

## CHAPTER VII

### THE END OF AN ERA

When I die and you set my funeral for a certain hour, If you're not on time; if there's any way possible, I'll rap on my coffin and ask, "What are you keeping me out for?" Lillian Brooks Coffey, National Supervisor<sup>1</sup>

The greatest test of the reorganized COGIC Women's Department was not younger women, a changing society, or the burgeoning civil rights movement. It was the death of their revered denominational leader, Bishop C.H. Mason. Always a charismatic leader, despite his age and bouts of ill health, Mason had allowed changes to the Women's Department because of his trust of Lillian Coffey. From an early age, he had groomed her for the leadership role she now held as the national supervisor of the Women's Department of COGIC. Where other women were absent from the denominational decision making, Mason had placed her on the executive board, and during the 1950's she had figured prominently in photographs with Mason during negotiations for the building of the new publishing board and other activities. The Women's Department even gave Mason a new home in Memphis in the late 1950's.<sup>2</sup> On a visit to Detroit to see his other two daughters, Mason fell ill, and within a matter of days died. Coffey describes her vigil at his bedside.

I stood by in those hours when he was slowly leaving us and prayed out of my broken heart for God to leave this great man with us. One whom I had seen prophesy and his prophecies came to pass. ..Few of his sons left the church under his administration. I have seen him go where there was great confusion, and pray for hours and hours. When he would get up the trouble would all be over. He always kept some

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<sup>1</sup>Lillian S. Calhoun. "Woman on the Go for God." *Ebony*, May 1963, 78-88.p. 80

<sup>2</sup>The purchase of the home caused major problems for Mason, as crosses were burned on the front lawn, and the roof was firebombed. *The Commercial Appeal*, March 4, 1958

of his daughters near him, and would let the women of God work in the Church and make use of our God-Given talents. He loved his sons and daughters!<sup>3</sup>

Masons' death on November 17, 1961 marked the end of an era for COGIC. The charismatic leader, perhaps 100 years old at the time of his death, had been a shepherd to the denomination, and had provided Mother Coffey and the women of COGIC positions of leadership within the carefully contrived gender constructs of the times. With his demise, the future was uncertain, especially for the Women's Department. Coffey had even stated to Mason during a talk some years before, "I don't want to be here after you are gone. If I go first, I will linger in the corridor of heaven till I hear you coming."<sup>4</sup> Coffey's grief, personal as well as public, seemed to even cause her to lose direction for a time. "I have missed the sweet communion (with Mason) and Oh, this has been a year of years for me! It was from HIS Mouth that I got my order of the day. As I consider his advice-his instructions-his great love-his humility-his peaceable disposition....Will we have another Brother Mason?"<sup>5</sup>

However deep her sorrow, Coffey could not afford to dwell on it. Within six months after Mason's death, the twelfth annual Women's Convention was held in Oakland, California. Amid the growing crisis in Berlin on the international front, and a shaky leadership of bishops in the wake of Mason's demise, Coffey was looked to as the last in the legacy of leadership within the denomination. The Women's Convention in May 1962 dedicated its first full afternoon session to the legacy of Bishop Mason, and the convention program was filled with tributes and accolades for the deceased leader.<sup>6</sup> There were even those men and women who supported giving Coffey leadership of the church until a permanent head of the church could be chosen. She personally backed away from the endorsement, claiming in an article that the church would not

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<sup>3</sup> Lucille J Cornelius. *The Pioneer History of the Church of God in Christ*. (Memphis TN: COGIC, 1975).26

<sup>4</sup>Lillian S. Calhoun. "Woman on the Go for God." *Ebony*, May 1963 1963, 78-88. 85

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 26

<sup>6</sup> "11th Annual Setting, 10th Birthday Celebration." A paper delivered at the International Women's Convention Church of God in Christ, Oakland, California, 1962. 57

function well under a woman.<sup>7</sup> After the 1962 Women's Convention, Bishop Orzo T. Jones was elected Presiding Bishop at the November Convocation. At first, the election of Jones seemed to be with the approval of the presiding board of bishops, but later, it became clear that the appointment did not sit well with other bishops, and consequently, the 1960's were filled with struggles concerning the eventual leadership of the denomination.<sup>8</sup> At the time, for Coffey, the issue had been settled. The eruption in COGIC would come after her demise.

