

## CHAPTER V

### THE MATRIARCH AND HER DAUGHTERS

Mother Lizzie Robinson, our General Mother and Supervisor of the Women's Work, is on the job pushing the work. This woman's worth to the Church of God in Christ is inestimable.<sup>1</sup>

With the reins of the Women's Department resting firmly within the hands of Mother Robinson, the department seemed on its way to lasting prominence and a place alongside the men of the denomination. In contrast to the efficient organization of the Women's Department, chief apostle and Bishop C.H. Mason appointed its first five Overseers (Bishop) to their posts in the 1930's, solidifying the episcopal structure of the clergy.<sup>2</sup> With women in foreign fields as missionaries, women planting churches as evangelists and missionaries to non-COGIC areas, a magazine, Lifted Banner, and Prayer and Bible Band Topics, Mother Robinson's Women's Department was systematized and organized as she had set out to do. The organization of the episcopate of COGIC in the 30's was an affirmation of the organizing of the women and its importance. On a secure foundation, plans were made to begin a new tabernacle for the saints to meet in at the yearly Convocation in Memphis. The Newspaper, The Whole Truth, was filled with comings, goings, and doings of the Women's Department. Yet tensions existed that belied the smooth efficient running of the Women's Department.

Mother Robinson's work, though formidable, was the work of a nineteenth century leader who had not quite leaped into the modernity of the twentieth century. By 1930 Mother Robinson had already reached her fourscore and seven years. Her health, good in the early years, had begun to fail her at times. With a sick husband who passed away in 1937, the rigor of constant travel began to take its toll on her. Trusting in her appointed State Mothers to run the

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<sup>1</sup>Robinson, *The Whole Truth* 1931., 2, col 4

<sup>2</sup>Charles H. Pleas. *Fifty Years Achievement, 1906-1956: A Period in the History of the Church of God in Christ*. Memphis Tennessee: COGIC Public Relations, 1956, reprint 1991., 12.

Women's Department smoothly and her assistant national mother Lillian Coffey, Mother Robinson spent most of her the time running the Women's Department from Omaha. She traveled to churches occasionally with her daughter Ida Baker, and always made a yearly appearance at the National Convocation. Yet absence from regular touring did not hamper her authority or her sternness.

Notice: To Bishops, Overseers, Pastors and State Mothers: I am revoking the licence of the following missionaries, because of their following a split church and will continue to use tour licence to get their books from the bureau to travel over the work. These women are in the state of Minnesota. Their names are as follows: Mrs. Addie Bures , Mrs. Lillie Vaughn, Mrs. Anna McConnell. All are evangelist missionaries and followed a split church. Please do not accept these women as they come to your church.<sup>3</sup>

Despite her advanced age and limited mobility, Robinson kept her fingers on the pulse of activities in the Women's Department, especially dissenting ones. Like the fundamentalists of the 1920's, who strove to hold onto the old landmarks of the Bible against encroaching modernity and technology, Mother Robinson's leadership was designed for a different era. Most of its membership in the early days of the Women's Department lived in rural areas, relying on farming or sharecropping to survive. In the 1930's however, the demographic of the COGIC church member had changed. More urban than rural due to the great migration, many COGIC women were members of storefront churches in such urban areas as Detroit, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, members came in contact with new beliefs, practices, and organizations that questioned the sectarian nature of the 'saints'. New COGIC members were not only from lower economic levels, but from the middle class. Members also had the opportunity to further their education beyond grade or high school. Tensions from members whose experience included a progressive urban lifestyle was imperceptibly forcing the

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<sup>3</sup>The Whole Truth, 1940. 4

<sup>4</sup>See Census of Religious Bodies 1926, 1936.

Women's Department to move towards a redefining of holiness. The redefinition and restructuring would come from within the Women's Department from two members faithful to Mother Robinson: Lillian Coffey and Arenia Mallory.

### Arenia Mallory: Moving The Saints Forward

Arenia's Mallory's work as an educator at the Saints Industrial School was integral in moving COGIC and the Women's Department from the fields to the mainstream of Black American church life. Mallory, as mentioned in Chapter two, was not born and raised in COGIC, but was a convert to the denomination in her late teens. She had been tapped by Bishop Mason during one of his evangelistic tours to take over the administration of Saints Industrial School, a school for children owned by the local COGIC church in Lexington, Mississippi and chartered by the state. The school had been in operation since 1918, and Prof. James Courts was its first principal. He passed away in 1926, leaving the position vacant and the school in need of a principal. Bishop Mason had recruited Mallory to teach at Saints, but had not been forthcoming about the conditions she would find upon her arrival.

At the site of a little school (owned by a Local Church of God in Christ) Miss Mallory found a little frame building erected on brick stilts, a mile and a quarter from the heart of the town of Lexington, surrounded by cotton rows, and located on a dark muddy road. The equipment included a few home made benches, two or three lamps and a few old ironbeds.<sup>5</sup>

Mallory found herself in the midst of a rural reality of the south that was the norm for the day. Schools for African American children in the south were often in poor condition due to lack

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<sup>5</sup>Mayme Osby Brown. "Mississippi Mud." *The Crisis*, May 1936, 142., This article perhaps ran in a series of articles in the black press of the 1940's and 1950's on Mallory. It was included in the Claude Barnett Papers, the founder of the Associated Negro Press wire service for African American newspapers.

of funds, with no state or local support. Whatever children attended were pulled out of school on a regular basis to help bring in the crops at harvest time. The conditions of the school were in a sorry state indeed. The boys and girl's privies were so far way from the school that the boys toilets were called Memphis, and the girls toilets Durant after cities in Tennessee and Mississippi. Water was carried in pots to boil for bathing and a hand pump was the water source at the school. To compound the situation, within a month of Mallory's arrival, the previous teacher in charge died. She took on both administrative and teaching duties. For a short while she worked, but then, her personal life and work collided in dramatic fashion.

