

## CHAPTER II

### THE OFFICE OF CHURCH MOTHER AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF BLACK WOMEN AND BLACK MEN IN THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST

The role of the local church mother is indeed one of great importance and a “must” for a growing church. She is to a pastor in the local church what a wife is to her husband in the home...There should be a pastor-church mother relationship going on at all times.<sup>1</sup>

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston referred to black women as “the mules of the world”—they carried everyone’s burdens plus their own.<sup>2</sup> In some ways, the status of black women in the historic black church and in the late nineteenth-century home was burdensome. Expected to perform many of the household duties, contribute to the church, and provide economically for the family, black women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found their options limited. Many black women were employed as domestics or worked as sharecroppers in the South, and were subject to a variety of abuses. Inside and outside the workplace, many black women who worked as domestics were periled by the sexual demands of white males. Life spans were limited by childbearing and harsh conditions in the cotton fields. The rights of black women suffered under the Freedman’s Bureau’s recognition of the black man as the head of the family. Advice from clergy, leadership, and publications reinforced the lower status of black women.<sup>3</sup> Those women who were educated were expected to represent the entire black race with exemplary behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Exacerbating the problem, the attitudes of white Southerners toward blacks were less than charitable. Faced with a newly freed population, whites were resentful, and eager to contain

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<sup>1</sup>Mattie McGlothen, ed. *Women’s Department Revised Edition of Organization and Procedure*. (Memphis, Tennessee: COGIC Publishing House, 1989) 21

<sup>2</sup>Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia, 1937), 29

<sup>3</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1999) 342

<sup>4</sup>Deborah Gray White. *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves*. (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999) 42

the advances that were being made by newly freed blacks. By the end of the nineteenth century, the gains of Reconstruction had been whittled away by disenfranchisement, sharecropping, and finally the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Black men and women in the South were now under a state of siege. They were the victims of lynchings perpetrated by white Southerners committed to the objective of keeping blacks subservient, fearful, and obedient. Among the few places of refuge for blacks in the South was the church.

At the same time, the black church had become an agent for perpetuating the patriarchal systems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As in the white church, most leaders in black churches were men. Women’s roles were limited to fund-raising, singing in or directing the choir, and missionary work. “Black men stood in the pulpit,” notes historian Darlene Clark Hine, “and women did everything else.”<sup>5</sup> Acceptance of socialized patriarchal norms was essential to maintain control of circumstances not in control. That is, patriarchy was used to stabilize familial situations made unstable by slavery. Former slaves joining institutional black churches accepted in toto the beliefs, rules, hierarchy, and patriarchal conventions of their white counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Women were expected to yield to these conventions without wavering.<sup>7</sup>

Outside the community, the depressed status of the African American male was reinforced through lynching, economic constraints, and racism in general. Within the community, the position of the black man was supported through a variety of means. After Emancipation, the position of pastor/preacher was held in even higher esteem in the black church, and the position of power that the male pastors attained was virtually unassailable. The pastorate, with its history as a pillar of the black community, was one of the few means that African-American men had available to them to exercise leadership and authority within the community. Desiring to “uplift the race,” and presenting a respectable front to white Americans, members of the Black Church after Emancipation tended to adhere to “Victorian” social mores

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<sup>5</sup>Darlene Clark Hine. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*. (New York: Broadway Books, 1998) 184

<sup>6</sup>C. Eric Lincoln, Mamiya, Lawrence H. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990)., 278

<sup>7</sup>White, 40

and conventions, particularly as they affected the difference between men's and women's spheres of influence. This had the effect of solidifying patriarchy in the Black Church. To understand how the Black Church, and specifically the Church of God in Christ, became a primarily patriarchal structure, it is necessary to consider at least three factors. These are: accommodation to culture (white), Biblical literalism, and the commitment to racial uplift at the expense of gender concerns.

### Accommodation to Culture

Black churches during the latter half of the nineteenth century functioned as the engine of social and political life for blacks in the South. As Reconstruction waned and the Jim Crow laws began to sweep through the South, the church applied a moral and ethical stance to fend off white critiques of black behavior. In order to present a united protective front, the Black Church practiced what Gayraud Wilmore calls "deradicalization." Deradicalization called for an easing of the protests against white supremacy, which was advocated by such black religious leaders as Henry McNeal Turner, in favor of milder opposition.<sup>8</sup> Deradicalization meant that the black church took the defensive rather than the offensive position concerning race relations. Accommodationists like Booker T. Washington and others argued that the only way for the black community to gain equality with whites was to prove themselves worthy through hard work and moral living. Assuming this posture, blacks through the church could accommodate themselves to the strict codes of Southern life and culture. When blacks were depicted by white Southerners as depraved, ungodly, and sexually licentious, churches began to instruct their members in proper behaviors. If black women were thought to be loose and lazy, they were encouraged and instructed in the ways of gentility, good housekeeping, and chastity. Black men were admonished to set good examples as family men and leaders. Temperance was preached, and the hope of heaven, as during slavery, was held up as a hope in the face of everyday suffering.

