Chapter 5

Gender Relations in the Black Church:
Pentecostal Ecclesiology and Women's Leadership Roles in Transition

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the lived experiences of women in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and presents a model for partnership in leadership with clerics and churchwomen. The model is based on the premise of the visionary founder and "Chief Apostle" of this denomination. Histories of churchwomen in this organization portray them as staunch supporters of ministries in the church. Women in leadership roles were defined by the founder as overseers—a term suggesting honorary prestige to women that was equal to clerical positions in the church. Following the death of the founder, however, churchwomen encountered barriers to leadership positions which lowered their status and authority thus impacting their inclusion, agency, and voice in matters of church leadership and governance.

INTRODUCTION

Following institutionalization of the Black Church in the US and formation of black denominations such as the COGIC, churchwomen continued supporting the social, political, economic and religious agendas initiated by ruling clergymen while being restricted by traditional roles dictated by male authority. Giddings (1984) reports that during the civil rights movement when black churches functioned as the institutional and organizational center, decision-making roles for women were nonexistent. The exclusion of women from occupying significant roles in the church has resulted in their absence of voice and visibility in ecclesiastical conclaves. In particular, the role of women in reference to the COGIC has been prescribed by clerics prohibiting the possibilities for leadership on the clerical level.

Subsequent to the death of Charles Harrison Mason, founder of this denomination, a newly configured ecclesiastical structure was instituted which consisted of a governing board of twelve bishops (Ross 1969; White 2012). The arrangement put women in a subservient position while leadership was dictated by men. This illustrates a model where "the power structures of [COGIC churches] are control[ed] by a board of bishops and the prevalence of an independently organized women's work…where female leaders assume… authority, but with deference and loyalty to the bishops" (Shopshire, 1975). At Mason's funeral, prominent women such as Lillian B. Coffey who was the second International Supervisor of the Women's Department at that time and Arenia Mallory, president of the COGIC's educational institution in Lexington, Mississippi spoke of their close association to the founder. Coffey appealed to the incoming "new" leader (ship) to remember the faithfulness of churchwomen. She "argued for women's centrality to the church, referring to the women, "the great majority" of the church. She reminded the audience that Mason had embraced women's contributions (he "spent much, much time with his daughters") and admonished the remaining male leadership to do the same" (Tucker, 2009, p. 112). Mallory also left her testimony of Mason's impact and support for the school.

This research examines barriers to women's gender justice in the COGIC impacting their agency and continued support of the church. The writer argues in support of a partnership model for leadership between clerics and churchwomen. A transformative and symbiotic model of leadership is the

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