

Chapter 25

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.

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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 “best fit” for this denomination that is steeped in so much history of the late founder.

DISCUSSION

Background

A preview of black religion and its development is necessary in order to mark the genesis of the Black Church. Black religion existed before churches were formed and organized in America (Raboteau, 1978). Independent black churches existed with slave members and masters in attendance. However, these services did not necessarily end on Sundays, because the “invisible institution,” termed black religion under slavery, was carried out secretly in various locations, such as slave meetings in slave quarters, “brush arbors” (secluded thickets), plantation “praise houses” (dwellings set aside for slaves), and camp meetings. Slaves were motivated to hold their own religious meetings because of the unsettling Gospel white preachers espoused who stressed the importance of slaves being obedient to their masters. Therefore, the religion of slaves was formal and informal, structured and unstructured, visible and invisible. The institutionalized Black Church arose in America following the separation of slaves and masters in religious settings.

For this research, the Black Church, which emerged in the U.S., is defined as those “independent, historic, and totally black-controlled denominations, which were founded after the Free African society of 1787 and which constituted the core of black Christians.” These denominations consist of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated; the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated; the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the COGIC (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p.1).

The COGIC traces its origin to an interracial movement, the *Black Holiness-Pentecostal* movement, primarily a late nineteenth and early twentieth-century phenomenon. Scholars are divided on the founding and origin of the Pentecostal-Holiness Movement. Lovett (1973) contends four competing theories exist:

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