayer line."<sup>24</sup> Most of the men did not want to hear her quoting Scripture either, and protested against her efforts. Mason, who was observing her during this time, asked her to begin teaching in the morning sessions rather than the afternoon sessions, when most of the men would attend. Even the men who attended the morning messages left, taking their hats and shaking their heads. The next day, more men came, and when they heard Robinson begin to teach they got up to go out. Watching secretly, Mason got up and said, "Go back and sit down, go back and sit down and

---

<sup>20</sup>H. Carlyle Church Jr. "The Accommodation and Liberation of Women in the Church of God in Christ." *Journal of Religious Thought* 52/53, no. 2/1 (1996): 87

<sup>21</sup>Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. "Together and in Harness: Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10, no. 41 (1985)689

<sup>22</sup>Melvin D. Williams. *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church; An Anthropological Study*. (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974) 31

<sup>23</sup>Whole truth, February 1968, col 3.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid

learn some sense, every one of you sit down, go back and sit down.”<sup>25</sup>

What male and female roles should be in COGIC were hotly contested during this time. Robinson’s reports that the relationship between COGIC preachers and the women deteriorated and became adversarial because the women had said that the “Man’s time is out.” Women in the church, at least in Memphis, were beginning to question the male leadership in general and, in particular, the denial that women had the right to preach. As they understood the Pentecostal hermeneutic of the time—that the Spirit could fall upon all flesh—there should have been no reason to prohibit women from teaching. Robinson found herself caught right in the middle of the fray, taking a determined stand in order to address the concerns of the women she represented.

I said to the women if the man’s time is out, why don’t you quit your husbands? Jeremiah said, ‘run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now and know and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgement, that seeketh the truth and I will pardon the city’. God wants a man. Jesus Christ always called himself the Son of Man, and you say you are going to hear a man. They had the biggest fight among themselves you ever witness. The men cooled down.<sup>26</sup>

Robinson’s message did not sit well with those women who at that time were loosely organized into two groups, a prayer group and a Bible-study group. Still, Mason had found an advocate for the vision of the mission and the roles specific to men and women in COGIC. He asked Robinson to accompany him to speak at South Fort Pickering, Arkansas. Robinson addressed the women at the meeting while Mason led the men to a different meeting and addressed them there. Robinson confronted the women with their ideas about preaching.

The women were turned over to me and I asked, how many preachers are there? Thirty-two stood up. I asked, who told you to preach? I took them right down to the Bible. One said that God had spoken to her out of the cloud and told her to preach, out of the air, I said, well, the devil is the prince of the air and no one told you to preach but the

---

<sup>25</sup>The Women’s Page,3

<sup>26</sup>The Women’s Page, *The Whole Truth* Feb 1968, 3

devil. This is the way I started to work in this church. I began to teach. The saints need to be taught.<sup>27</sup>

That this confrontation occurred at all clearly shows that the women understood the right to speak in the congregation as the right to preach, in line with early Pentecostal teachings on the matter. Yet Robinson's Baptist background, influences her resoluteness in defining the boundaries for women's roles, by reinforcing their role as teachers and denying via scripture that they had a legitimate role as preachers. In her opinion, preaching implied ordained office, and a strict reading of Scripture that allowed no room for women in leadership roles over men. Her adherence to a strict and literal reading of the Scripture, without making allowances for the work of the Holy Spirit, suggests perhaps the influence of the Baptist teachings that the proper role of women was to keep house, rear their children, and respect their husbands. If male leadership was the Biblical norm, then it would be observed in all realms of life not just in the congregation. Her dismay at the ideas of the COGIC women and their insistence upon preaching shows her concern both that women remain in their "place" and that they were neglecting their role as teachers. Her insistence upon women as teacher also shows her entrenchment in traditional roles accorded to Black women in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. The altercations between her and the COGIC women eventually gave way to Robinson's vision of women as educators, or teachers of doctrine, rather than as pastors exercising primary leadership in COGIC.<sup>28</sup>

By the time of the November convocation in Memphis in 1912, Mason, having had ample opportunity to observe Robinson and to assess her talents, appointed her General Overseer of the Women's Work. The title Overseer, used in the New Testament also to designate a bishop, was here given to Robinson to solidify her appointment over all women's activities.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>Ibid

<sup>28</sup>Church, 80

<sup>29</sup>The term overseer, in the COGIC manual, is defined as: bishops (episkopi). "Overseer emphasizes what the elder or presbyter does" *COGIC Official Manual*, 139, 1973, reprinted 1991, 1992

With this title, she would now be able to speak for COGIC and exercise authority in her effort to organize the women to serve the church. There are no extant records indicating how the appointment was handled at the convocation, however, we know that soon after the closing meeting, Robinson embarked on a journey to Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas to organize the women of COGIC. She wrote that, in the beginning, her job description was to “have general supervision over all the women’s work, and to organize such activities as would be helpful to the work,” and to “evangelize and systematize the work among the women.” The phrase “evangelize and systematize” sums up neatly the way that women’s work was defined to retain core COGIC beliefs and keep women within the church’s organizational structure. Through evangelization, spreading the message of Christ, and the Holiness Pentecostal message of sanctification and speaking in tongues, Robinson was able to lock the women into COGIC. She systematized the various groups of women she found studying and working together. Combining Scripture, doctrine, and practical homemaking and work skills, Robinson was able to organize the women in COGIC into a strong Women’s Department. The combination of faith, organization, and the Holiness Pentecostal message of sanctification and speaking in tongues constituted the core of the belief structures of members of Women’s Department. By using existing structures, Robinson, stressing Scripture, study, and homemaking skills, began to win over and unite the women of COGIC.