### The Ebony May 1963 Article, and the end of Coffey's era

With Mason gone, Coffey turned back to the task of marshaling the Women's Department of COGIC during the turbulent beginnings of the 1960's. The specter of the Cold war, the escalating civil rights movement, and the changing morals of society made the reformulated message of holiness and sanctification important to a new generation. What better way to get that message out, but with an interview in the largest Black magazine in America of the time, Ebony Magazine. The May 1963 issue featured an interview of Coffey titled "Woman on the Go for God." The article is an encapsulation of Coffey's work in the Women's Department, and her opinions on leadership within the church. Its publication coincided with the Women's International Convention being held in Chicago, Illinois, the home of the Johnson Publishing company and of Coffey. Perhaps it was her longstanding relationship with the city of Chicago, or her leadership of the Women's Convention prompting the article. Whatever the reasons, it showcased her talents and her entourage. The writer, Lillian S. Calhoun, described Coffey this way:

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<sup>7</sup>Calhoun 86

<sup>8</sup>The ensuing battles in the 1960 led to lawsuits, counter-lawsuits and even fist fights on the convocation floor. The denomination experienced a small split in factions in 1969 as a result of the turmoil. For an overview of the crisis and its eventual resolution, see Charles E. Blake, *The Church of God in Christ: its Organizational Crisis, 1965*, and Robert R Owens, *The Dark Years (1961-1968): Leadership Styles and Organizational Types in the Transition from the Founder to the Successors in the Church of God in Christ*. 2000, Regent University.

Women church leaders in most denomination are generally strong-minded enough to deal with God and a male hierarchy, but few can hold a candle to Lillian Brooks Coffey, indomitable General Supervisor of the Church of God in Christ's Women's Department. Partially blind and paralyzed after a massive stroke in 1951, she made speeches the following year by sniffing oxygen every ten minutes, and the only time she failed to speak from the dias, held conferences under an oxygen tent during her churches convention.<sup>9</sup>

The tenacity of Coffey despite her illness sets the stage for an article in which she reminisces about her conversion to Holiness-Pentecostalism, family problems relating to her conversion, and her work in the church. Remarkably candid and forthright, she discusses such diverse issues as the failure of her marriage, her loyalty and devotion to Bishop Mason, and her goals for the Women's Department. Her interview, not peppered with Scripture overtly, is firm underneath about holiness and what it means.

She is concerned about the charges of immorality made by welfare officials about young Negro women who bear illegitimate children "I believe no race can rise above the moral standards of its women, Mrs. Coffey avers. At the same time I must exercise mercy as a Christian, But the real me, the authoritative leader abhorring weakness asserts, has very little patience with a young woman who will fall again and again in this rut"<sup>10</sup>

The statement "no race can rise above the moral standards of its women" is reminiscent of the post-Reconstruction ideals surrounding African American women's roles in maintaining the high standards needed to convince the world of the worth, value, and industriousness of African Americans. Though the fundamental manner in which holiness is portrayed to the outside world had changed through Coffey's repositioning on rules regarding clothing, the fundamentals of sexual abstinence for unmarried women remained a strong thrust of COGIC teachings. She goes

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<sup>9</sup>Calhoun, p. 78

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 88

on in the article to mention that the Young Women's Christian council, the auxiliary designed to teach young women how to become wives and homemakers, helps to provide for unwed mothers. What she does not say explicitly is how the council brings these women into the church, "cleans them up" and helps to find husbands for them and fathers for their children. Though the focus has changed with the times, the fundamental core teaching for Coffey is the home, from which all other activities flows. The underlying current is that if the home is a Christian, sanctified home, these types of problems would not occur.

What is also interesting in this article is the way that the writer describes Coffey as stern, authoritative, vigorous, and forceful, except when speaking of the regrets of her personal life. One has to wonder how the strain of ill health and leadership responsibilities may have changed her fundamental demeanor. The responsibility of leading over 100,000 women, plus dealing with a male hierarchy in increasing turmoil after Bishop Mason's death perhaps required a toughened demeanor. Or perhaps, like Mother Robinson, with whom she worked, she realized that in order to be a true church mother in COGIC she could not afford to be the traditional image of softness and quiet demeanor, but had to show directness and strength. Referring to her troubles with receiving a proper census of women's membership in COGIC, she voices frustration with the male leadership.