According to Mallory's biographer and personal secretary Dovie Simmonds, Mallory had to step down from the leadership of Saints Industrial school for a time because of her marriage to a man who was not a member of COGIC. As is the case in many hagiographic stories however, the truth is usually more colorful and insightful. The story played out in the minutes of the December 10 and 11, 1928 Convocation of COGIC:

Committee reported the finding of Eld. H. C. Clemmons marriage which is as follows: that Eld. Clemmons last marriage to Sister Emma Lee Harper is unscriptural on the ground that since his marriage to Sister Mallory was decided legal that is, that Sister Mallory's marriage to J. Pullam, was found unscriptural. Because she (Mallory) was married to another woman's husband and was freed by the Chief Apostles decision according to scripture and that Eld Clemmons had married her in the knowledge of these things, then left her with a baby born of them for no other causes saving that which he had already known before he married her and Sister Emma Lee Harper of California, obtaining an annulment of his marriage from Sister Mallory through the California Courts by false statements.<sup>6</sup>

One of the more interesting rule and belief in COGIC surrounded the issue of double marriages. Mason, who had been divorced from his first wife, felt that as long as the original spouse was alive, remarriages were not scriptural, no matter what the circumstances of the dissolution. He held fast to that rule in his life, and had made it a cornerstone belief of the

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<sup>6</sup>*Minutes of the General Convocation of the Church of God in Christ. Memphis, Tennessee, 1919-1932., 1928 minutes, 87-88*

denomination. Mallory found herself in a sticky situation when the matter of her marriage was brought before the elders' council in Memphis. She was already looked upon with disdain because some of the male membership of the denomination did not want her running Saints Industrial School.<sup>7</sup> Her biographer claims the reason she found disfavor was that her husband was not a COGIC member. Presumably, the non COGIC member was Pullam. After Mason released her from that liaison, Mallory married Clemmons, a COGIC elder, who left her with child and went to California and married someone else. It is this situation that is being addressed in the minutes above. By having this double marriage, Mallory had put herself in a position of being disciplined and stripped of her position at Saints Industrial School. The committee decided to censure Eld. Clemmons and required him to return to Sister Mallory. The next Day, Eld. Clemmons was allowed to speak to the committee

Eld Clemmons was permitted by the council to make a statement which he did endeavoring to Justify his action, giving for his grounds that he has followed Eld. C.H. Mason's advice in marrying Sister Harper. He also stated that the courts of California condemned or pronounced his first marriage illegal considering his first wife (sister Mallory) a bigamist. After a statement and cross questions asked by the council also explanation given concerning Eld. C.H. Mason advice to Eld. Clemmons. It was ruled by the council that Eld. Clemmons marriage to Sister Harper is unscriptural and that Eld, Clemmons be disfellowshipped from the brotherhood until he repent and make restitution.<sup>8</sup>

The minutes do not record any statement being taken from Mallory. One could speculate that women were not allowed to address the council, but other proceedings acknowledged the presence of women and their contribution. What is clear in this instance is that Clemmons was considered to be the perpetrator of the confusion regarding the marriage, he had not taken his responsibility in caring for the child he had with Mallory, and that his assertion that Mason had given him advice in his marriage to Sister Harper may have been spurious. The

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<sup>7</sup>Dovie Marie Simmons, Martin, Olivia L. *Down Behind the Sun: The Story of Arenia Conelia Mallory*. (Memphis, Tennessee: Riverside Press, 1983) 40

<sup>8</sup>*Minutes*, 89-90

situation spelled disaster for Mallory keeping her position at Saints Industrial School. She took a two-year leave of absence, although there are some indications that she might have been temporarily removed from the position. What also is unclear is the amount of blame that was placed at her feet for the marriages. Given the fact that COGIC women's leadership was expected to portray the ideal holiness woman, Mallory's situation was not in keeping with the image. The separation from the school, despite the problems, was painful. The process of returning was fraught with difficulties as well. In order to prove her repentance, Mallory had to find a church in which to publicly repent for the marriages and disobedience to the church. She had doors of churches closed to her by uncooperative elders until a COGIC church in New York City opened its doors to her, and after the emotional service, was reinstated to her position at Saints Industrial School.<sup>9</sup>

Given the facts that are known, the punishment seemed rather harsh by the standards of the present day. For COGIC, and especially for the Women's Department, it was standard operating procedure. Public repentance and confession were important not only to cleanse oneself as a part of the sanctification process, but to re-pledge obedience to leadership in the church. Mallory, even though an up and coming leader, was still subject to the rules that governed even the lowliest member. Yet disentangling herself from the marriage equipped her to be able to work unhindered by a spouse. Once again, the practice of being released from a marriage worked to Mallory's favor in that it freed her to return to Saints Industrial School. She poured herself into the school in the early Thirties, facing the various problems of lack of funding, supplies, and clothing for the children who attended the school. In order to raise moneys for the school which received very little in the way of contributions from COGIC, she set off with a group of young girls from the school that she organized into a singing group called the Jubilee Harmonizers.

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<sup>9</sup>Mallory's biographer recounts that this is how the famous "Yes Lord" of COGIC came about through Mallory's extemporaneous singing of it at her repentance service. See Simmonds, p 90. The sanctioning of Mallory for two years is an example of the religious sanctioning that can occur in strict church organizations. See also Darren E. Sherkat. "Preference Structures and Normative Constraints in Movements Outside, Between and Within Church Organizations" paper presented at Lilly Foundation Conference, *When Church is Not Enough: The Christian Life and Voluntary Organizations*, 1994, 25.

They traveled across the east coast and the south in the summertime, hoping to raise funds for the school, despite the depression had swept the country.