The most effective agent of deradicalization was the black pastor. His role between the

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<sup>8</sup>Gayraud Wilmore. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*. Third Edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988) 168-169

black and white communities was key to keeping the delicate balance between them. At times a conservative and accommodationist influence, the pastor often walked a fine line between his role as protector of Southern mores and his role as protector of the race.<sup>9</sup> In virtually all cases his occupation as pastor, one of the few of status within the Southern black community, ensured that his directions and advice would always be heeded.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, though, pastors, far from solving or alleviating problems in the black community, actually created them, engaging in corruption and colluding with oppressors.<sup>11</sup> Like their white counterparts, black pastors were able to find within the culture of the times a justification for their leadership based on the predominant cultural bias toward male religious leadership. They were always themselves subject to the whims of white leaders, no special favors being accorded to them by virtue of the Christianity they all shared.

The other factors in the black church's accommodation to a culture that allowed for male leadership were separation of the sexes and the idealization of Southern womanhood. Separation of men's roles from women's was commonplace in Southern society, while the notion of Southern womanhood colored most of the racial rhetoric and belief of the times. Perhaps these issues are best delineated through the methodology used by the historian Barbara Welter. Welter described the nineteenth century as a period when the public sphere was male-dominated, with the private sphere—the home, childrearing, and religious activities—dominated by women.<sup>12</sup> However, for black women, the economic as well as racial environment did not permit the same definition of domesticity as for white women. Domesticity for black women meant work, and the separate sphere they encountered was characterized by racism and inferior facilities. What was common, however, to the woman-dominated private sphere for both blacks and whites were that both were informed by a definition of womanhood that was perceived to be

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<sup>9</sup>Litwack, 389

<sup>10</sup>Lincoln and Mamiya, 278

<sup>11</sup>Litwack, 389, Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*. First ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993) 208

<sup>12</sup> David G. Hackett. "Gender and Religion in American Culture, 1870-1930." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 5, no. 2 (1995): 127-149, 128-129

biblically based. White women could be considered to satisfy this definition because of the virtue attributed to them, especially by Southern society. This idealization of Southern womanhood was by no means limited to white women, as black men, hoping to defend their women from unwanted sexual advances, placed black women on a pedestal also. The pedestal also served to reinforce male authoritarianism, allowing for the black woman to be controlled because she needed “protecting.”<sup>13</sup> Black women, on the other hand, portrayed as being devoid of virtue, clung to Biblical notions of purity and holiness and proper family life as a way to deflect criticism from whites. To compound the situation, black women, as standard-bearers for the race, were encouraged to set an example for whites. The strength of any culture, leaders asserted, should be measured by their women. Black women, therefore, had more than their burden of the culture to share.

The Black Church’s accommodation to the culture of both Jim Crow and nineteenth-century Southern society did net some educational gains, and kept some members alive, but it did little to subdue the pressures of a white populace who considered blacks to be inferior no matter how sound were the family relations of black church members, how well they dressed, or how obeisant they were to whites. Though on the surface black women might seem likely to have enjoyed some protection as a result of accommodation to the dominant culture, they were actually hindered by that accommodation. Patriarchal relationships during this time period in both black and white societies were normal, and in such a racially charged environment there was little room for black women to exercise any authority unless as educators or through child-rearing.

### Biblical Literalism

The interpretation of Scripture as the literal word of God was also an important element in the establishment of the patriarchal foundation of the Black Church. Slave Christianity involved a sophisticated hermeneutic of freedom relative to the message of surrender and docility taught by white Christians. After Emancipation, biblical literalism and fundamentalism played a large role in the interpretation of biblical texts in black churches. Black pastors, usually