The men haven't given me the status. They haven't given me the figures on women membership. I'm supposed to reach every woman and to organize them in one or another of our groups, but this had never been accomplished,. The men don't want the women to have too much influence. The big thing is the church and they have that all but it's hard to make them see it. <sup>11</sup>

The male leadership may have feared if Coffey realized the large population of women's membership, she would wrest power from them. However, power to Coffey had not been earned in the sense of taking it from the men, but in sharing it with them. In all of her years with closeness with Mason, she seemed to realized that although she may not have had clearly stated power, she had implied power from her relationship to Mason. What is interesting is that in the

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<sup>11</sup>Calhoun, p. 86

interview, she couples her authority with knowing the doctrines and teaching of COGIC.

Having been raised and tutored by the Senior Bishop and founder, she declares, I knew thoroughly the doctrine, rules and regulations. He never left me out of the leadership. Deftly she amended that to “he never left me out of the knowledge of leadership. I was his personal secretary for years, and 21 years financial secretary of the church”<sup>12</sup>

Coffey understood her position relative to Mason’s as one who had been trained to lead, and knowledgeable in the doctrines of the church. Her qualification, came not from the fact that she was a woman but from being a person who knew the doctrine, rules, and regulations. Her statement suggests that she knew on the basis of gender relations and expectations in COGIC that she could not overtly say that she had been a leader, but had been “part of” the leadership. The role of the Church Mother as un-recognized advisor in a fictive family relationship again becomes apparent. Perhaps Mason confided in her, asking for advice and suggestions. Coffey could not admit to that fact in the article, possibly because of continued loyalty to his memory, and her desire to work with the current male episcopal leadership in the most amicable way possible.

It is unclear how COGIC leadership responded to the Ebony article, but it was clear that outside of an article on Mason, and several columns on Arenia Mallory and her work with Saints Industrial School, the public image of COGIC was still for the most part that of a storefront church with Southern roots. It is difficult to gauge the how the perceptions of the public toward COGIC women may have changed , but the well appointed home, the retinue of seven men and women available to answer Coffey’s beck and call, and the general tone of the article suggested that the piece could only help to change the perception of COGIC as Coffey described it as “We’re not a treasured church”<sup>13</sup>

The piece was to be the last major public piece on Coffey. Her heart, enlarged, caused her to have to take her traveling schedule down to make sure she got adequate rest. She made it

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 82

<sup>13</sup>Calhoun, *Woman on the Go for God*, p. 84

through the Convocation of November 1963, which saw the death of the revered President John F. Kennedy, and set her sights on the Women's Convention of May 5-10, 1964. The convention met in Albany, New York. Along with the usual pictures of church mothers, now state supervisors, and auxiliary leadership, a brief history of the Women's Department was included. At the end of the article, a tribute to Coffey's leadership was included.

We boast of a group of women, sound steadfast, in faith, teachers of good things. Our women do not smoke drink, or chew tobacco, But as the scripture says: We believe in temperance. Whenever you see the Church of God in Christ, moving onward and upward; there is an organized group of women. The supervisors range in years from the late 20's to beyond ages. Some are past 80 years and are still active. It is ours as a convention of women to know how earnestly Lillian Coffey has labored in this work, along with the tasks of supervision of the Women's Department in the General Church, which has meant long days, sleepless nights-problems that have caused her body to weaken, her heart to lose its beat at times, yet through it all we hear her saying. "Fight on my soul, 'til death shall bring me my reward".<sup>14</sup>

Despite the changes Coffey made to the appearance and tasks of the Women's Department, the fundamentals of temperance, holiness and sanctified living still were paramount concerns of the women. The text seems to make it clear that the gains of COGIC are due in part to the organized group of women under the leadership of Coffey. No matter how the Women's Department appeared to the episcopate and outsiders, the women recognized the hard work and the toll on Coffey's health as a result of taking the reigns of leadership. The sacrifice of a sanctified life was expected not just of Coffey but of all the women of COGIC in order to make certain that the life of holiness would continue. The conference focused on the theme of the decline in moral and Christian ethics. The changing times of the 1960's were presenting new challenges to COGIC women, and they would have to reiterate the basic messages they had received from their Church Mothers to a new generation. They would soon have to convey the message without Coffey leading them.