### Organization of the Women’s Department

#### *Prayer and Bible Band*

At the time of Robinson’s appointment, the women of COGIC were meeting in two separate groups, a Prayer Band and a Bible Band. The Prayer Band, or group, engaged in corporate prayer, usually in the early mornings. The Bible bands were a Scripture-study group, led by those who could read, for the benefit of those who needed help both to read and to study Scripture. Robinson’s first tour as overseer required her to organize these groups of praying women and Bible-study women into a single organized group, under her leadership. These two

groups existed within the church most likely because of the influx of Baptist women who, like Robinson, had embraced holiness beliefs but, having no opportunities for leadership or growth within the confines of the National Baptist Convention, transferred their membership to other Pentecostal denominations. These women, refugees from their former churches like Robinson, took with them the framework of another organization and attempted to recreate it in their new Pentecostal environment. Small successes on the local level did not lead to corporate growth, however. It was Robinson's duty during this tour to draw in and organize new women. Robinson's first task was to combine the prayer and Bible groups, which she did eventually incorporate into a single unit, the Prayer and Bible Band. Her second task was to insure that all were receiving the same instruction. After her training as a Matron, the greatest resource she had for this was the newspaper *Hope*.

*Hope* was an easy, accessible text for black women to use in Bible studies. In 1901, the National Baptist Publishing Board assumed the newspaper's publication, and that ensured its distribution to many black homes and churches throughout the South, both Baptist and non-Baptist. In *Hope*, Robinson had found a tool for instruction that insured uniformity of teaching and provided sound Biblical advice.<sup>30</sup> Having at her disposal now a set of teachings which she found effective for instilling holiness, she could start to organize the groups around a corporate Bible class. She writes: "I had women go to their various churches and start Bible Bands. The women did not know how to go back home and start the bible class, so I went from church to church and got them started. I went into Arkansas, then to Texas with Mother Chandler for about fifteen or twenty days to organize Bible Bands throughout Texas."<sup>31</sup>

These Bible bands were not the product of Robinson's creativity, but of training format invented by Joanna P. Moore. In her autobiography, "In Christ Stead," Moore explains why she founded the Bible bands. "There is no power strong enough to reform human lives but the power of the Gospel of the son of God. And there is no book that tells about this Gospel but the Bible. Therefore, the great object in all our work has been to get this book into the hands and

---

<sup>30</sup>Pleas, 16

<sup>31</sup>*Whole Truth*, Feb 1928, col 4

hearts of all. This great thought led up to our Bible Band.”<sup>32</sup> Bible bands were designed primarily to help women study Scripture and commit it to memory, so they could teach the Bible to others. Another of their objectives was to supply the destitute with Bibles. Bible Band members were encouraged to carry a Bible with them always, to read at leisure moments if possible. The organization of the group called for officers, which consisted of a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. The daily Scripture readings and studies used in the Bible bands were printed in *Hope*. Its monthly offerings highlighted Scripture and Holiness teachings.<sup>33</sup> The bands were organized as well with a view toward fund-raising. Robinson writes, “I taught them how to make up money in the Bible Bands.” Perhaps initially there were dues to be paid, but later in the *Whole Truth*, the COGIC newspaper, various fund calls were made to the leaders and participants of the prayer and Bible. There are reports that COGIC’s first bank account consisted of \$168.50 that came from funds raised by the Prayer and Bible Band in 1917(8).<sup>34</sup> Mason, receiving the funds from Robinson, put part in white banks and part in the Negro bank, explaining, “Now Sister, you have given me a standing with the banks, now we can build.”<sup>35</sup>

Bible bands also played an important training function for fledgling COGIC pastors, who under Jim Crow were unable to attend Bible schools or to work. Bible bands served as teaching programs and as feeder schools toward ordination. Potential pastors had to attend Prayer and Bible Band regularly and be examined before being recommended for a pastoral appointment.<sup>36</sup> Since women, most of whom were church mothers in local congregations, were prayer and Bible band leaders, they were sanctioned to teach the men. This instruction of men for eventual ordination through the prayer and bible bands is the beginning of church mother’s

---

<sup>32</sup>In Christ’s Stead, 170

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 171

<sup>34</sup>Reprint of Christian Hope Magazine in 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Women’s Convention book, 1988, 334.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid

<sup>36</sup>Lelia Mason Byas oral interview with author, Memphis Tennessee, June 1996

taking an active role in the teaching of the doctrinal beliefs in COGIC. By teaching the men, the church mothers could identify men that were potential candidates for ordination. Just as Robinson had begun teaching men, women received the sanction from Robinson's example to teach "doctrine" to men. Other pragmatic considerations, such as the higher literacy for black women factored in as well. The Sunday-school department was not organized in COGIC until the 1920s, so outside of the Prayer and Bible bands there was no certain way to ensure that potential pastors would be versed in COGIC doctrines.

When the men passed their examinations, usually given by leaders of the Prayer and Bible Band, they were recommended to their state's male overseer, who would determine their competency for ministry.<sup>37</sup> The need to ensure doctrinal correctness, as defined by Bishop Mason, was created by the influx of new members from Baptist and other Pentecostal denominations. Doctrines relating to "no dying," baptism in the name of Jesus only, multiple marriages, and loose notions of divorce—all were a problem for COGIC members, as evidenced by how much of the minutes of convocation meetings are devoted to disputes about these issues. Under the sound leadership of men appointed by Robinson, the Prayer and Bible bands could help to minimize the problems with doctrine and ensure that the beliefs were sound from the back of the pews to the leadership in Memphis.

