

UNRAVELING THE CORDS THAT DIVIDE: CULTURAL CHALLENGES AND RACE RELATIONS IN THE CHURCH OF GOD (CLEVELAND, TENNESSEE)

History Interest Group

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Introduction

Since 2005 I have conducted a series of interviews with black ministers and members serving the Church of God. More than once I have heard about a particular event that occurred at a Church of God General Assembly. Although I have not yet located any contemporaneous document describing the episode, which likely took place in the 1930s, this story has become part of the oral tradition passed down among the black constituency of the Church of God and continues to shape their understanding of race relations in the movement.

One account came from Mother Evelyn Gooden, who related that her father witnessed and reported the episode. According to Mother Gooden, Bishop John Henry Curry, was dancing in the Spirit during a General Assembly worship service. Curry was an immigrant from the Bahamas and a significant leader in his time. During his ministry he served as pastor of the prominent Fifth Avenue Church of God in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was national overseer of the “Church of God Colored Work” from 1928 to 1939, and served on the Supreme Council of the denomination from 1932 to 1938.¹ Although black members and ministers were welcome to attend General Assemblies, a cord divided the seating sections designated for black and white

¹ Louis F. Morgan, “Bishop J.H. Curry: An Eminent Church Leader,” *Church of God History and Heritage*, Winter/Spring 2003, 3-4.

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delegates. At that time such segregated seating was common for public events in the southern United States. The incident involving Curry was unusual, however.

“Overshadowed” by the power of the Holy Spirit, Curry was dancing and shouting as was common during Church of God worship.² While he was dancing, his extended arm caught the dividing rope and pulled it down. Black observers recognized the event as a work of the Spirit bringing down that tangible and symbolic cord that divided the races. White leadership, on the other hand, chastised Curry for violating the laws of the land. This event, the different reactions to it, and its continued telling in the oral tradition, illustrate the challenges regarding race relations that have existed and continue to exist in the Church of God.³

The Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)⁴ is an international denomination approaching seven million members.⁵ Although the almost six million members outside the United States are racially and ethnically diverse, with many adherents residing in Africa, Asia and Latin America, membership within the United States is less so. While immigration patterns are gradually changing the face of the Church of God, the birth and early development of the denomination in the southeast has resulted in a primarily white organization in the United States.

The most visible challenge to racial and ethnic inclusion in the United States exists within the state of Florida where vast coastlines provide opportunities for the waves and currents to bring new immigrants to the state’s shores. Before becoming a part of the United States, Florida

² Dancing during worship was prominent among the black constituency of the Church of God and continues to be so today. Evelyn Gooden and James Gooden, interview by David G. Roebuck, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 25 August 2009; George Wilson and Dewey Wilson, interview by David G. Roebuck, Kathleen, Florida, 29 August 2009; and Kimberly Marcelle Egbulun, interview by David G. Roebuck, West Palm Beach, Florida, 24 August 2009.

³ Mother Gooden commented, “My dad said the Holy Ghost was using him at that time. And I believe it because it is possible.” Bishop Gooden reported on the reaction of the white leadership, “He was scourged very heavy about it.” Goodens, interview by Roebuck.

⁴ There are numerous denominations that use the name Church of God. This paper refers to the Pentecostal denomination with international offices in Cleveland, Tennessee, that dates its birth to the Christian Union in 1886. To distinguish this denomination from others, it is often referred to as “Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee).”

⁵ According to the Church of God Office of Business and Records as of November 2010 the Church of God had 1,088,124 members in the United States and Canada and 5,549,774 members outside the United States and Canada. Phone conversation, February 3, 2011.

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was a prime treasure over which European powers battled. Numerous flags have flown over its territory, and arriving ships have brought both bond and free. Proximity to the Caribbean Islands as well as to Central and South America continues to guarantee the arrival of people of various races, ethnicities, nationalities and languages. In response to these realities the Church of God presently operates three jurisdictional offices in Florida: an office in Tampa primarily serves Caucasian congregations; another office in Tampa primarily serves Spanish speaking congregations;⁶ and an office in Cocoa primarily serves congregations of African descent.

Whatever the historical roots and rationale, this structure is a stark reminder of the continuing challenges of race relations in the United States, the Pentecostal movement and the Church of God in particular. This paper will survey how this situation came to exist, review previous assessments, and hear living voices reflect on these divisions.