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<sup>14</sup> "A Decline in Moral and Christian Ethics: A Challenge to Godly Women" 14th Annual Women's Convention, Church of God in Christ. Albany New York, 1964.17

## The End of the Line

Soon after the Women's Convention was over, Coffey's health began to fail. She was able to make the post-convention trip to the World's Fair in New York, and then returned home to Chicago. Two weeks later, she suffered a heart attack and was admitted into Jackson Park Hospital. She died soon after on June 9, 1964. The woman who had seemed so indefatigable had finally succumbed to the inevitability of death. Immediately, notices appeared in both black and white papers across the country, with headlines such as "Lillian B. Coffey dies; World Church Leader."<sup>15</sup> Her funeral, held on Saturday, June 13, 1964, was attended by over 4000 church members, family and friends. Eulogized by Presiding Bishop O. T. Jones, with Arenia Mallory holding forth as mistress of ceremonies, the funeral was a combination of Coffey's favorite hymns, scriptures, resolutions, and acknowledgment of cards and telegrams. The Evangelists Speaks recounted her passing in a rather interesting use of language for a woman considered to be the 'Mother' of all the women in the denomination. "We sincerely regret the loss of Dr. Coffey as she was an outstanding patriarch, who was a faithful soldier of the cross from her pioneer days until her death".<sup>16</sup>

The masculine language of "patriarch" and "soldier" is an interesting way for the writers to refer to Coffey since she was the National Supervisor over the Women's Department. One might surmise that this is due to her status, albeit informal, as deceased Bishop Mason's right hand for so many years. From the accolades accorded to her, it seemed that her strong "Motherhood" may have transported her into the eyes of those she led, to a stature of "honorary patriarchy." Her foundation of churches in the Chicago area, her assistance in helping both men and women establish their ministries within and without the church, and her deft organizational skills gave her a status that conferred both male and female attributes. Those attributes, transmitted in the guise of family relationships, helped Coffey to speak throughout her tenure as

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<sup>15</sup>Newspaper clipping, Associated Negro Press files, Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup>"Dr Lillian Brooks Coffey dies." *The Evangelist Speaks, Church of God in Christ*, July 1964.1,4



supervisor in an authoritative manner much like the queen mother of the Ashanti. Her titular powers may have been only for the women, but her pronouncements, organization, and directives affected the men and women of COGIC equally. In death, the specter of her skill as an organizer would loom over the ensuing confusion and litigation that would plague the denominations through the 1960's. The reverence of Coffey's leadership and longevity is best evidenced by the fact that the new National Supervisor, Ann L. Bailey, was not installed in her position at Coffey's funeral as Coffey had been at Mother Robinson's.<sup>17</sup> Her death, though held in abeyance by a combination of tenacity and fortitude in prayer, signaled the true end of an era in COGIC that would remain for those left behind as the days of glory to look back and long for.

### Conclusions, Observations, and Reflections

Stop arguing about what you are doing, just do it! My grandmother used to take some meal and flour and egg, mix it with some milk, put it in a little iron skillet and call it a flapjack. My mother made it and called it a pancake. My sister made it and called it a waffle. They all used the same ingredients, and when you eat it, they called it what it tasted like. Stop arguing about being a preacher, just expand the word of God! The people will tell you what it tastes like!!... God has not changed, we've changed. Go back to the old landmark. What it took grandma, it is going to take for a daughter.<sup>18</sup> Mother Evelyn Bram Bibby, evangelist.

I have chosen to close with the above statement from a session of the COGIC Women's Department International Convention in Los Angeles, May 30, 2000. The quotation strikes my fancy because it encapsulates the work of a Church Mother in the COGIC tradition. That work, simply stated, is to take the ingredients of holiness and sanctification, bake them into women (and men) through the Bible as the iron skillet, and come out with an edible message that will build strong saints who know what being "COGIC" tastes like, looks like, and sounds like. In academic

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<sup>17</sup>This may have been as a result of Coffey's revered status, but the reason is unclear.

<sup>18</sup>Evelyn Bramm Bibby, National Evangelist, COGIC International Women's Convention, May 2000, Los Angeles CA. Video recording, Morning session, May 30, 2000.

terms, the Church Mother is the catalyst for disseminating the doctrines of the denomination through her work as a visible representation of holiness and the sanctified life. The Church Mother has been and is the glue that holds a fragile gendered structure between the episcopate and the Women's Department. No matter of the passage of time, or terminology, what a Church Mother creates in COGIC is made of the same ingredients: The Bible, holiness, and sanctification.