The Prayer and Bible bands created some of the first leaders of the COGIC Women's Department. Training women to run these newly merged groups presented some problems for Robinson on her initial tour. Mother Chandler was one of the first women appointed to leadership in the Women's Department. As a reward for her zeal in establishing Prayer and Bible bands in churches throughout Texas, she was installed as the Overseer for the Women's Department in Texas. Robinson initially exercised sole authority for choosing her woman's leadership in each state. By choosing women like Chandler, who had organizational skills and some education, Robinson insured that the teachings and beliefs of COGIC would remain uniform.

---

<sup>37</sup>Ibid

### *Sewing Circle and Sunshine Band*

In conjunction with organizing the Prayer and Bible Band, Robinson also started a group called the Sewing Circle, inspired by the story of Dorcas, a seamstress in Acts 9:36-40.<sup>38</sup> These women, previously called “The Daughters of Zion,” were a small, organized group within some COGIC churches, perhaps attending to more practical needs such as sewing and domestic duties. Many of the women, like Robinson, were domestics or washwomen who had joined the church. Therefore, the decision to organize the group around those skills was to some extent dictated by necessity. The Sewing Circle was used to train women in sewing, knitting, crocheting, and related skills. The Sewing Circle handbook provides some basic patterns for items such as Bible covers, lap cloths, and scarves. Much of their handiwork was sold and the proceeds sent to the local or national COGIC church. In the minutes of the 1916 convocation, the women are praised for their industrious work. “The women as heretofore had on hand some of their handiwork, showing how they are still working with their hands to the glory of God....The sisters are still asked to send along bedding, as the meeting is still growing larger each year, and the demand for more cover is necessary.”<sup>39</sup>

The Sewing Circle played an important role in the church during the convocation meetings for the denomination. During Jim Crow, participants traveling to Memphis had for housing only the homes of fellow church members or tents erected by COGIC. As is indicated in the quotation above, the women collected clothing and bedding materials to distribute to those arriving without them. Also, with limited funds from rural COGIC members, proper attire that was handmade and likely to be less expensive than merchandise from white-owned stores amounted to a form of empowerment for church members, while at the same time ensuring that they were “properly dressed,” in accordance with “holiness.”

Another of the domestic duties important to Robinson’s vision for the women of COGIC was child-rearing. Once more, Robinson used the material from Joanna Moore to

---

<sup>38</sup>In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha,(which translated, means Dorcas) who was always doing good and helping the poor.

<sup>39</sup>Lucille J Cornelius. *The Pioneer History of the Church of God in Christ*. (Memphis TN: COGIC Publishing Board, 1975). 52,56

supplement her organization.<sup>40</sup> The Sunshine Band, an in-home Sunday school for children, was established as an auxiliary of the Women's Department to teach young children Bible verses and COGIC doctrine. The Sunshine Band was designed so that children between 5 and 12 years of age could learn scripture verses. This operated in lieu of an organized Sunday school. A Sunday school was established in the first COGIC church in Lexington, Mississippi, but COGIC did not begin to publish quarterly periodicals until 1916. Unlike the Sunshine Band, which was the jurisdiction of the Women's Department, the Sunday school was under the jurisdiction of the denomination's central organization. In addition to functioning as a children's version of the Prayer and Bible Band, the Sunshine Band taught children hymns and sponsored a children's choir and a mini-playhouse that featured events stressing Biblical themes, holiness, pure living.

#### Purity Class

An offshoot of the Sunshine Band, the Purity Class was established in 1926 by Mother Enora C. J. Johnson, one of Robinson's appointees. The purpose of the Purity class was to provide training for male and female adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15. It was one level up from Bible Band. The advent of flapper fashions and "questionable moral behavior" prompted COGIC Mothers to found the Purity Class on the principles of "preserving in Christian youth a high moral standard of living." The moral decay of the 1920s was eroding the principles on which, in the view of COGIC, Christian living was based. Equipped with a creed and song designed expressly for the Purity Class, the Mothers endeavored to instill in their young members, the Puritans, the basics for a sanctified lifestyle—modest dress, abstinence from sex and alcohol, and pure speech.<sup>41</sup>

#### Home and Foreign Mission Board

The Home and Foreign Mission Board was organized in 1926 by Ed Searcy, who was then a member of the House of Prayer International Home and Foreign Mission Board in Portland, Oregon. Robinson on one of her many preaching and organizational tours met Searcy,

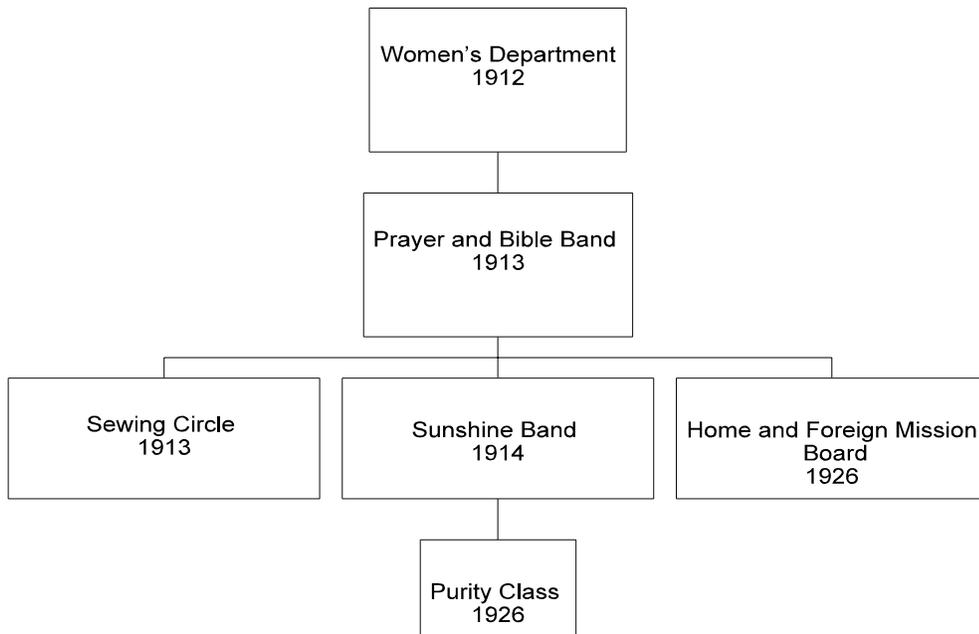
---

<sup>40</sup>Moore, 185-187 discusses the introduction of the sunshine band and its purposes.