They went to Abyssinia Baptist church, because it was the largest protestant church in America. Arenia went to see the pastor of the church. She had to wait eight hours to see him. His secretary had sympathy for her and insisted that he hear Arenia...Arenia told the pastor that she had five girls and that they were trying to build a high school down in Mississippi where there was no high school for blacks. Of course, he didn't know her from anyone else. He said, Miss Mallory, do you know that Abyssinia seats 8000 people...We have two services every Sunday morning, and we couldn't possibly let an unknown group come in. Then she said, all I ask is that you give us a chance. He permitted them to come that Sunday morning and sing one song without charging admission. The girls sang, "In My saviors care"...by the time they finished the song, the church was completely broken up... during the depression, they gave us \$8000.00.<sup>10</sup>

Mallory's persistence and relentless travel with the Jubilee Harmonizers began to bring funds and recognition for the Saints Industrial School. Raising funds and collecting clothing for the students through clothing drives, she began to build new buildings on the campus and fund schooling for the children attending the school. Modeling the Harmonizers after the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the students had the opportunity not only to serve, but to see another side of life different than the harsh conditions in Lexington. The new openness to other churches and groups outside of COGIC began in a very slow and deliberate way, to introduce the young in the church to new ideas and ways of behavior. The Whole Truth, COGIC's newspaper, began to run articles concerning the work of Sister Mallory, and the sacrifices she and the other teachers made to keep the school open:

The school has passed through a great crisis this year, due to the failure of the farm crop this year and the low price of cotton. The destitution in Mississippi this year has been very acute. The leading white colleges and schools have had to eliminate one to two months from their usual nine month's schedules. The tuberculosis sanitariums, insane asylums and other institutions have contemplated closing their doors due to lack of funds... In the midst of these great tribulations it did not seem possible to operate our little school which had no possible way to receive help other than God's grace. The

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<sup>10</sup>Simmons, 19-20

board of education suggested closing the school, but Sis. Mallory felt that the work was too important and that too many sacrifices had already been made to give up so easily. She and the faithful faculty offered their services at a minimum salary and without probable chance of receiving that in the future.<sup>11</sup>

Mallory's dedication to the school despite its problems helped it to grow from 10 students to over 400 in the 1930's. Traveling extensively for the school, planting crops, overseeing building projects and the like, Mallory turned from a pampered middle class black woman into a hard-working missionary. She was a model of the nineteenth century black women's leadership role. Her loyalty to COGIC was evident in the work that she did in the school. With only 10 dollars in her pocket when she first arrived, she found funds through the Jubilee Harmonizers, fund raising, and personal appeals to both blacks and whites to keep the school open. Out of the four hundred students attending, only 12 were able to pay their tuition and the rest were subsidized without any pay being received.<sup>12</sup> What was different about Mallory, however, was that by her service, she carved out a place for herself in the top women's leadership for African American women educators. More importantly, she established ties outside of the COGIC that would eventually change her fortunes, as well as the dynamics of the Women's Department.

Mary McLeod Bethune, Mallory, and the National Council of Negro Women.

It is not clear just when or how Arenia Mallory met Mary McLeod Bethune. However their first meeting occurred, the friendship between the two women and their work in educating African American was a shared life goal. Mallory is described as being a protege of Bethune's and probably came in contact with her during her travels with the Jubilee Harmonizers in the 1930's on fund raising tours. Her friendship with Bethune could have been based on the fact that Bethune had embraced holiness teachings earlier in her life, having trained at Moody

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<sup>11</sup>The Whole Truth, Vol VII, # 10, October 1931, 2

<sup>12</sup>Mayme Osby Brown. "Mississippi Mud." *The Crisis*, May 1936. 142



Bible Institute to become a missionary. She was denied a missionary post in Africa because of her race, and went on to found a school for girls in Florida that later became Bethune-Cookman College.<sup>13</sup> Bethune also went on to found the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), an umbrella organization that encompassed many of the black women's organizations that had been founded at the turn of the century. Mallory was a charter member of the NCNW, and it is safe to assume that Bethune and Mallory made their acquaintance with one another sometime between 1931 and 1935.

Merely saying that the friendship between Bethune and Mallory was important would miss the enormous importance and impact that the friendship had upon the Women's Department of COGIC and the denomination at large. In 1935, upon founding the NCNW, Bethune's already prominent position rose as she was tapped the following year by then President Franklin D Roosevelt as Director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, a position she occupied from 1936 to 1943. The appointment working with Negro youth opened the doors to the White House. Bethune's friendship with Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, also afforded her a position on Eleanor's Kitchen Cabinet. Through Bethune's access to the White House, Mallory's access was open as well. In 1937, Mallory had the opportunity to present her work with Saint's Industrial school at the White house to President and Mrs. Roosevelt, singing for them. In 1936, she was featured in the May issue of the 1936 issue of the Crisis, with the front page article written about her called "Mississippi Mud".

Residents of the famous and infamous Mississippi Delta look almost with reverence on the woman who, coming on the scene a total stranger a scant eleven years ago, has wrought the miracle of feeding clothing and educating children without the aid of financial appropriations or endowments from any source. Hundreds of them call her "Mother", and thousands pray for her life to be perpetuated. She gave them hope when they had done hoping; she gave them opportunity when all other doors were kept shut, and so they would look upon her almost as they would a god.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rosemary Skinner Keller, and Ch. *Women and Religion in America*. 1st ed.(San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 97. Many of those who trained at Moody were holiness proponents.