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<sup>13</sup>Litwack, 346-347

untrained, took texts in literal fashion and used them to provide guidance in family life. The instruction to “wives to submit to their husbands” and the teaching that a “deacon must be the husband of one wife” contributed to the assumption that the black woman’s place was in the home and not the pulpit.<sup>14</sup> The literal reading of Scripture, used, on the one hand, to speak of freedom, did not commit itself to freedom for women, particularly black women. The Bible, as moral support for patriarchal family norms, contributed to the sanctioning of the authority of the black man over the family.<sup>15</sup> It was even reported that some women had been expelled from black churches for not obeying their husbands.<sup>16</sup> This sanctioning of the black man as head of the family had its echo in the black church, where the pastor’s role as head was reinforced. Though pastors may have acted as agents of social control within the black church, it was, invariably, women who enforced those controls and articulated them in order to keep the power structure of patriarchy intact.<sup>17</sup> By adhering to the patriarchal norms set forth in Scripture, black women attempted, all at the same time, to elicit respect from black men, to support the race, and to diffuse tension with the white community, blunting any assault from it.

### Commitment to Racial Uplift

Inexorably tied to the gender of black women was the issue of race. After Emancipation, this issue was crucial to the gains or lack thereof that black women would make relative to their status both within the community and in the black church. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her landmark history, *Righteous Discontent*, chronicles the rise of the Women’s Convention in the Black Baptist movement. She writes that black women had to assume multiple forms of consciousness within the black church, advocating racial reforms,

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<sup>14</sup>Ephesians 6:22 and I Timothy 2:12.

<sup>15</sup>E. Franklin Frazier. *The Negro Church in America*. ninth ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1963) 39

<sup>16</sup>Paula Giddings. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. 1st ed. (New York: W. Morrow, 1984) 64

<sup>17</sup>Ibid 39-40

assuming a politics of respectability in order to combat stereotypes, and asserting gender self-determination.<sup>18</sup> Using Jurgen Habermas's formulation of the public sphere, she posits black women working within the church operated within a public sphere of discourse with the outside world and black men, at times agreeing and at times dissenting. For instance, in the struggle for racial equality, the women's convention of the National Baptists aligned itself with the male leadership over lynching and Jim Crow laws, yet internally it disagreed on roles for women within the Baptist denomination. The overarching "metalanguage" of race, as Higginbotham terms it, is imbedded within every gender issue that black women faced during this period. This metalanguage blurs and disguises gender and class relations within the black community. She successfully shows how this language is negotiated in the black Baptist Church. In other black churches, these lines of class and gender relations are not so easily transgressed. Jim Crow, lynchings, and economic deprivation all combined to make the black women's issues of gender relationships subject to the greater language of racial equality. Progress on issues of gender equality within the church and without was hampered by the overarching specter of race. The participation of black women in the women's suffrage movement was limited by the racism of white women. In short, black women were barred full participation in their own emancipation because of overarching concerns about race.

The cultural, spiritual, and race concerns of newly freed slaves in the South combined to create an environment in which their tendency toward accommodation, their biblical literalism, and the need they felt for racial uplift would cement the role of male patriarchy in the black church. COGIC, a Southern-based black church, could not hope to escape from these constraints in order to provide a different role for women within the denomination. Despite their Pentecostal doctrines, and their belief in the freedom of the Spirit to empower all flesh, COGIC ideology was no different from that of other Southern black churches. What was different about COGIC was its Women's Department, which afforded women the opportunity to take an active role in the church and reflected the denomination's embrace of the leadership styles of black women in the post-Reconstruction South. COGIC's Women's Department has its roots in the

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<sup>18</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) 2-3

nineteenth-century black women's club movement, and the educational professions, in which black women of the late nineteenth century South could assume a leadership role.

### Post-Reconstruction Black Women and Leadership Roles

Despite the social constraints of patriarchal norms and Jim Crow, African American women in the post-Reconstruction period found ways both to support their community and assume leadership roles, often as educators or as members or leaders of women's clubs. In those roles, many black women also fought for temperance, suffrage, and civil rights, which had their origins in Christian missionary endeavor. The particular leadership roles that black women ascended to after reconstruction had their roots in the church and in missionary activities of white liberal Northerners. Education, as the foundation for both a moral and a civic service, provided the means by which African American women of the day could assume middle-class roles in communities where the majority of black women worked as domestics or sharecroppers.