<sup>41</sup>Women's Department Handbook, 27

and he later became a member of COGIC. Shortly after he joined, Robinson invited him to meet the other COGIC leaders in Memphis. At Robinson's recommendation, the Elders of COGIC at the 1926 convocation organized and approved a Foreign Missions Band for COGIC. Searcy was made secretary-treasurer of the board, perhaps in part because the House of Prayer had decided to discontinue their home and foreign missions' board and allowed COGIC to take over its operations, even turning over to COGIC the leftover funds in their mission coffers. Searcy's association with the band was brief. After he left it in 1927, Elder C. G. Brown was appointed secretary. Though the initial appointments to leadership positions went to men, Robinson had the authority to appoint missionaries and the band, renamed the Home and Foreign Mission Board in 1937, was an auxiliary of the Women's Department. Lula M. Cox, a Robinson appointee, also served as a charter member of the mission band's board, ensuring that women's concerns would be addressed there. By 1926, the full complement of the Women's Department auxiliaries had been established through the efforts of Robinson.

Women's Department Organizational Chart, 1926



Robinson's relentless traveling during the early years of her tenure as Women's Overseer resulted in a well-organized Women's Department. The organizing work that she did initially in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas led to her meeting and marrying her third husband, Elder Edward Robinson, a COGIC minister. When he and Lizzie married, he traveled with her for a time on her evangelistic tours as she established Prayer and Bible bands and Sewing Circles. In 1916 they moved to Omaha, Nebraska, and founded a COGIC church there. At first they lived with her daughter, Ida Baker, and her husband Archie.<sup>42</sup> Once the church was established, Elder Robinson was unable to travel with Lizzie, and she was accompanied either by her daughter Ida or by several women who would soon be among the first to be appointed state Mothers.

#### The First Church Mothers

Initially, Robinson undertook on her own the organization of the women, establishing a Prayer and Bible Band and a Sewing Circle in each church. The auxiliaries were to be under the leadership of the Women's Department in general, and of Robinson in particular. However, their rapid growth and the great geographic distance between them made it impossible for Robinson to attend to every question on procedure or behavior. It was, therefore, not only expedient but necessary for her to delegate some of her authority. But to whom? The first state Mothers Robinson selected: Fannie Jackson, Lucinda Bostic, Jessie Strickland, Nancy Gamble, and Eliza Hollins. Each had accompanied her on her first evangelistic tours without her husband. At her inception in 1912 Robinson had received the title Overseer of Women, a title not equal to Mason's, which was simply Overseer. Still, the title was estimable, given its implication that she would oversee the entire domain of women's concerns. It is unclear how "Mother" emerged as the title for women in leadership positions, and there is evidence that in the early days the issue of how they should be addressed was marked by some confusion. In the

---

<sup>42</sup>National Register of Historic Places Application, Lizzie Robinson House, sec.8, 3, 1993

minutes from the 1916 convocation, a list of State Mothers from the states of Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Illinois, Texas, and Oklahoma were included, as well as a list of missionaries from each state. In Pleas' account of the first fifty years of COGIC's history, State Mothers, together with leaders for the Women's Department in a few states without State Mothers, are referred to as State Overseers. Pleas notes that subsequently the title of state executives of the Women's Department has been State Mother and then State Supervisor. The title Supervisor is still in use today. As for the term Mother, it is likely that it came into usage because it had historical resonance, recalling the time when it referred to elder women, of mature status (see chapter 1). The missionary tour of duty with Robinson suggests that the women chosen were perhaps Church Mothers in their local congregation due to their maturity and spiritual stature.<sup>43</sup>

In the space of three short years, the number of State Mothers had grown to eight, including Robinson as state Mother of both Arkansas and Oklahoma. The cities of Kansas City and Moberly were assigned their own Mother, in addition to the State Mothers of the states in which they were located. Missionaries numbered thirty-two. Interestingly enough, the missionaries were located only in Tennessee and Arkansas, the states where Robinson began and laid the groundwork for her Women's Department. One might surmise that this was not an accident, that it was intended to insure that the first generation of women to become Missionaries would be longstanding members of COGIC and confirmed in the denomination's doctrines and beliefs. These first COGIC women appointed Missionaries should be not confused with missionaries to foreign countries. Rather, they traveled to and from various COGIC churches in the United States, teaching and evangelizing in cities and towns that did not have a formal COGIC congregation. Many of these women had founded new COGIC congregations. They would set up tent ministries and "dig out" a church for a male to pastor. A woman, or group of women, were said to be "digging out" when they would hold evangelistic meetings, preaching in tents and on street corners in the effort to establish a home meeting in a convert's house. The home or tent meeting would grow. As the membership became more committed, the

---

<sup>43</sup>Mother, perhaps, was a title that was used and conferred by Robinson in deference to her mentor, Joanna Moore, who continued to use the term mother in her writings.

women would send word back to Memphis that a preacher (read: male) needed to come and lead the new church. As the Prayer and Bible bands were established, COGIC congregations began to expand into other geographic regions. Women dug out COGIC churches in many areas of the country as blacks migrated to the northern states and west of the Mississippi. Lucinda Bostic, one of the first state mothers, planted churches in St. Louis.