Historical Development of Jurisdictional Structures

Expansion to Florida

The ministry of the Church of God in Florida began with the efforts of General Overseer A.J. Tomlinson in 1909. Tomlinson had received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit the previous year when G.B. Cashwell preached in Cleveland, Tennessee. It is interesting to note that Tomlinson attributed the restoration of the doctrine of Spirit baptism accompanied by speaking

⁶In the United States the Church of God has eight regional offices that serve Spanish speaking congregations. The Spanish language has been spoken in Florida since 1513 when Juan Ponce de Leon claimed the territory for Spain. The first known Church of God ministry to persons who speak Spanish occurred when Sam C. Perry, who came into the Church of God in 1909 at the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting, traveled to Cuba in 1910. His exploration of the possibilities of a mission work there did not bear fruit, however. The first recorded Spanish language Church of God congregation was not in Florida but in New Mexico in 1911. The first report of ministry to Spanish speaking people in Florida came in 1913 when state overseer M.S. Lemons preached to and baptized Cuban immigrants.

The South Eastern Spanish office was created in Miami in 1978 with Josue B. Rubio as overseer. There were six Spanish speaking churches in Florida listed in the General Assembly Minutes in 1978. Prior to 1978 these congregations were part of the Eastern Spanish Region. The South Eastern Spanish office serves Florida, South Georgia, and part of South Carolina. Church of God, *Minutes of the 57th General Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1978), 445.

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in tongues to the ministry of African-American William Seymour and the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles.⁷ Tomlinson’s experience revolutionized his ministry, and he soon began making evangelistic trips to other states.

On April 29, 1909, Tomlinson boarded a train with T.L. McClain bound for Florida. Florida became his greatest harvest field,⁸ and ministry there changed the face of the Church of God from a Caucasian church to a multicultural one and from an American network of congregations to an international movement. Their first stop was Tampa where they organized the first Church of God congregation in the sunshine state.

While in Tampa, Tomlinson received an invitation to preach at the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting in nearby Durant. The South Florida Holiness Association owned the Pleasant Grove camp ground and frequently hosted camp meetings there. This was the first of several visits Tomlinson made to Pleasant Grove, where he preached the Pentecostal message and the importance of restoring the Church of God. This latter doctrine was a primary theological emphasis of Tomlinson and proved controversial for some, but it provided the theological glue that held together black and white members during the period of segregation. By the time Tomlinson left for home, he had taken 174 members into the Church of God and credentialed nineteen ministers. The Pleasant Gove Camp Meetings included both black and white attendees. Edmond and Rebecca Barr were among the new members and were likely the first black

⁷ A. J. Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Press of Walter E. Rodgers, 1913), 137. This out-of-print book and many other early Church of God documents are available in the digital collection *Church of God Publications, 1901-1923* (Cleveland, Tenn: Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, 2008).

⁸ Tomlinson’s message of restoration of the Church of God facilitated bringing many independent Pentecostal congregations into the denomination. By January 1912 there were twenty-four congregations in Florida, ten more than the next largest number in the state of Tennessee. See Church of God, *Echoes from the General Assembly*, (Cleveland, Tenn.: n.p., 1912), 7.

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members and ministers in the Church of God⁹. On May 31, 1909, Tomlinson licensed both Edmond and Rebecca as evangelists.¹⁰

The Bahamian Mission

Edmond S. Barr was a black Bahamian, born on the island of Exhuma about 1871, who immigrated to Florida about 1893. In Florida Edmond met and married Rebecca.¹¹ It was Edmond who provided the first international connection for the Church of God. When Edmond came into the movement in 1909, he immediately realized the importance of taking the Pentecostal message to his homeland.¹² In November the Barrs travelled to Nassau and began preaching. Robert and Ida Evans, along with Carl M. Padgett, joined them on January 4, 1910.

⁹ David Michel observed that the holiness movement in general, and thus the Pleasant Gove Camp Meeting in particular, was more open to the integration of blacks and whites than most areas of American society. See David Michel, “The Importance of Florida for the Early Pentecostal Movement” (Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians, Vol. 12, February, 2005), 102, accessed 3 January 2011 at <http://fch.fiu.edu/FCH-2005/Michel-The Importance of Florida for the Early Pentecostal Movement.htm>. In an interview Quan Miller suggested that the Barrs were not the only blacks who attended the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting. He reported that Peter C. Hickson affirmed that the Solomon family attended. This family was instrumental in establishing the Church of God in Webster, Florida, which was one of the early churches. Eddie Solomon reported that his grandfather John Henry Solomon Sr. was a charter member of the Webster church and family tradition believed it was the second or third Church of God among blacks in Florida. Quan Miller, interview by David G. Roebuck, Clermont, Florida, 27 August 2009. Eddie Solomon, interview by David G. Roebuck, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 25 August 2009.