<sup>14</sup>Crisis, 142

The article chronicles her work with Saints Industrial School and the conditions that the school was begun in, and gave her a prominent place among the black women's educators of the day. The Crisis article lauded her in this manner: "Florida has its Mary McLeod Bethune, North Carolina its Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Mississippi Arenia Cornelia Mallory, who, out of Mississippi mud, has made it possible for children born, or yet unborn to have a better heritage than chopping cotton".<sup>15</sup> In addition to all her work with the school, Mallory found the time to receive her bachelor's degree from Jackson college in Jackson, Miss. She also brought health services to the rural areas of Mississippi through the auspices of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. The sorority helped to inoculate children against diphtheria and smallpox, and Mallory provided living expenses for the sorority leaders during their stay.<sup>16</sup>

By working effectively to make Saints Industrial School viable, Mallory cemented her significance to the Women Department, and made the outreaches that were crucial for the next generation of the Women's Department. Her friendship with Bethune brought in new ideas to the Women's Department. Through the connections Mallory made in their travels, a shift began in the rhetoric of education and ideals that COGIC women should aspire to. Articles in The Whole Truth that highlighted her travels on behalf of the school began to link the women of COGIC to a larger work of black women's club work, and education. The sectarian manner in which COGIC had been viewed began to change through Mallory's liaison with Bethune. By the early 1940's, Mallory was appointed regional director of the NCNW, and held yearly meeting of the various regional groups involved. One such meeting that did not receive the proper publicity caused Mallory to write a cordial, but concerned letter to Bethune.

My dear friend and Mother: Just rushed from California to the bedside of my mother who is very ill again...Mother seems a bit better this morning, but very weak. The suspense is quite heavy to bear.....It is impossible to express my disappointment at the lack of publicity the National office (NCNW) gave out regional meeting. "Women United" did

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 142

<sup>16</sup>Crisis, 142

not carry a picture or a report, although the Executive director has both. ..I know you cannot check every little thing, but the director could have seen to it.<sup>17</sup>

What is striking about this letter is that Mallory calls Bethune ‘mother’ in the same letter that she addresses her own natural mother’s illness. She related to Bethune in the manner similar to how COGIC Women’s Department members referred to the older women who were in leadership roles. However, she did not hesitate to complain about the lack of publicity her regional arm of the NCNW had received from the national office. By 1942, Mallory was a force on her own account, soliciting aid from both Washington and black publishing concerns around the country to promote her work. In a letter to Claude Barnett, editor and owner of the Associated Negro Press, she writes:

We are working in connection with this Victory Corps program; and as chairman of the Rural life committee, of the National Negro Women’s council, I am trying to influence the powers that be, to place a Negro citizen both in the Victory Corps Program, and the Red Cross unit for the State. I have done more, perhaps, than any other Negro in this section to bring various types of Health clinics to the rural Negro, and I have made certain important reports form time to time, To Washington, that could not be divulged. The type of service that I render my people in this benighted state must go unsung, and without mention, due to the ignorance and prejudices of the other group.<sup>18</sup>

Mallory’s work, it seems, had already crossed the confines of COGIC and the Women’s Department in its scope. By using the school as platform, she was able to position herself both as educator and a type of emancipator. Bethune’s friendship had given her access to Washington, and though not clear what she means by making reports to Washington. It would be safe to assume that she was in contact with Eleanor Roosevelt’s kitchen cabinet, making reports on race relations and other areas of concern to the Black peoples in the State of Mississippi. By making

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<sup>17</sup>Mary Mcleod Bethune Papers, correspondence, Arenia Mallory to Mary Bethune, June 13, 1949

<sup>18</sup>Claude Barnett Papers, correspondence, Arenia Mallory to Claude Barnett, November 13, 1942.

contacts outside of COGIC, the methods that she gained from working with the NCNW began to slowly infiltrate and change the ways in which the Women's Department of COGIC was administered. It also allowed Mallory to have other similar structures to exercise her talents.<sup>19</sup> The foundation of the basic holiness teachings of cleansing, sacrifice and consecration were evident both in her work in the school and the holiness-based education that the students received. However, the many meetings, publicity and partnerships with other black organizations such as the NCNW, the NAACP and others began to put the Women's Department in a different light. Despite her prominence, Mallory did not have enough clout on her own to fully influence a complete change. The changes that were wrought came about through an internal partnership between Mallory and Lillian Brooks Coffey.

#### Little Lillian and the Women's Department

Lillian Brooks Coffey, unlike Mallory, had been in COGIC practically all of her life. Mallory was groomed from a very early age not by the women, but by Bishop Mason to someday lead the Women's Department.<sup>20</sup> It is said that he originally wanted to appoint Coffey as leader of the Women's Work originally, but she was too young for the type of work Mason wanted her to do. Coffey, however, had a hard life. Her mother passed away giving birth when Coffey was 16, and soon after, she moved to Chicago along with her three siblings. After her arrival, she had to return to Tennessee to care for her ailing father. He died within a few months after her return, and the baby sister born at her mother's death passed soon after.<sup>21</sup> The family once again moved back to Chicago. Moving with an aunt, she got a job as a hotel maid. Coffey married in her early twenties to Samuel Coffey, a non-COGIC Pentecostal, who was employed as an interior decorator. They had two daughters, and a third child that died soon after birth. Coffey, not

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<sup>19</sup>Sherkat, 9

<sup>20</sup>See chapter three, where I outline her original story of being in Mason's care.

<sup>21</sup>Lillian S. Calhoun. "Woman on the Go for God." *Ebony*, May 1963 1963, 78-88.,81

completely over her “sanctified life”, began to feel a pull towards the life of evangelism and missionary work. She also was a gifted singer. Using these talents, she began to work at planting churches in the Chicago area with an evangelistic team.<sup>22</sup> She started off as a missionary in the area, holding home and outdoor meetings. Credited with beginning to the work of COGIC in the state of Illinois, Coffey is referred to in reverential terms.