Mother Lucinda Bostic and Mother Hattie of St. Louis erected a tent at 1430 Colas Avenue as a Mission for the Church of God in Christ. The tent burnt down the first year. Then, with Elder Bell as pastor, the brothers and sisters worked hard, gathering money and building materials. During the day, the ladies and their children washed down the brick used by the Black brigade to be used in the structure of the "First" COGIC in East St. Louis and Southern Illinois. The women also made home-cooked dinners which they sold for 35 cents each...Mother Lucinda Bostic was instrumental in securing Elder A.W. Webb as pastor.<sup>44</sup>

Women worked hard establishing COGIC churches. Manual labor in the service to the church was also service to God. Women were expected not only to work as evangelists, but also to perform the domestic duties, such as dinner sales and needlework sales, necessary to keep the newly planted churches alive. Their eyes ever on expansion, the COGIC women devoted much of their talent and energy to the task of convincing other church members that expansion was good and even necessary. Sometimes, the mere desire to have a Church of God in Christ produced notable results.

A few faithful followers of the Church of God in Christ labored for God in Chicago during the year 1913. Bishop Bostic and Mother Bostic held their first state convocation in 1914. Mother Lillian Brooks Coffey believed that there should be a Church of God in Christ in Chicago. She contacted Elder William Roberts and Bishop C.H. Mason to see if a Church of God in Christ could be opened in Chicago. Elder Roberts then moved his

---

<sup>44</sup>History of Colas Temple Church of God in Christ in: Sherry Sherrod Du Pree, *African American Holiness Pentecostal Movements, An Annotated Bibliography*. Garland Publishing, 1996, 184.

family from Memphis to Chicago in 1917. The Church grew and moved around the city of Chicago.<sup>45</sup>

Not all the church-planting activities initiated by women went so smoothly. Opposition to them came in various forms.

Brothers Mathis and Sisters Fugett, Elija, Prescott, and Warren who were saved under my ministry in 1914 in Waco, Texas , were there (in Tulsa, Oklahoma) trying to raise up a work for the master. They had quite a struggle because of those ministers who claimed to be saved but had not the Spirit nor the vision of God. These faithful women on this work were doing their uttermost to help the brethren get the work established, but every time they would get anything started these visionless, Godless ministers would tear it up.<sup>46</sup>

The interference of men may have had much to do with the perception of the roles that women were accorded in COGIC. Prior to the inception of the Women's Department, women were noted to have been meeting together in prayer groups and Bible-study groups, but otherwise there is no indication that COGIC formally recognized concerns specific to its women members. Once the Women's Department was established and began to become a mobilizing force for women within the denomination, tension between men and women's roles began to develop. Robinson encountered problems with respect to the teaching-versus-preaching issue, in addition to other problems encountered by female Missionaries, suggest that in the beginning leaders of the Women's Department sometimes clashed directly with male pastors. In the minutes of the 1916 convocation, the women are instructed as follows: "Mothers and elect ladies, (are) exhorted to be obedient and hear their Overseers."

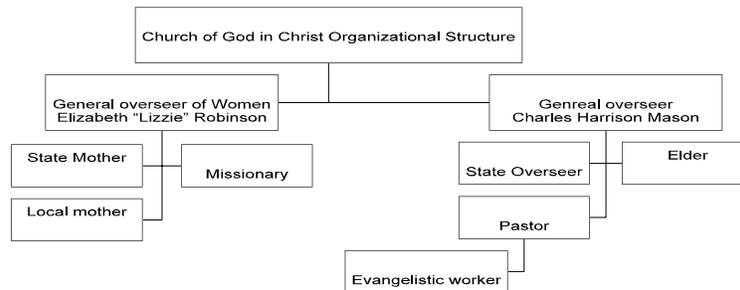
By the time of the 1916 convocation the Episcopal structure of the denomination looked

---

<sup>45</sup> The Church of God in Christ in Illinois, History, In the *Thirty Faith Annual State Convocation of the COGIC of Northern and Southern Illinois, Memorial Souvenir Program 1954*, reprinted in *African American Holiness Pentecostal Movements, An Annotated Bibliography*, 191-192

<sup>46</sup> Pleas, 42

something like this:



In some ways, Robinson had done her job too well in organizing the Women’s Department. The rapid increase in numbers of women in COGIC may have exceeded Robinson’s expectations. The migration of African Americans northward and westward, many being displaced women without spouses, provided a ready source of converts.<sup>47</sup> This growth coupled with the nervousness of the male episcopate toward the growing Women’s Department may well have threatened a delicate working balance between Robinson and Mason. Various admonitions such as the exhortation to Women’s Overseers to be obedient and hear the male overseers to suggest that the growth of women’s participation in COGIC was perceived as a threat to the male-run episcopate. Initially, Robinson, in consultation with Mason, had been responsible for all appointments to the Women’s Department. However, as the number of women belonging to COGIC began to swell, rules for consultation with local pastors and elders began to appear in convocation minutes. By 1924, the Women’s Department had grown to the

---

<sup>47</sup>Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “Surplus Negro Women” in Kelly Miller Smith, *Radicals and Conservatives, and other essays on the Negro in America*. The author, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, posits that with migration to the north, Negro women outnumbered available single Negro men, therefore, marriage was not available, subjecting the women to greater perils. (prostitution, spinsterhood, lack of economic status)

point that it began to supersede the male-led episcopate. A system of checks and balances had to be put in place so that the authority and power of the women would not usurp the delicate balance of spiritual and temporal authority that had favored the men. Initially, Robinson received from Mason great latitude to make appointments in the Women's Department, but by the 1920s the appointments were made jointly by male and female leadership. A statement from the 1924 convocation suggests that male leadership could have a say in what the Women's Department might entail.