#### Teachers

With the advent of white Northern missionaries in the South after Emancipation, former slaves were introduced to organized and established educational institutions. The American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) and other groups traversed the South, setting up schools and training young women to be teachers. Schools such as Morehouse (formerly Atlanta Baptist College) and Spelman were established to educate the new generation of freed blacks. For Northern white Baptists, moral training was the most important phase of their formal education.<sup>19</sup> Their emphasis on "Christian education" was designed to provide moral discipline and to address the dearth of positive role models for Southern blacks whose personal and family history had been defined by slavery. Spelman emphasized Christian morality, evangelizing, temperance and purity. Emphasis on such issues stemmed from nineteenth-century holiness doctrines, specifically, from the belief that those doctrines, Biblically based, could enable one to

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<sup>19</sup>Higginbotham, 30



better oneself and others for service to the world. In this framework, to become a teacher and missionary was the goal of education. Instruction in reading, proper behavior, and salvation were interwoven into the study of every academic discipline. Women educated at Spelman took their training into rural areas of the South, sometimes meeting with success, sometimes not. Students related the difficulties they had in trying to discourage the use of alcohol or chewing tobacco. All the same, the newly trained young women understood their importance to the community as leaders who would provide their people with the light of reason and the light of Christ. Their purpose—(Du Bois called them “the talented tenth”)—was not to edify their own selves as individuals but to edify the whole race and show it the way to salvation.

These newly trained teachers, a boon to the decrepit educational system of the South during this period, constituted the heart and the bulk of black professional women in the South. By 1900, 86.7 % of all professional black women in the South were teachers. Whereas higher education steered black men into other professions, it left women largely relegated to teaching positions. These teaching positions, in turn, influenced the structure of the black church. Many of those who had been trained in Baptist denominational schools also conducted Bible schools, Sunday schools, camps, and various religious training facilities. The National Baptist Convention was organized in 1895, and the Baptist Women’s Convention in 1900. The women who populated the conventions were teachers and missionaries within the community. These women took their training into the churches, and with the help of Baptist training materials began to organize other groups that provided benevolence and assistance to members of the church outside of the Sunday service.

These newly created teachers did much to organize and evangelize the black community of the South. However, compared to the black women working as domestics in the Southern states, they were few. If they were to have any hope of organizing a concerted effort on behalf of their shared interests and aspirations for the race, they needed a meeting place—hence the women’s club, which enabled them to meet outside the church yet still in relation to it.

## Clubwomen

In the South, black women educators and upper-class black women needed ways to connect with and assist other black women who were pursuing the same goals for education and racial uplift in other regions of the United States. Many fraternal organizations, mutual-aid societies, and burial clubs existed in the post-Reconstruction South. However, few were for women or provided a forum in which they could meet to address women's concerns.<sup>20</sup> These societies and clubs supported black businesses and the social and political interests of the community, but not gender considerations in particular. It was against this background that the National Association of Colored Women was formed in 1895, to address both gender and race issues. The NACW encompassed several city clubs and black women's clubs that espoused racial uplift through self-help. These women believed that by educating mothers and improving home life through social services they could solve many of the problems blacks faced during this period. They formed mothers' clubs, and the scope of their instruction was wide. It included child-rearing, business management, moral issues, personal hygiene, and critiques of wayward black leadership.<sup>21</sup> Black clubwomen believed that by banding together they could make headway against Jim Crow and contribute to improvement in social standing and in living conditions for the black race. "Lifting as we climb," the motto of the NACW, meant that, as the clubwomen assisted themselves, they would lift the entire black race. Representing the poor, as well as those in the black community who were well-off, they did much through their educational and social-service efforts to bolster the black community during the Jim Crow period.

The work of clubwomen was not free from problems. Black men, struggling with the independence and prosperity of the clubwomen, admonished them to be helpmeets and support their men. The notion that the race could "rise no higher than its woman" was used against the clubwomen. Suggesting that in their independence and quest for power they overshadowed men,

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<sup>20</sup>White, 26-27

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 29

they were advised to stay in their places and support black manhood.<sup>22</sup> These attacks became more pronounced when clubwomen criticized black political leadership or insisted on respect and better protection for black women. Clubwomen, who were accused of being unfeminine and not fulfilling their household duties, endured despite the harsh criticism they received from members of the black and white community. Both the NACW and the Women's Department of the National Baptist Convention met with heavy criticism from black male leadership. Black clubwomen and black women educators alike suffered from the burden of participating in the uplift of the race, while contending with two sources of hostility, namely, the gender issues with which they were assailed vis-a-vis the white community's perception of them and the black man's tension with their status. An educated black woman was a source of pride for her race, but then the social independence that her education made possible had the effect of suggesting licentiousness. She did not represent "the ideal womanhood" of that period. W. E. B. Du Bois was voicing a sentiment shared by many progressive black leaders when he suggested that "in civilized cultures, men were breadwinners and women were physical and spiritual mothers."<sup>23</sup>

What leadership role, then, was there that black women could fill, that would satisfy the need for racial uplift and for spiritual and familial support, and that at the same time would not arouse controversy and ire? The answer came in the form of the Church Mother, as she came to be called.