Since God has ordained it that women should be our helpmeet, in the work, as the clock of history records the fact of generations past, there was found in Chicago during those early years a woman of much perseverance, faith and optimism known then as daughter Coffey. She believed that Church of God in Christ should and ought to be a great stronghold for God in the city of Chicago. Being convinced of this fact it was she that made the plans with others that the contacting of Elder Wm. Roberts, then assistant pastor to Bishop C.H. Mason in Memphis, Tennessee, that we should have a church that would be second to none if Brother Willie was given an opportunity to work here.<sup>23</sup>

Coffey is said to have been instrumental in the planting of 11 churches in the Chicago area for COGIC. She started the first COGIC church in Chicago by renting a place in which to hold a mission, and calling for a preacher, Elder Roberts. Though the above quote is laudatory in its own right, the credit for starting the church was not given solely to her, much in keeping with the idea of self denial and sacrifice. Coffey was said to have been the first COGIC official to establish branches above the Mason-Dixon line.<sup>24</sup> Evangelistic work in COGIC for women was often hard, and at their own expense. Coffey led a team that traveled through Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Minnesota, planting COGIC churches. Standing on street corners preaching, inviting people to house meetings, and attempting to find suitable meeting places at one’s own expense took its toll on Coffey’s health and marriage. Coffey’s children and siblings were being

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<sup>22</sup>Patricia Casenia Wells, Historical Overview of the Establishment of the Church of God in Christ, Doctor of Ministry, International Bible Institute and Seminary.

<sup>23</sup>Charles H. Pleas. *Fifty Years Achievement, 1906-1956: A Period in the History of the Church of God in Christ*. Memphis Tennessee: COGIC Public Relations, 1956, reprint 1991. 32-33

<sup>24</sup> Ebony, 84

cared for by a Mrs. Mattie Thompson, allowing Coffey to travel unhindered. Though successful in having pastors from Memphis and other places to assist her, the strain on her marriage became evident. She began having problems at home with her husband because of her traveling.

There were no quarrels or spats: the vices of life just lured him away from God and his home. I always think of it as two beautiful lives spoiled. I was very zealous. I often bare that experience to young women, telling them to be more attentive in their homes and not to let their religious work overlap. However, I never neglected our home because I have always liked a nicely-kept well ordered home. I really think, that as I went on, he stood still. Being a man, he waited too long and when we might have reconciled, I had gone on and become a little more independent. I was daily gaining national and international influence. This may have made the span too wide to bridge...<sup>25</sup>

Others tell her story differently. Coffey's relentless traveling, her meetings in the home, and neglect of her husband, it is said, caused the rift between them.<sup>26</sup> Her husband's thoughts are not revealed regarding her ministry and travel, yet filing for divorce perhaps told his feelings succinctly. In much the same way as Mallory, Coffey's her loss of a husband did not diminish her position in COGIC, rather, it released her to greater freedom to work for the denomination and the Women's Department. Mason, however, did forbid Coffey to remarry on the grounds that her first husband was still alive. "He (Mason) forbade my marrying and told me it would slap me in the face when I wanted to teach God's pure word. This I often wondered about, but he said do it and remain as I was, so I remained single to this day."<sup>27</sup>

Coffey's loyalty to Mason on the one hand was pure obedience to leadership indicative of COGIC Women's Departments beliefs on what constituted a sanctified woman or saint. Within Coffey's statement are the seeds of her difference from the older Church Mothers and Mother Robinson. She obeyed, but had the 'pluck' to wonder about Mason's admonition against

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<sup>25</sup>Wells, also, Ebony 1963, 34-35

<sup>26</sup> Mother McDaniel, Pastor Anne Love, interview with the author, July 16, 2000, Omaha Nebraska.

<sup>27</sup>Lucille J Cornelius. *The Pioneer History of the Church of God in Christ*. Memphis TN: COGIC, 1975., 26

re-marriage. It is said that later in the late 40's, a prominent COGIC bishop wished to marry Coffey, but she declined. The loneliness of the work did strike Coffey, however. "Down through the years, I knew I wanted companionship and knew as old age approached, I would be more deeply appreciative of it. But it seemed not my lot. I would work just as hard, but I might have a different approach now, maybe."<sup>28</sup> Both Coffey and Mallory's release from their husbands seems to have been a trend for women in Pentecostal ministries. Aimee Semple McPherson, Katherine Kuhlman and others women leaders seemed to lose their husbands to divorce or death. They were then either restricted from re-marriage, or the re-marriages backfired on them to the extent that they got rid of the replacement husbands.<sup>29</sup> Mallory and Coffey managed to usurp those rules by remaining single, despite the fact that sanctification could be perceived in COGIC as incumbent upon the status of one's marriage. Both women had to work doubly hard to reassure others of their sincerity, holiness, and chastity.<sup>30</sup>

Not only did Coffey lose a husband to the church, but in the early days she also lost her home in a foreclosure because of not attending to her business affairs. Yet, strangely enough, in the 1928 she was appointed Financial Secretary for COGIC.<sup>31</sup> She also served as Bishop Mason's personal secretary for a number of years. The appointment placed her, once again, in close proximity to Memphis and Bishop Mason. Working at the yearly convocation placed Coffey in a new realm. Being a part of the daily business meetings, as well as keeping the financial affairs of COGIC organized, gave her a unique position to see how the denomination was administered. The preparation served her well, for two years later in 1929 she was appointed State Mother over

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<sup>28</sup>Ebony, 84

<sup>29</sup>Edith Blumhofer. *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998., 320-323. Loneliness was cited as one of the reasons McPherson remarried.

<sup>30</sup>In interviews conducted, marriage, evangelistic, or mission work seems to be a pathway to status within the ranks of COGIC women. Church Mothers today, in the tradition of Mother Robinson, do not hesitate to match church members together. There was also in the past a strong prohibition within COGIC to marriage with members outside the denomination.

<sup>31</sup>*Minutes of the General Convocation of the Church of God in Christ*. Memphis, Tennessee, 1919-1932.,100. Coffey served as financial secretary for 21 years.