The woman's place in the church whereas the woman have proven to be of great help to the church general and are great help to and among the pastors and evangelists with whom she works and that it shall be left with the state overseer and pastors to guide her sphere of work and that each pastor will be granted the power to direct any woman worker in his congregation both the pastor and the woman being subject to the state overseer.<sup>48</sup>

Though in this statement pains were taken to affirm the importance of women to COGIC and its growth, the stipulation that appointments be made jointly by pastors and State Overseers can be interpreted as a measure to insure that the women would not usurp male authority. The prescription above outlined the manner in which women were to "submit" to the male-led episcopate. The male State Overseer and pastors could guide her work, as well as the State Mother and National Mother/Overseer Robinson. Women's leadership appointments had to be sanctioned by both the State Mother and the (male) State Overseer. They in turn were accountable to General Overseer Mason and to Robinson, National Mother.

The sheer number of women who had flocked to COGIC represented a challenge to the male portion of the episcopate. In urban and rural areas, the educational level of the women, and perhaps their earning power, exceeded that of the men. Once given a space in which to create their organization within the denomination, the women now had to share their decision-making power with the men. It would seem, then, that the Mothers would not have much leverage against male interference in their realm. That was not the case, however. While temporal

---

<sup>48</sup>Minutes of the 1924 COGIC Convocation, 38

authority had been conferred to the men, the Mothers held the stronger spiritual authority. The position of Mother in COGIC was an appointment, but it carried greater spiritual than temporal authority. Women like Mother Robinson who were great “teachers” had conferred upon them great charismatic authority that was not easily assailable by men. So even if the pastor or State Overseer was not in agreement with an appointment by a State Mother, she could use her “spiritual authority” to make sure that her candidate was approved. This sharing of gender space gave to men roles of temporal authority and to women roles of temporal and spiritual authority. The Women’s Department, though concerned with women’s issues, could be described as inhabited by women but encircled by men. While Cheryl Townsend Gilkes argues that the Women’s Department was an autonomous space in which women defined their own destinies, shared space is more the case. The organizational space of the Women’s Department insured that men would be involved in the decision-making process throughout the department, but also insured a system of checks and balances would be in place. The ultimate check, spiritual authority, could always be wielded by the women in an effective way. It also provided that the Mothers could cite men’s interference as a scapegoat for unpopular decisions made within the department.

Because of the sharing of the gendered space, the Women’s Department, Robinson and the women leaders collectively could call on the male episcopate to enforce their decision making. In theory, this oversight of the women by the men should have insured the primacy of male authority within the episcopate. However, with the obvious growth in membership of women in COGIC, the denomination found its chief resources in the Women’s Department, whose members raised monies, taught, and imparted doctrine. How, then, were the women able to move forward and carve out a space in which their need could be addressed within the larger framework of denominational polity and the racial issues that were so integral to the denomination’s identity? Through their appointments of educated women to leadership positions, the Women’s Department was able to keep the male episcopate satisfied and at the same time create a triad of leadership responsible for taking the Women’s Department forward.

## Post-Reconstruction Women's Leadership and COGIC

The model of post-Reconstruction women's leadership was sustained in COGIC's Women's Department in the twentieth century. On the one hand, Robinson, establishing and appointing state Mothers, was using the Bible Band model in her effort to find suitable women for leadership positions. On the other hand, Bishop Mason sought educated women, who in some ways were a class above most of the women in the local churches. Where Mother Robinson was looking for faithful workers, Mason looked for faithful workers who were educated and connected to the middle and upper classes of black society. It is difficult to know whether his choices were based on a conscious decision to model the COGIC Women's Department after the women's-club movement—a decision that would have been based on a desire to move from the image of COGIC members as sanctified holy rollers from the backwoods—or were regarded by him as merely a practical measure to fill obvious staffing needs. Whatever the case, it is clear that the women he chose to work alongside Mother Robinson, those to be groomed for future leadership positions, were educated women of the middle and upper classes.

### Lillian Brooks Coffey

Mason's initial pick for leader of the Women's Department was Lillian Brooks Coffey. In the end, she lost out to Robinson because, when Mason made his appointment in 1912, Coffey was too young. Coffey was personally groomed by Mason and his family, and the ties they established lasted for the duration of his leadership of COGIC. Born in Paris, Tennessee, on March 29, 1891, to Jerry and Lula Brooks, little is known about her early life.<sup>49</sup> Coffey's grandfather, a Baptist minister, was an acquaintance of Bishop Mason. Mason would visit their home from time to time, and he made an impression upon young Lillian. When her family moved to Memphis, Coffey attended the Sunday school in the church tent adjacent to Mason's church. She recalls fondly her time with Mason.

---

<sup>49</sup>"Dr Lillian Brooks Coffey Dies." *The Evangelist Speaks, Church of God in Christ*, July 1964, 4.