### The Church Mother

Despite increased educational opportunities after Emancipation, many black Southern women were unable to attend schools such as Spelman. Their wisdom, not gleaned from books, could provide education to those within the church. But how would they be able to impart that learning and ascend to a position of authority and esteem within the church, without compromising some of their basic notions of Christianity and the delicate balance between black men and women? For those women, the office of Church Mother provided a model of post-

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<sup>22</sup>White, 66

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 68

Reconstruction women's leadership that relied not on formal education but on a spiritual and moral education that centered their leadership in a traditionally feminine role that men could not criticize.

The title of Mother is one that has been bestowed in the African American church tradition to the woman of the congregation who is among the eldest and most spiritually mature woman in a congregation. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya define *Church Mother* as "an honorific title usually reserved for the wife of the founder or for the most experienced female members of the church." The phenomenon of the Church Mother, they claim, has no parallel in white churches: it is derived from the kinship networks found in black churches and black communities.<sup>24</sup> The title operates informally, and sometimes formally, within the hierarchical church structure. Though a highly visible role within the African-American church, the Church Mother in her various aspects and functions has been largely ignored by historians. Perhaps the most notable discussion on the role of the Church Mother is that of the sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, who in a series of published articles examines what she terms the "dual sex roles" between the pastor and Church Mothers. She describes the roles of the Church Mother as:

The most distinctive aspect of dual-sex church politics is the role of the Church Mother. While most black churches in the Baptist, Methodist and "Sanctified" (Pentecostal, Holiness, Apostolic) denominations have a woman to whom all members refer as the 'church mother', her position varies. In almost all cases, she is an older woman, often elderly, who is considered an example of spiritual maturity and morality to the rest of her congregation. Her career as a Christian is usually exemplary and long, and most members know of her various activities in the missionary unit or on the deaconess board. Perhaps she is the widow of a pastor or bishop or a deacon, but not necessarily. She is one of the few people whose seat in the congregation is formally or informally reserved. When she dies, her seat may be draped in black. Most important, she is publicly addressed by the pastor, the bishops, and members of the congregation as mother.<sup>25</sup> The church mother is also the one who consults with the pastor on various daily issues of discipline and doctrine within the church. She is a seasoned member of

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<sup>24</sup>Lincoln and Mamiya, 275

<sup>25</sup>Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. "The Politics of 'Silence': Dual-Sex Political Systems and Women's Traditions of Conflict in African-American Religion" In *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul E. Johnson. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 92

the congregation, one who knows the Bible and members solicit advice, permission, and prayers from her. These mothers serve effectively for a very long time and accumulate great prestige and in many cases very real authority.<sup>26</sup>

The Church Mother, according to Gilkes, operates as a counter or foil to the pastor. The Church Mother's responsibilities were primarily to the women within the congregation, but the top Church Mother can also advise, influence, or threaten the pastor. The Mother, while not the pastoral head, is the protocol leader for the congregation. She is the discipliner, enforcing good conduct and a dress code, as well as an instructor and counselor both for women generally but also, typically, young persons of both sexes. She may or may not be a voting member of the church board, but in either case her opinion is always consulted, and usually heeded. She provides cues or directions during the worship service, signaling how it should proceed. If Mother dances, it is permissible to dance. If Mother does not respond to the pastor's message with an "Amen" or an "all right," no one else should either. The Church Mother also is the epitome of spirituality, providing a model for the women of the church. Whether she is scripturally knowledgeable, a prayer warrior, or a spiritual advisor, she has a "word from the Lord" that is never to be taken lightly. She may speak in little sermonettes to the congregation. She is never ignored.<sup>27</sup> Church Mothers are also known to "raise a song" to "call down" the Holy Spirit and "raise up" the congregation. Often Mothers also operated through the spiritual gifts of discernment and healing.<sup>28</sup> Mothers also occupy the right of first refusal of all appointments made by the pastor, deacon, or elder board. Only death or severe illness can remove a woman from the position of Church Mother. Most importantly, the Church Mother is responsible for enforcing the gender roles and rules of the particular church or denomination to which she belongs. She perpetuates the male hierarchy, while giving men nominal or limited access to

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<sup>26</sup>Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. "The Roles of Church and Community Mothers: Ambivalent American Sexism of Fragmented African Familyhood?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 41-59

<sup>27</sup>Gilkes, "Politics of Silence" 92-93

<sup>28</sup>Audrey Lawson Brown, "Afro-Baptist Women's Church and Family Roles Transmitting Afrocentric Cultural Values" *Anthropological Quarterly*, 1994. 175

women's concerns or space. While they uphold the right for men to preach, they have a strong voice in the decision to hire and fire pastors.<sup>29</sup> The Church Mothers is the female spiritual and moral authority in the church, and even the pastor confides in and consults with her.