¹⁰ See “Church of God Record of Bishops, Evangelists, and Deacons” ledger. Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, Tennessee.

¹¹ For the common Church of God narrative regarding the Barrs see Charles W. Conn, *Like A Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God, 1886-1996* [Tribute Edition] (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway Press, 2008), 112-17. Church of God history has generally considered Rebecca to have been Bahamian as well. But recent research in the 1920 census records indicates that she, along with both of her parents were born in Florida. For census information related to Rebecca Barr see *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920* (Washington, D.C.: Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1920), Record Group 29; West Tampa, Hillsborough, Florida; Roll T625_222, p. 4A, Enumeration District 69; Image 266 [distributed via Ancestry.com (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2010)].

¹² The people of the Bahamas were entering an age of hope and optimism. The population of approximately 61,000 lacked luxuries such as running water, electricity or paved streets. The life-expectancy of a black man in the Bahamas was only 33 years. As a colony of the British Empire the Church of England dominated the islands. Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Roman Catholic congregations were well established. But the message of Pentecost had not yet reached the Bahamas. Much of the information here about the Barrs and the Bahama Islands comes from Michael S. Swann. *Vision, Zeal and Fire: A Concise History of the Church of God (of Prophecy) in the Bahamas* (Longwood, Fla.: Xulon Press, forthcoming). It was Swan who discovered that the 1920 U.S. Census reveals that Rebecca and her parents were born in Florida indicating that she was a citizen of the United States. I have used the Americanized “Edmond” rather than the British spelling of “Edmund,” which was probably used in the Bahamas.

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Together these five became the first members of the Church of God to take the gospel outside the United States. Their partnership represented the growing breath of the Church of God: it was multinational with citizens of the United States and the Bahamas; it was multi-racial with persons of both European and African heritage; it was multigenerational with both mature and young participants; and it included both male and female ministers.¹³

Emergence and Challenges of Black Congregations

Many of the details concerning the establishment of black congregations in the United States have not yet been recovered. The first two black churches were likely established in Miami and Jacksonville in 1909. By the end of 1912 there were also black churches in Coconut Grove and Webster.¹⁴

The Barrs returned to Florida in 1912 and settled in Miami. Probably because of Edmond’s Bahamian connections, most of the early growth of the Church of God among people of color was among Bahamians. On June 4, 1912, Tomlinson wrote in his journal: “Held a

¹³ See James E. Cossey, *R. M. Evans: “The First of His Kind”* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway Press, n.d.); and Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, 129-32. The Barrs likely were acquainted with Robert and Ida Evans as a result of the Pleasant Grove Camp Meeting. Robert Evans was a retired Methodist minister who previously had been baptized with the Holy Spirit at Pleasant Grove. He had served as pastor of several Methodist Churches, and Ida had been a housemother at Southerland College. They had often kept foster children in their home. Despite their retirement, they partnered with the Barrs to take the gospel to the Bahamas. Some sources suggest that the Evans and other friends of the Pleasant Grove camp ground financially supported the Barrs’ travel to the Bahamas. Before embarking in Miami, the Evans invited Carl M. Padgett to join them. Padgett was the son a local Church of God pastor. He made several trips to the Bahamas and later served as overseer in 1913.

¹⁴ The Barrs may have established the first congregation in Miami where there was a large population of Bahamians. One of their companions, Sampson Ellis Everett, returned to his home in Jacksonville, and ministered to his family there. The Coconut Grove church was likely a Bahamian congregation as well. E.L. Simmons published the earliest history of these events in 1938. Although Simmons did not cite any sources, he was a contemporary Floridian and may have been acquainted with the people involved. His tentative recollection and the lack of citations suggest that additional verification of this history is still needed, however. In 1954 Peter C. Hickson included a historical survey of the “Church of God Colored Work” in the minutes of the black General Assembly. The most inclusive history to date, it’s reporting of the earliest decades is quoted from Simmons. See E.L Simmons, *History of the Church of God* (Cleveland, Tenn: Church of God Publishing House, 1938), 85; Peter C. Hickson, “History of the Church of God Colored Work” in *Minutes of the 30th Annual Assembly of the Church of God Colored Work* (Jacksonville, Fla.: Church of God Colored Work, 1954), 10-131, especially 10-11; and Michel, “The Importance of Florida.” Miller reported information on the Coconut Grove congregation in our interview. Miller, interview by Roebuck.