From the Women's Department's inception, the women have been responsible for the dissemination of holiness doctrines through their work in formation and inculcating of beliefs through their embodiment in dress, comportment, and teaching. The organizational foundation of the denomination through the work of former Baptist matron Lizzie Robinson helped to create networks of women dispersed in various places to have one common purpose and goal. The common goal, living the sanctified life, at first was constructed to make the denomination a home for those who may have felt dispossessed by their embrace of Holiness-Pentecostal doctrines. Sanctification in COGIC became a means to differentiate, to establish distinctions between saints and other religious groups, and outsiders. It may have been difficult to determine whether men were members of COGIC, but for women, plain dress, no makeup, no jewelry and unprocessed hair helped to make the distinctions between an ain't and a saint.

More importantly, the visible embodiment of holiness by COGIC women, especially Church Mothers, enabled the women to become the Biblical leadership within the denomination. While men were respected for preaching or fatherly roles, the role of spiritual leadership and discernment was accorded to the Church Mother by virtue of her stamina, perseverance, and study of Scripture. Though at times the role of men as ordained leadership was sometimes contested by the women, The Church Mother remained in many ways the final authority on spiritual matters. Where individual members of the episcopate attempted to curb authority of the women, the Women's Department simply branched out further, extending its reach and influence, reaching those the ordained seldom had contact with. The example of leadership that Arenia Mallory and Lillian Brooks Coffey embodied through their involvement with education, politics, and social action helped to raise the profile of the denomination from sectarian to a more mainstream status.

The individual lives of Robinson, Mallory and Coffey have also served this dissertation in the sense that their personal stories embody a prime example of the construction of the Church Mother in the context of COGIC, and perhaps the broader context of the Black Church. The Church Mother, a post-Reconstruction leadership role for African American women, was available to women who had some formal or no formal education at all. The qualifications were spiritual, not social or educational. Mother Robinson, though educated, qualified in Mason's eyes by her maturity, ability to lead, and her spiritual stature. Able to organize, lead, and command, she took loose bands of prayer and Bible study groups, forming them into well-organized groups of women with local, state, and national leadership. Her mobilization of women into the Prayer and Bible band set the foundation for the doctrines of COGIC to become systematized, and the expectation of the sanctified life codified and realized. By relying on material in *Hope*, she helped to organized both the homes and spiritual lives of the women she governed.

Mallory and Coffey, both products of Robinson's leadership, opened the way for COGIC Church Mothers and women to participate in the mainstream of African-American social life, and the broader world of education, politics, and social action. Both women, experiencing tremendous hardship by embracing the teachings of Holiness-Pentecostalism, became estranged from their families. Yet they found a fictive family, one with stringent rules, that offered rewards of a nurturing family. COGIC offered to them a strong father figure in Bishop "Dad" Mason, a stern yet loving mother in Mother Robinson, and a network of saints that could assist them in any section of the country. Mallory's endeavors with Saints Industrial School gave her back the social status that she had discarded from her blood family through her embrace of holiness. Her work with Eleanor Roosevelt, the National Council of Negro women, and her relentless quest to build up the school gave her recognition and the status of Church Mother. Even when she married a man from outside the denomination and was "sat down" for two years, she was still able to return and reassume her position of leadership. Without Mallory's work to improve the education and facilities of Saints Industrial School, the work Coffey did to update the role and visibility of the Church Mother in COGIC would have been more difficult to achieve.

Coffey, on the other hand, is a perfect example of the bridge between generations of the church mother's role and embodiment in COGIC. Bishops Mason's first choice for leadership of

the women, despite her age, Coffey grew up in the shadow of Mason, and was in a sense, his most productive offspring. Leaving to plant churches in the Chicago area in the early teens, she worked diligently on behalf of COGIC at great personal expense. Her marriage, also to someone outside of the church, suffered because of her loyalty and work in COGIC. Her various roles as Bishop Mason's personal secretary, financial secretary of the denomination, State and Assistant General Mother all groomed her for the role she would ascend to at the death of Mother Robinson. Despite constant ill health and financial setbacks, she managed to establish a rest home in 1942 in Detroit for retired missionaries, and partnered with her friend Arenia Mallory with fund-raising for Saints Industrial School and with her work in the NCNW. That would have been enough for one lifetime, but at her appointment as National Supervisor/Mother in 1945, she set about to expand the breadth of the Women's Department on a grand scale. Coffey's addition of fourteen new auxiliaries created new organizations in which women of every level of leadership in COGIC could take part. The expansion helped to pave the way for Coffey's redefinition of the embodiment of holiness and the sanctified life. Unlike her predecessor Robinson, she helped to "smooth out the women" with more stylish, yet modest clothing, hats with feather adornments, and social events like teas and dinners to lift the spiritual and social status of the Church Mothers and other women. The new embodiment, gleaned from her participation outside of the denomination with Mallory in the NCNW, allowed for an updating of the definition of the "Saint" who could embody holiness in a stylish yet demure manner. The culmination of this re-embodiment, the creation of an annual Women's Convention, helped to seal the new thrust for COGIC church mothers by bringing them together to discuss matters important to them, such as their homes, schools and spiritual lives. The annual convocation of COGIC had allotted only a day to the women, but the establishment of the convention was a brilliant move by Coffey. The convention help to solidify the women of COGIC, address and create their own agenda, and model their Women' Department program after prominent African American women's social groups of the time like the NCNW and the Links. Coffey's closeness to Mason, her loyalty to the doctrine, and her vision helped to re-define the post-Reconstruction role of the Church Mother into a viable leadership role in COGIC, one that would help to bridge the eventual strife that would occur in the denomination after the demise of Bishop Mason in 1961.