The historical antecedents of the title *Church Mother* in the Black Church in America are unclear. Generally, pastors and women, when discussing the Church Mother, referred to Judges 5:7, which describes the prophetess Deborah as a "Mother in Israel." "A Mother in Israel" suggests a strong woman capable of both spiritual and temporal leadership. Other sources point to the roles of African-American women as midwives in communities of the postbellum South.<sup>30</sup> In the African Union Methodist tradition, many pivotal women leaders were also referred to as Mother.<sup>31</sup> The term *Mother* could also have some relationship to the custom, during slavery, whereby slaves and slave owners would address black women by familial titles such as *mammy*, *maum*, *mother*, and *auntie*. Whatever the origins of the term *Mother* in the black church, it is clear that it denotes some type of fictive kinship relationship between members of the church community and a woman of great spiritual and moral stature. Spiritual motherhood, in black religion, often superseded biological motherhood, so the importance of the Church Mother for the governance of the church cannot be overestimated.

#### Historic Anthropological Connections to the Role of Women in COGIC

Gilkes argues that the dual-sex system she describes in her work on the Sanctified Church mirrors precolonial societies in Africa, where women and men have dual power and leadership roles in established societies. This allowed them to share power and leadership roles without competing for hierarchical roles based upon gender. These dual-sex political systems, according to Gilkes, are where "Major interest groups are defined and represented by sex."<sup>32</sup> For

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 180

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 175

<sup>31</sup>Lewis V. Baldwin. "Black Women and African Union Methodism 1813-1983." *Methodist History* 21, no. 4 (1983): 225-237

<sup>32</sup>Gilkes, 44

example, certain West African women would be responsible for marketplace activities and mutual-aid societies. In eastern Nigeria, women's organizations were based on lineage. Their responsibilities were agricultural labor and social control of men. In Ghanaian culture, the lineage of the king is matrilineal, and there the council of women decides, based on matrilineal descent, who will ascend to kingship.<sup>33</sup>

The Akan culture of Ghana is the best example of a dual-sexed political culture based on matrilineal descent. Robert Fischer notes that, in matrilineal societies such as the Akan, the lineage of one's mother determines that one's inheritance and social status, and, in the case of kingship, royal succession.<sup>34</sup> Political status in the Akan culture is conferred by women.<sup>35</sup> The only political office held by a woman in the Akan culture is that of *omanhema* (queen mother, or female ruler). The queen mother is co-ruler and with the male ruler (king) has joint responsibility in all affairs of state. She has her own royal stool or throne, her own spokeswoman, and her own council. She does not control all women, since that is the responsibility of the female head of each lineage. In the absence of a male heir or ruler, the queen mother rules alone as chief.<sup>36</sup> Famous queen mothers, including Seewaa and Yaa Asantewaa, led wars against rival tribes and English colonizers, even well into their menopausal years.<sup>37</sup>

The office of queen mother was a substantial political office, not merely a domestic position. She was expected to advise and guide the male chief, as well as to rebuke or criticize him publicly. Her failure to perform such duties could result in her dismissal from her royal stool. The queen mother presided over her own royal court, consisting entirely of women. She

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 46

<sup>34</sup>Robert B. Fischer. *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* Faith Meets Faith,(Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 75

<sup>35</sup>Aidoo, Agnes Akosua, "Asante Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century" in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1981) 66

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 66.

<sup>37</sup>Aidoo, 69

was the genealogist of the royal line, and was the person who would determine the rightful heir to the stool or throne of the Akan. At the king's death, she held first right to nominate his successor.<sup>38</sup> If her candidate was not approved, she could nominate as many as three additional candidates. She was also responsible for the late king's funeral. Powerful in her own right, she held court over domestic affairs of the royal family and over affairs of the state at large. Usually an older, mature, and an intelligent woman, the queen mother commanded both obedience and respect. Her personal wealth was vast, and her ownership of villages and businesses added to her status within the Akan community. The role of the queen mother in the Akan culture was at the heart of the kinship relations both of the royal family and of the nation.<sup>39</sup>

The similarities between the roles of the Akan queen mother's and of the Church Mother are striking. Matrilineal, matrifocal, and matrilineal, these women's roles provided leadership in a gender-based system in which the women acted in tandem with, but not as complement to, men who held leadership roles in both political and religious contexts. It was a shared gender space, rather than a contested gender space that was based on what anthropologists and sociologists call a fictive-family relational structure. This fictive familial relationship holds the structure of male and female leadership together in these contexts by creating a family without blood, related only by nation, race, and/or belief.