Michigan. She relocated to Detroit, Michigan, and began her work as a State Mother. The work must have agreed with her and others, as a poem in tribute to her service appeared in an issue of The Whole Truth:

**Zion Mother (dedicated to state mother of Michigan, mother Lillian Coffey on Mothers Day)**

Zion Mother, God bless you  
Faithful worker, kind and true  
Love unspoken, care unfeigned  
Tribute mother is thy name  
Zion mother, greetings true  
Zion daughters send to you  
Mothers tender love and care,  
Joy and heartache both have shared  
Zion mother strong and brave  
Honor to the way you have paved  
Zion daughters feel your care  
Zion daughters need your prayers.<sup>32</sup>

Little Lillian, as Mason often called her, was well liked by both the men and women of COGIC. She was popular, petite, and, though of quiet voice, seemed to have enormous energy and vitality. As Mason predicted, she rose from being state Mother to Assistant General Mother in 1934, second in charge to Mother Robinson. Robinson, unable to travel as much as she used to, gave over some of her duties to Coffey. Coffey ably discharged her duties, traveling frequently until she was felled with a heart attack in 1939.<sup>33</sup> She recovered, and it did not stop her from lending fund-raising assistance to Arenia Mallory for Saints Industrial School.

#### Mallory and Coffey: A Partnership of Change

The pairing of Mallory and Coffey, apart from Mother Robinson's leadership and setting

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<sup>32</sup>"Zion Mother." *The Whole Truth*, 1940 p 3 col 3

<sup>33</sup>Ebony, 88



up the Women's Department, was perhaps the biggest catalyst for the Women's Department moving from a COGIC-centered organization into relationships with other women's organizations within the larger African American community. Mallory and Coffey certainly knew each other prior to Coffey's appointment to assistant General Mother. Mallory's connections with Bethune and the NCNW, however, allowed their friendship to take on a new dimension. As Coffey began to assist Mallory in fund raising for the school, Mallory in turn introduced her to the women of the NCNW and Mary Bethune.<sup>34</sup> In the minutes of the 1942 convocation, their outside endeavors were given a prominent mention.

Mother Coffey was blessed to have a consideration opened for her through the President of Saints Academy Arenia Mallory, to attend the National Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, as a representative of the Church of God in Christ; not as an invited guest but as a leader and a guest of the President's honored wife, Mrs. E Roosevelt; together with Mrs. Bethune, as president of this organization and the many other women of national repute. We know not of no one more eligible for such a position, and to embrace such an occasion, to express herself on "Religious Morale".<sup>35</sup>

Coffey's introduction into the broader world of women's activism and organization within the club movement had enormous implications for the Women's Department. Up to this time, the Women's Department had centered around the goals that were of value to the denomination, sanctification, Christian service, and evangelistic work. The possibilities for liaisons with other groups could occur by introducing the core head leadership in the Women's Department to broader issues of education, race relations, and politics. COGIC and the Women's Department up to this time had been perceived by middle and upper class black society as a storefront church. Social theorists of the times usually described COGIC as a sectarian church

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<sup>34</sup>Cornelius, 45. "Mother Lillian B. Coffey came to her (Mallory's) assistance upon the endorsement of both Bishop Mason and Mother Robinson.

<sup>35</sup>Ruther, 109

with poverty level or lower adherents, with little education.<sup>36</sup> Mallory's relationship to the NCNW and Bethune allowed the upper tier of women's leadership of COGIC an entree into the larger realms of social and political agendas . How and when would these new alliances affect the Women's Department of COGIC?

The introduction of Coffey to the larger world of Women's Club work was a natural course of women working together for shared common goals. Black women were advocates for better education, housing, and job opportunities for women. The racial situation had not changed appreciably, and in the tradition of Bishop Mason, the COGIC Women's Department was open to working with women of other races.<sup>37</sup> The belief structure of COGIC and the Women's Department also played an important role in how Mallory and Coffey began to cultivate like-minded connections with other groups. Individual leaders like Bethune who had embraced holiness teachings were seen as like-minded reformers, pursuing the sanctified life. Pairing together for better education, better homes, better communities, and a better world, Mallory's and Coffey's relationship with groups like the NCNW and the NAACP could only help, not hinder their cause.

These new alliances would not be without consequences. By partnering with groups outside of COGIC, new ideas would come into the Women's Department that would change the outward appearance of the Department, its duties, and Church Mother's responsibilities and tasks. The model of Black women's Post-Reconstruction leadership centered in the office of Church Mother would change, and the definitions of holiness would be woven into a modern version of Sanctified women who were able to speak to clergymen on the one hand and businessmen and politicians on the other. What the new alliances accomplished for the Women's Department was a new framework on an old foundation of holiness. Before the new framework

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<sup>36</sup>Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study of the Deep South*. (New York, New York, Russell & Russell 1966) 234-236

<sup>37</sup>COGIC was initially comprised of both Black and whites, with the majority of whites leaving in 1912-1914 to form the Assemblies of God. However, several white jurisdictions and elders remained, and some white women were active in the women's work, albeit a very small number. In this reference, I refer to Mallory's work under Bethune with Eleanor Roosevelt and other whites in Mississippi on behalf of the Saint's Industrial School.

could take shape fully, the old framework had to pass away.

### The End of an Era and Change

The 1941 convocation in Memphis for the denomination was a time to ponder the loss of the older saints as well as the illness of several of the prominent founders who had helped Mother Robinson in the organization of the Women's Department. Many of those who had been with Mason and Robinson from the beginning were either dead or too ill to attend the yearly convocation in Memphis. Robinson's health was not at its best, and Coffey, recovered from her heart attack, was still frail. Yet the meeting still went on, despite illness and a soon-approaching entrance of the United States into World War II.