## Observations

In many ways, this work and labor of love is only a beginning. Many areas of exploration remain in this dissertation. At this writing, a comprehensive history of Pentecostalism, African-American Pentecostalism, and the roles of women in Pentecostal history does not exist. No definitive history of the Church of God in Christ has been written, nor of its founder, Charles Harrison Mason. Historiographic problems ensue from lack of source material, wariness of denominational members, and plain old mildew and rot. The work that needs to be done is immeasurable. Yet some fruitful avenues of work remain for this writer and others to do in regards to COGIC and church mothers. The role of Church mothers in the Baptist and other Pentecostal Traditions should be documented and compared to the role of the Church Mother in COGIC. How are they similar or dissimilar? What does this say about gender relations historically and currently in the African American church? Why is ordination pushed to the side as a non-salient issue for these women? Does power come more authoritatively through prophetic and scriptural means rather than organizationally? Perhaps the lives of Robinson, Mallory and Coffey could be explored in depth. As more information is revealed about these women, perhaps a better picture of the gender and power dynamic in COGIC could be understood. A better developmental history of the episcopate in COGIC could help to expand this work also. Other methodologies such as ethnography and oral history could immensely enhance similar works on the Church mother. The death of several key figures in the history of the Women's Department of COGIC during the research and writing of this dissertation has given the author pause and consternation at the information that is lost to herself and other researchers. As Harvey Cox once said, the greatest problem in writing the history of African American Religion and Pentecostalism is "the deterioration of source material, both immaterial and material."<sup>19</sup>

## Reflections

The old Landmark, as Mother Bibby referred to in the quotation that begins this section, is holiness. Holiness is at the core of what a Church Mother should be, is, and shall be in COGIC.

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<sup>19</sup>Private conversation between the author and Harvey Cox, November 1994.

Without the message of holiness, a Church Mother is just an older woman who is accorded her own special pew in the sanctuary of the church. Without the spiritual message and authority that holiness affords her, she is merely an anachronistic symbol in a day when symbols can mean many things. Without the foundation and authority that comes from her knowledge of scripture, life, and God, she is merely an older woman worthy of respect.

In the beginning of this dissertation, the theme of the May 2000 Women's International Convention of COGIC was "Holy Women Perpetuating Fifty Years of Historical Facts and Traditional Teachings". I, was in one way, very disappointed in how the theme was articulated. I wanted history stories, reminiscing from older church mothers, and well-printed outlines of the history of the Woman's Department. I now realize that perhaps the theme surrounded me all along. It surrounded me as I assisted Mother Barnett in and out of the Sports Arena, driving her car so that she could rest a bit from playing the piano each day at the morning prayer service. It surrounded me as Church Mothers, in hats seemingly too big for their petite gray heads to carry, clutched their Bibles as they prayed. It surrounded me in the prayer service as women shouted out their hopes and pains to God for wayward children, stretched finances, and absent husbands. And it surrounded me in the visage of the stern yet knowing visage of the General Supervisor, Mother Willie Mae Rivers, who stepped off the podium in her seat of authority to come and stand next to 99 year old Evangelist Reatha Herndron as she read from the letter Mother Coffey sent to her in 1951 asking her help in organizing the first Women's Convention. History, it seemed, was not on the pages of a text at all. It lived and breathed all about me. For that, I owe a debt to the Church Mothers. They have taught me that unless history can live and breathe through those of us who write it, we have no business writing the stories and hopes of others at all.