### Fictive Family and Kin

These systems of kinship relationship were transferred from Africa to America through the culture of the slaves. Fictive-family relations, prevalent in both the religious and secular cultures of African-Americans, translate into pseudo-family structures that forge links between persons who are otherwise unconnected. Throughout the study of African American history and religion, there has been constant debate surrounding the hypothesis that fictive-kinship relationships, of which the queen mother serves as an obvious synecdoche, were transmitted

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<sup>38</sup>Aidoo, 67-68

<sup>39</sup>Fischer, 75



from Africa to the culture of African-Americans.<sup>40</sup> In any event, examination of both the queen mother and the Church Mother can provide some insight into how the black church used fictive-family relationships. Predating slavery, fictive-family relationships were a normal idiom of social relations in West Africa. During the slave trade and throughout slavery, children were taught to address, by terms such as *aunt* or *mother*, other adults who were unrelated to them by blood or marriage. This terminology, used primarily by women, helped to socialize the children into the slave community and bind unrelated individuals, providing them a support network.<sup>41</sup> This fictive-kin terminology was incorporated into the black church, mostly through the title of *Church Mother*, although *brother* and *sister* were also used. Regional culture also plays a factor in fictive-kin relationships. Southern blacks were more likely than those in the Northeast to have a fictive-kin relationship.<sup>42</sup> Remnants of West African kinship structure in post-Civil War black communities are still to be found in Southern-based churches like the Church of God in Christ. Fictive-kin relationships in the church provide members solidarity and support and provide the corporate church an effective organizing tool, establishing hierarchy, inter-generational church relationships, and matrilineal descent.<sup>43</sup> It also serves to differentiate members of the immediate church community from those outside it. Given the church as a model for the family of God, fictive-family members learn how to negotiate the church power structure, and assume roles relative to their place in the fictive-kinship structure.

It is logical to assume on the basis of Cheryl Gilkes' comparison of the office of the Church Mother to that of the queen mother, that we are dealing with a direct Africanism in American culture. Others do not share her view. In a recent book on African-American political

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<sup>40</sup>Linda M.Chatter, Robert Joseph Taylor, Rukmalie Jaykody. "Fictive Kinship Relations in Black Extended Families." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 25, no. 3 (1994): 297 See also Mellville J. Herskovitz, *The Myth of The Negro Past*, and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 298-299

<sup>42</sup>Chatters, 302

<sup>43</sup>Nicole Rodriguez Toulis. *Believing Identity: Pentecostalism and the Mediation of Jamaican Ethnicity and Gender in England*. Explorations in Anthropology (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 1997) 59

action and religion, Frederick Harris argues that Gilkes' analysis of the dual-sex system in COGIC and in its African antecedents raises more questions than answers. Harris points out that this dual-sex institutional structure arose after Emancipation, a fact that challenges the unbroken links Gilkes makes to dual-sex norms of leadership in West African societies. The institutional dynamics of West African cultural holdovers are less clear, Harris asserts, than the moral and spiritual aspects of Afro-Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Further eroding Gilkes' argument, Harris claims that these alternative spheres of church women and the development of formal roles of power and authority did not arise in Catholic and Protestant churches of African-derived populations, such as in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. It is also unclear which practices are uniquely derived from West African societies and which from "Euro American Patriarchy."<sup>45</sup> Harris points out the inconsistencies in Gilkes' assumptions about dual-sex politics, but has failed to factor in important elements of how the dual sexed structure is supported. The combination of a literalist biblical belief system, slavery and its consequences, and the need to reconstruct the family system through fictive kinship ties combines to form the bridge between the church mother and the queen mother, Africa and America, male and female.