God's favor was to us in that he touched the body of our General Mother and brought her as it were from the dead, and let her be at her post of duty. As she appeared in our midst, accompanied by her beautiful and loyal daughter, sister Ida Baker, our hearts overflowed with joy. Just to see her, comforted hearts that had been in sorrow. Her appearance was made possible by the love extended to her by her executive board of women. Assistant General Mother L. Coffey asked for absolute quietness to reign, and the Saints of God to arise at her coming in honor of her presence in the room. Great was the demonstration in God. Tears of joy were shed. She wanted all to know that she was not dead. She is the National Mother exercising all the power invested in her by Senior Bishop Mason, in the organizing of the Women's Work. Her gratefulness extended to all her Mother's staff for their love to her; they coming from far and near to be at her bedside and administer comfort and to pray for her deliverance.<sup>38</sup>

Robinson at this time was 83 years old, and time had caught up with all the travels and sacrifices she had made on behalf of the Women's Work. Despite all of the work she had done, she did not feel as though she could rest on her laurels so to speak, and leave it to others. She

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<sup>38</sup>Ruether, 109-110

appeared at the convocation, frail, seemingly not having enough money to pay for the trip.<sup>39</sup> The manner in which she is greeted is a sign of the status of General Mother as well as Church Mother. All are asked to rise, as though greeting a ruler, in this case a queen or government official. The emphasis on respect and love for Robinson indicated how important and revered the office of Church Mother had become in COGIC. The role of Church Mother had grown from an organizer and spiritual enforcer into a major position of honor and rank within the denomination. The General Mother was accorded virtually the same dignities as Senior Bishop Mason.

The practice of giving such accolades does not fall in line with what could be termed “Pentecostal practice”. Most Pentecostals of the time made an effort to insure that no member, even if a pastor or evangelist, was above another member within the congregation. Attitudes in COGIC towards leadership, particularly in how the Women’s Department began to use ‘protocol’, suggest a continued attitude of racial uplift, and status affiliations through elevation of sanctified roles. The General Mother, as the epitome of the sanctified woman, was to be revered and honored, as in the tradition of the Queen Mothers of Africa. Mother Robinson had a place assigned to her on the platform that was usually to the right of the Senior Bishop Mason, but always within sight range. A special chair was usually given to her, one with cushions, and water and other amenities for the long meetings. If she wished for anything, an assistant, later called an adjutant, would procure what she had requested. Her arrival in a room meant that all persons would have to stand, remaining standing until she had been seated. Usually, a right hand would be raised in blessing towards her as well. As the minutes of the convocation put it, “She was treated as a queen in her own right.” The Church Mother’s role therefore, began to converge by virtue of her work and spiritual stature within the denomination to that similar of the Queen Mothers in Ghana. Like her African counterpart, General Mother Robinson was the head of female leadership and the spiritual shepherd that was the counterpart to male leadership. It is

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<sup>39</sup>“The phrase ‘love extended in the quotation indicates that some type of love offering (monetary gift) was raised by the executive staff to insure her presence at the convocation. This practice is common among the saints, and is usually done to help support travel expenses. The denominational office does not allocate funds for travel.

difficult to determine when Mother Robinson began to be treated in such a manner, but what is certain is that the power and authority of her position relative to the male leadership was now clearly defined and recognized within the denomination. The dual sexed structure of leadership moved from a working relationship to a status relationship. The manner in which the general as well as church and state mothers were treated denotes that these positions were not just for spiritual uplift, but for cultural uplift as well. Surrounded by racism and sexism, the women of COGIC raised the office of the Church Mother through their work and embodiment of holiness to a position of status, authority, and real power. In a time where women and men of the South were called by their first names, or “Auntie” and other derogatory terms, by whites, the emphasis on etiquette and protocol helped to create an enclave of respect for women. With this much authority and recognition, it is easy to see why ordination may not have been an issue for the majority of women participants in the Women’s Department. Even more interestingly, Bishop Mason was often referred to by members as “Dad Mason”, completing the image of the spiritual fictive family of COGIC by the top leadership being referred to as “Dad” and “Mother”<sup>40</sup>

That recognition did not mean that problems were non-existent. In fact, perhaps the positioning of women in these reverential terms caused stains between those who were in power, and those who wanted to attain it. The minutes of the 1941 convocation have strong evidence of strife occurring within the ranks.

Elder R.F. Williams gave the message...Every auxiliary is subordinate to the one cause of saving souls. He said the women of this church have a place and you do not have to fight for a place. The bretheren cannot get along without the women, neither the women without the men. Let the tension down sisters; when the sisters are referred to in admonishing do not be offended; for the scripture is to be given in season and out of season-reprove , rebuke and exhort.<sup>41</sup>

One of the problems that faced the Women’s Department was its unique working relationship with the male episcopate. Despite the fact that the auxiliaries were designed

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<sup>40</sup>Cornelius, 78-79

<sup>41</sup>Ruether, 110

originally to be within the church, women appointed by local or state mothers had leadership over the auxiliaries. In the 1920's as the episcopal structure began to organize, the pastors and state overseers were encouraged to work together with the Women's Department leadership in making appointments to the auxiliaries. Tensions flared if appointments that Church Mothers had approved were not agreeable with the male leadership and vice versa. Women who were also "soul winners" and did more evangelistic work than men were subject to censure and constraint by men who were outside of the purview of the Women's Department. In addition, Mother Robinson's illness had left it up to Coffey and her board of Mothers to try to mediate struggles. Now that she was back at the convocation, she wasted no time trying to redress the problems that had occurred in the balance between men and women's leadership.

Mother gave her daughters more instructions. Speaking, she said, that it was the part of the State Mother to defend the Overseer, and should the wife be serving with him in the capacity of District Missionary (in case of misunderstandings) it would become a husband and wife issue; for the wife or husband will defend one another. People do not want all the church to be consolidated in one house. Go from this meeting and make the changes, then come back to a new appointment. Monetary assessments of the women should not be raised by the Overseer unless in cooperation with the State Mother.<sup>42</sup>

Mother Robinson identifies three areas of contention that she is attempting to diffuse: discord between the Overseers and State Mothers, husband and wife teams who serve as both overseers and missionaries, and Overseers' undue demands for money on the State Mothers. Each of these had the potential to unbalance the delicate balance of power between the Episcopate and the Women's Department. The situation was such that at the close of the Convocation, Elder (Bishop) Mason called for a joint meeting between the Episcopate and the Women's Department. Interestingly, it was open to the whole convocation, not just leadership.