Bishop Mason started his church in Memphis and when they wanted a Sunday School in their church tent just across the street from where we were living—at 329 South Wellington Street—I along with other neighborhood children, was carried to the services. I liked the singing and soon learned to sing the songs in my childlike manner. I remember them singing “Jesus is a rock in a weary land, and I thought they were saying” Jesus is a rocking in the weary land.”<sup>50</sup>

She was converted in the Sunday School tent ministry. She grew close to the Mason family, and would take care of Bishop Mason’s children in Lexington, Mississippi, where they would spend their summers. She even began to travel with Mason on his evangelistic tours, singing and reading the Bible for him during meetings, and assisting the older women who traveled with him as part of the evangelistic team.<sup>51</sup> It was during this period that she met Lizzie Robinson. It is not clear if it was by Coffey’s invitation or Mason’s that Robinson ended up in Memphis. In any event, Coffey was friendly and cordial. Mason, trusting Coffey’s abilities, wanted to appoint her head of the Women’s Department, but at the tender age of 21 she would have had difficulty leading older women. Robinson’s greater age helped her on that count. So, for the time, Mason continued to train and shape Coffey for eventual leadership. But the sudden death of her parents caused her to have to take her siblings away from Tennessee to other relatives who could help to raise them. She moved to Chicago. While there, she helped to establish a COGIC congregation in the Chicago area, managing to attract enough members to form a congregation, a task at which COGIC men before her had failed.<sup>52</sup> In the 1920s, after some problems with the then Financial Secretary Jesse Strickland, she was appointed to succeed her. She also acted as Secretary for Bishop Mason.<sup>53</sup> The relationship between Mason and

---

<sup>50</sup>Cornelius, 26

<sup>51</sup>Ibid

<sup>52</sup>Pleas, 32-33

<sup>53</sup>Minutes of the General Convocation of the Church of God in Christ. Memphis, Tennessee, 1919-1932., 78,79. Perhaps some of the prevailing opinion among the ranks of the men was revealed when it was discussed that the former financial secretary, Jesse Strickland, was considering suing COGIC. The Overseer (Mason) advised the council “not to trouble themselves about what she threatens as she is a woman and she speaks many things that is (are)

Coffey by then had become truly Svengalian.

He (Mason) knew that I was interested in his welfare and the welfare of his family. He would tell me about the work. During those days he would not allow me to be too idle. He often had me reading the Bible even while he slept in the office. I would complain at times for as the other youngsters I wanted to go down into the Basement and laugh and talk with the folks. He would often say to me “Watch yourself for your future. Someday you will lead the Women of this church and anything you do now will could heavily against your leadership. Now I cannot say that I was always to willing to obey, for I was young and full of life, but I put aside my will and heard what Bishop Mason had to say.<sup>54</sup>

The relationship between Mason and Coffey was close, to say the least. Perhaps in our own time it would be termed unseemly. At that time however, the communal aspects of African-American culture lent themselves to the practice whereby elders would “shepherd” younger people who they thought would be capable of leadership.<sup>55</sup> Coffey’s loyalty to Mason would ensure her loyalty to denominational teachings, because it caused her to perceive them as not just rules but as admonitions from a father figure who oversaw every area of her life.<sup>56</sup> At times Coffey may have questioned Mason, but she adhered to his teachings faithfully, and was rewarded for her faithfulness by being appointed, in the 1930s, Assistant National Mother under Robinson.<sup>57</sup>

---

unsound”

<sup>54</sup>Cornelius, 26

<sup>55</sup>Hans A. Baer, and Merrill Singer. *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century : Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) 159. Baer and Singer talk about the intersecting sets of personal relationships, and this case is no exception. Within COGIC, it is interesting to note how many Bishops, pastors, and church mothers have either familial relations through marriage or other loosely bound family connections, making it an interlinked group .

<sup>56</sup>Cornelius, 26. Coffey married outside of the denomination, against Mason’s wishes.

<sup>57</sup>Pleas, 38

*Arenia Mallory*

Mallory's upbringing clearly placed her among what Du Bois would have called the talented tenth of black society. Unlike Coffey, whose social background was dominated by COGIC itself, Mallory was brought up in an environment that in secular terms was relatively privileged. Her father, Eddy Mallory, an entertainer, traveled around the country with his brother, Frank, performing comedy routines and opening up for musical acts such as Bert Williams, the famous comedian and entertainer. He married Mazy Brooks, and on December 28, 1904, Arenia Mallory was born. Since both her parents were involved in entertainment and music, Mallory took piano lessons in the hope that she would become a concert pianist, a desire of her mother's. However, that would not come to pass. As a teenager she received the gift of speaking in tongues after a tent revival meeting. Soon afterwards, her father died. Her mother, distraught at the turn of events, became infuriated with Mallory when she asked to live and travel with Elder and Mother Carter, who were COGIC missionaries.<sup>58</sup> Her mother gave Mallory an ultimatum: Stay home or live with the Carters permanently. Mallory chose the latter. She began to travel throughout the Midwest, playing music for the Carters' tent revivals.<sup>59</sup> Some time later, at a meeting of the ministers and workers of west Missouri and Nebraska, Bishop Mason met Mallory. He was impressed with her musical ability. Mason was hoping to replace James A Courts, a professor at the Saints Industrial School, which the denomination had founded in 1917. Since Courts was ill and unable to continue day-to-day leadership of the school, Mason approached Mallory and asked if she would be interested in coming to Lexington. Mallory, however, had intentions of going to Africa to become a missionary, having been impressed by the work of Jane Adams and Hull House. Mason replied that there was a "little Africa in Mississippi" and that she could be used there to help their students.<sup>60</sup> Mallory, who had never been South, agreed to travel to Lexington. After a harrowing experience riding the Jim Crow

---

<sup>58</sup>Church of God in Christ. *From The Beginning of C.H. Mason and the Early Pioneers of the Church of God in Christ*. (Memphis, Tennessee: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1991) 66

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, 4-6

<sup>60</sup>From the Beginning, 66

train from Missouri down to Lexington, she found a school in disrepair and marked by obvious extreme poverty. In addition, she found herself at odds with the townspeople because, first, she was considered a Northerner, and then many of them did not want a woman in charge of the school. Practicality prevailed, however. Within a month after her arrival, Courts died and Mallory became president of the school.