Harris's critique of Gilkes suffers from the assumption that because dual-sexed organizations arise after slavery, there is no holdover to African antecedents. COGIC, a Holiness- Pentecostal denomination, engaged in practices such as the ring shout, healing, and other religious practices reminiscent of African religious practices. Founder Bishop Mason and the first women's leader in COGIC, Elizabeth Robinson, both were born as slaves. Secondly, the dual-sexed structure arose because of the cultural and civic components of the time. Both black and white men of the period were considered to be the 'heads' of business and the household. As mentioned previously, Black women without husbands could not even receive assistance from the Freedman's Bureau if they were unmarried. The advancement of the black race was dependant upon cooperation between the sexes. Harris also posits that although Afro-Christianity has provided the tools in which to resist racial domination, it has also privileged

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<sup>44</sup>Fredrick C. Harris. *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.), 161

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, 161

patriarchy through religiously sanctioned rules.<sup>46</sup> I would counter that those religiously sanctioned rules are upheld especially by the women who are Church Mothers because they acknowledge the power structure in charismatic Christianity rests not in the ordained office, but in the spiritual office. Women who are “spiritual giants” can wield enormous power, because their power is not man-made, but God-given. Finally, Harris fails to consider the relevant types of African retentions that can be found in British Caribbean and Latin American contexts.<sup>47</sup> Within these traditions, certain gender roles, religious practices and the like can be traced back to African antecedents. The critique is well warranted, but flawed.

Gilkes is correct in asserting that the Church Mother and the episcopate in COGIC arise from a dual-sex system, but the church’s hierarchical structure is based not simply on West African Cultural holdovers but on the fictive-kinship relationships. These relationships in turn, are based on biblical foundations and beliefs concerning gender roles, the church family, and the role of sanctification. Both Gilkes and Harris neglect the use of the Bible as a literal text informing all COGIC’s aspects and activities. Interpretation of texts on holiness and sanctification play an integral role in how the women view their roles alongside the men’s. These hermeneutics, interpreted through the lens of the post-Reconstruction reality of African Americans, provide the foundation for the dual-gender roles based on fictive-family and biblical family relationships. Research also supports the hypothesis that a denomination’s commitment to biblical inerrancy or to sacramentalism should be understood in the context of broader resistance to liberalism and modernity in the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> In COGIC, orthodox readings of the Bible and rejection of modernity facilitated black men in their reclamation of their place in the home, even as they were losing their place in the larger society. The particular theological and cultural milieu of COGIC also provided a shared gender space in which men and women could work and interact for the good of the denomination and God, in expectation of the immanent return of Jesus Christ.

This multi-faceted and liminal culture, rooted in different spheres of influence, sought

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<sup>46</sup>Harris, 157

<sup>47</sup>Toulis, 246-250

<sup>48</sup>Chaves, 91

to create an insular culture of recognizable believers , called saints. However, at the same time, it set them apart from the secular culture that posed a threat to the fictive church family.<sup>49</sup> That church culture, led by the pastor and the Church Mother, provided admonitions against, commentaries on, and critiques of the larger culture (temperance, sexuality, civil rights), while also providing church members with rules for life inside the fictive church family. In enforcing the rules, the family of God or saints could continue to be protected.<sup>50</sup> COGIC, founded in this complex context, embraced a conventional world view prevalent in the nineteenth century, and used it to establish the Women’s Department. Led by a National Mother and State Mothers, the Women’s Department worked alongside men in a shared gender space that was mediated by Biblical principles.

#### Summary: Women, Leadership and COGIC

While useful as a descriptor of the relationship between the male-led episcopate of COGIC and its Women’s Department, the dual-sex political system is only a partial explanation of how the Women’s Department of COGIC. Given the history of the nineteenth-century Black Church and the influences that helped to shape it, the development of a separate Women’s Department and the use of the Church Mother as an institutionalized office in COGIC can be seen as a product of the complex environment that existed in the South. It is an environment defined by issues of race, gender, class, religious belief, and leadership. To characterize the development of the Women’s Department in COGIC as simply a mirror of African cultural practices would be to miss the intricate relationship between beliefs, ideals, and the cultural norms that helped to shape the dual-sex episcopal structure under the aegis of a fictive church family. COGIC has also been depicted by sociologists of the early twentieth century as a sectarian organization of a culturally deprived lower class. This view of COGIC does not take into account the numbers of educated women who ascended to the ranks of church, state, or national Mothers within the Women’s Department. Southern race relations, ideals about

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<sup>49</sup>Toulis, 55

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 56

Southern womanhood, and women's roles played a crucial role in how women were allowed to participate in COGIC. In short, as the ensuing chapters will show, the development of the Women's Department of the Church of God in Christ is the product of multi-faceted responses to cultural reality, the Biblical beliefs of those who participated, and the men who interacted with them.