The Bishops and ministers counsel and the women's counsel were together to hear things passed on and things requested from each side. It was an open session to the Convocation at large. Mother Coffey, speaking of misunderstanding, said in expressing

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<sup>42</sup>Ruether, 110

opinions on any particular issue, “You will find that all do not think alike, there may be differences among them; but disagreements should not make us enemies; we are brethren and sisters...”<sup>43</sup>

Mason’s willingness to bring both groups together shows that the women were in charge of handling their own concerns and the men as well. Where there were areas that needed to be discussed jointly, meetings were held in concert to cover areas of disagreement. Though the minutes do not expressly say what areas of misunderstandings or the issues discussed, the fact that they met jointly is evidence in itself of the problems that may have existed between male and female leadership. It also shows how the two groups came together despite the differences to attempt to hash out areas of disagreement. The minutes stating that “things were requested from each side” could be compromise, or simply requests for assistance. The dual sex structure of the episcopate and the Women’s Department could come together to air out differences, and shows a respect and recognitions from the male episcopate towards the Women’s Department that shows their strength and validity to the denomination. If women had been considered marginal to the work in COGIC, a joint meeting would not have been called, and senior Bishop Mason could have issued an edict to quell any unrest.

The direction from Mother Robinson concerning husband and wife teams in the ministry together recognized if they joined together on issues, it would be hard for the episcopate or the Women’s Department to control the outcome of their activities. The admonitions to divide the power of the two between different areas within each state were instituted to divide the power in a household.

Questions were asked Mother concerning the power invested in District Missionaries and those excluded from serving. Those not serving are Minister’s Wives in the same district with the husband. They are privileged to work in any other district. All district Missionaries are subject to the state mother. No district missionaries are to be called

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 112

“Supervisors”. Her appointments are under the supervision of her State Mother: both working in cooperation. Many instructions were given to State Mothers and workers.<sup>44</sup>

With her husband, a woman could be considered no more than the pastor’s wife and accorded the benefits of that office within her district (later jurisdiction). If she had an appointment as a District missionary, it could not be in the same area with her husband. There was also some obvious confusion, deliberate or naive, on the part of what to call District Missionaries. The title of Supervisor was used interchangeably with State Mother at this stage of the Women’s Department organization, and the Mothers wished to make clear the difference between the two. The lines of hierarchical power were also being reiterated by reminding all Saints that District Missionaries were under the Supervision and oversight of the State Mothers, and that they should cooperate with one another.

The problem between the District missionaries and State Mothers (supervisors ) was simply a generational gap. Though it is not said outright, the predisposition to assign older women to the office of Church Mother insured that by the time that they had risen through the ranks to become the State Mother (Supervisor) they were already well into their 60's and their workers were anywhere from their teens to age 50. The gap between the older women and the younger women was more difficult to bridge, considering all the admonitions that were required to live a holy life. Those in the urban areas were presented with different sets of options for education, relationships, and employment. Working in the church or limiting one’s marriage possibilities by marrying another “saint” was not as desirable in the rapidly changing structure of African American women’s lives. The saints no longer held onto the accomodationist culture of the Black Church post-reconstruction and early twentieth century. Members who joined COGIC classified themselves as the “New Negro,” not willing to say ma’am or sir to whites nor to

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<sup>44</sup> Ruether, 110 . District Missionaries differ from missionaries in the sense that they attend to local, not foreign missions work they have the ability to plant new churches, hold evangelistic crusades, and the like.



anyone else.<sup>45</sup> They held progressive ideas about race relations, and were eager to gain economic and worldly rewards instead of working solely for the hope of heaven. The largest catalyst for change, the advent of Pearl Harbor and entrance into World War II, would cement how the roles for women would be redefined.<sup>46</sup> In short, the reins were becoming slack in Mother Robinson's much older hands, and it would take new vitality to get the women back on track. Perhaps she realized it herself as she remarked during the convocation, "You may think Elder Mason and I are too old to run this church, but we have brought you where you are."<sup>47</sup>

### Summary

The 1930's and early 1940's saw changes beginning to take place in the leadership of the Women's Department that would have implications for its future. Mother Robinson's work slowed down as her health began to fail her. Her leadership, however, remained strong, and the women who remained alongside her were more than willing to support her programs in the various auxiliaries. Despite the disputes and problems that sometime arose between the leadership of the women and men, the Women's Department remained in authority and thrived. The beginnings of tension between older and younger members began to show in several disputes, signaling a change in the membership and perhaps a future restructuring of the departments. The advent of the educational endeavors localized under the leadership of Arenia Mallory at Saint's Industrial School opened new doors for women in the denomination. Fund

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<sup>45</sup>The terminology of "New Negro" was used in the literature of the time to denote an African American who was not subject to the race rules of the south. White newspapers used the term perjoratively, while black publications used it to differentiate between the older and younger generations.

<sup>46</sup>Ruether, 112. The convocation recognized the battle at Pearl Harbor during the convocation. "The calamity that suddenly came on the United States (Pearl Harbor) did not dampen the ardor of the saints in rejoicing."

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 112

raising, travel, and connections to other black women educators like Mary Mcleod Bethune not only provided a training ground and school for the Saints, it became the platform in which new alliances between the Women's Department and other groups through the auspices of Mallory and Coffey. Coffey, making her way up the ladder of leadership in the Women's Department, experiencing struggles on her way to the appointment as General Mother in 1935. Her friendship with Mallory led to her introduction to the NCNW and other groups, and her interactions with these groups would have a profound effect upon the Women's Department once she ascended to the post of General Mother. The Matriarchy continued to keep its dual sex structural relationship working, but the strains of change and the ageing of the leadership meant that changes were inevitable. The question was, how would the change affect the old landmark of holiness?