Mallory, also handpicked by Mason, had her share of problems with the COGIC leadership. Unlike Robinson, who acquiesced to Mason's leadership, and Coffey, who questioned but never disobeyed, Mallory in her position of leadership in COGIC endured a tenure that was fraught with problems. Some bishops and pastors felt that Mallory, as president of the main educational facility for COGIC youth, had too much power and visibility. In addition, women within COGIC, especially among the leadership, were expected to marry within the denomination or not at all. Mallory married a man who was not a member of the denomination. As is recounted in her biography, this compromised her standing with Mason and the COGIC leadership.

There was one mistake made by Arenia Mallory (according to COGIC standards) that astounded most of our church people during the 30's . She married a young man who was not a member of the church of God in Christ. During those days, if someone married outside the church, you were disfellowshipped: even if you played ball, it was understood that you could not testify until a repentance was made and prayer, asking God's forgiveness, interceded. The young woman already had one strike against her as the head of the Church's only institution of learning- the fact that she was a woman. The Mississippi men felt like another man should have been placed at the head of the school. So she paid a high price for the fault of marrying outside the COGIC. She took a two-year leave from the work that she loved so dearly. <sup>61</sup>

The author of the biography goes on to explain that when Mallory, after her departure from the school, wanted to appear in a church to repent of her marriage, some elders closed the doors of their churches to her. She finally found a COGIC church in New York that allowed her

---

<sup>61</sup>Dovie Marie Simmons, Olivia L Martin. *Down Behind the Sun: The Story of Arenia Conelia Mallory*. (Memphis, Tennessee: Riverside Press, 1983) 39-41

to speak and make her confession.<sup>62</sup>

### Qualifications for Leadership and the Women's Department

As can be seen in the cases of both Mallory and Coffey, their work, sanctioned by Mason, was not immune from the gender politics surrounding the denomination. The requirements for leadership and ministry were defined in large part by Mason's own beliefs as head of the church. His personal background of divorce and remarriage after his first wife's death set the pattern for what was expected of both male and female leadership in COGIC. Convocation minutes recount the hours devoted to negotiating and agreement as to what constituted proper and improper marriages for ministers, evangelists, and members. The marriage issue was important to the business of selecting the triad of women's leadership at the top of the Women's Department, but not as important as Bishop Mason's personal sanction. In the case of both Robinson and Coffey, Mason had the opportunity to observe them for a time before appointing them to the positions of General Mother and Assistant Mother, respectively. This "shepherding" might be described as mentoring, or providing training for the women leaders of COGIC. To insure that the doctrine taught to the women in the various groups would be uniform, the women leaders had to be in line with the male leaders—hence the denomination's strict marriage and divorce laws as set forth by Bishop Mason.

More importantly, the issues surrounding the marriages and divorce exemplify the standards placed on women who, in COGIC culture and belief, were the repository of "culture." Women in leadership positions were expected to uphold high standards of personal conduct. Those standards included marriage only to men within the denomination. The "sitting down" of Mallory infers that nineteenth-century models of leadership for women continued in the denomination, despite the growth of the women's movement in black as well as white sectors of American society. Leadership for women in COGIC meant not only recognition; it also meant strict guidelines that hemmed in all areas of their lives. No matter how educated or prominent, these women were not exempt from chastisement by men in the denomination. To avoid losing

---

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, 41

their offices, both Mallory and Coffey took steps to ensure that their positions would be unassailable. They detached themselves from their spouses in order to work within the structure of the COGIC Women's Department.

Robinson's detachment from her husband came, on the other hand, as a result of his death in the 1930s. It is interesting to note that this triad of women leaders became single in the sense that they had become detached from husbands with whom they would have to contend, husbands who would compete for their time and distract them from their denominational duties. One COGIC woman whom I interviewed described this detachment as being "released" from general duties as a wife.<sup>63</sup> This "release" from God allowed for a husband, in the case of abuse, disagreements about ministry, or opposition to COGIC to 'disappear', allowing a woman to work for the Lord unhindered. Death or Divorce also allowed a woman to be released from her wifely duties in order to serve God better. For these three women, release allowed them to take more control of the areas they served in, so that they would eventually steer the Women's Department in a direction agreeable both to them and to the male leadership of the denomination.

### Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the history of the establishment of the Women's Department and of the auxiliaries that originally constituted it. Mother Lizzie Robinson, the first General Mother, modeled most of the Women's Department after Baptist missions that had been introduced to the black Baptist church by the missionary Joanna P. Moore, and through the missionary work of the American Baptist Hope Mission Society. From COGIC Prayer bands and Bible Bands, Robinson formed the Women's Department after her appointment by Bishop Mason in 1912. However, the tensions between men and women within COGIC continued to mount. Robinson did her best to accommodate women and keep them in the place where COGIC men and the surrounding culture required them to be. Mason also

---

<sup>63</sup>Phyllis Barnett, An interview with the author. May 31, 2000, Los Angeles, CA. Mother Barnett is a pastors' wife and Church Mother at New Canaan COGIC, and also was a student at Saints Industrial School from 1945-1947.

expanded the roles for women by appointing Arenia Mallory over the Saints Industrial School, and by appointing the second General Mother (supervisor) Lillian Brooks Coffey to be his secretary, personal assistant, and treasurer, grooming her for her eventual leadership of the Women's Department. Through divorce and the death of husbands, the major women leaders were unmarried. This, in turn, I believe, consolidated their position as teachers and enforcers of holy and sanctified lifestyles. Their release allowed the Women's Department to become the primary vehicle and repository for the construction of the denomination's belief and identity. How they accomplished this task will comprise Chapter four.