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conference meeting yesterday to consider the question of ordaining Edmond Barr (colored) and setting the colored people off to work among themselves on account of the race prejudice in the South.” This ordination allowed Barr to establish churches and grant ministerial credentials. In 1915 Tomlinson appointed Barr as overseer of the black churches, while W.S. Caruthers served as overseer of the white churches in Florida.¹⁵ During the next two years the numbers increased from seven to thirteen black churches and from 111 to 200 members.¹⁶

Tomlinson’s 1912 journal entry regarding the ordination of Barr acknowledged the deep racial divide that existed in the first decades of the twentieth century. This was a time of tremendous hardship for black Americans. The evils of segregation led to separate and very unequal opportunities. Jim Crow laws were first passed in Tennessee in 1881 and soon spread to other southern states. They excluded people of color from many of the comforts of life, and made it difficult for blacks to function in general society. Black Christians in the south could not drink from the same water fountains, eat in the same restaurants or stay in the same hotels as their white brothers and sisters--if water fountains, restaurants and hotels were available at all. This made evangelism very difficult, especially when bi-vocational pastors often drove long distances to the churches they served.¹⁷ To add to the injustice, ignoring the law could lead to severe punishment including lynching.

¹⁵ An early practice was for questions to be raised and answered at each General Assembly. Most often we do not know the origins of these questions. In 1915, the General Assembly minutes state: “Question was raised as to whether it would be best to appoint a state overseer for the colored people. After a few remarks it was decided best for the general overseer to appoint a colored man as state overseer over the colored people in Florida.” Barr had previously been asked to address the Assembly, but the minutes do not record what he said. They do report, “His few minutes talk was interesting and all enjoyed it.” Although the list of overseers does not include Barr, when churches are listed by state, he is listed as state overseer of “Florida Col” along with seven congregations, one bishop, four deacons, and seven evangelists. The minutes also record 111 members and one-hundred persons attending five Sunday schools. See Church of God, *Minutes of the Eleventh Annual Assembly* [1915] (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 21, 18, and 26.

¹⁶ Church of God, *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Assembly* [1917] (Cleveland, TN: n.p., n.d.), 53.

¹⁷ State overseers frequently changed pastoral appointments. Bi-vocational pastors had to drive long distances or quit their secular jobs. Those with good jobs often chose to continue living in one city and drive to their appointments. Examples include James Gooden and George Wilson. Some such as Percell Sanders Sr., who was a

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Church of God members were not exempt from these harsh laws and customs, which remained in effect until the 1960s. Although it is tempting for us to discuss these conditions somewhat abstractly, they affected real people in real situations. Many of the seniors I interviewed continue to have vivid memories of the harsh realities. Bishop Dewey Wilson had to attend an all black school and remembered that there were no school buses for black children.¹⁸ Mrs. Viola Albritton had to walk two and one-half miles to school because she could not attend the white school in her neighborhood. She told me of the difficulty of going shopping in downtown Jacksonville, Florida. Only the J.C. Penny’s store had “decent” restrooms that black citizens could use. The trip by bus from her neighborhood to Penny’s, as well visits to other downtown stores, had to be planned carefully so that one did not get caught too far away from a needed restroom.¹⁹ Out-of-town trips had to be planned with even great care. Bishop James Gooden noted that the absence of restaurants and motels for blacks made it necessary to pack meals in advance, eat by the side of the road, and sleep in cars. He added that relieving one’s self had to be done discreetly in the bushes alongside the highway. Drinking from a water fountain or sitting in a bus seat designated for whites could result in arrest. On one occasion while traveling on a public bus from Florida to Washington D.C., Gooden witnessed the bus driver publicly demand an elderly black woman vacate her seat or face arrest at an upcoming stop. Summarizing these restrictions Gooden stated, “That is what we had to do in those days. We did not have any other choice. We had to live with that.”²⁰

barber, could more easily take their job with them and relocate with a new appointment. Gooden, interview by Roebuck; George Wilson, interview by Roebuck; and Percell Sanders Sr., interview by David G. Roebuck, Jacksonville, Florida, 31 August 2009.

¹⁸ Dewey Wilson, interview by Roebuck.

¹⁹ Viola Albritton, interview by David G. Roebuck, Jacksonville, Florida, 31 August 2009.

²⁰ James Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

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While black members were welcome at the Church of God General Assemblies, they were required to sit in sections designated for “colored” attendees.²¹ Conversely, when whites attended the Black Assemblies in Florida, seats were designated for them as well.²² Such seating arrangements were the law of the land.²³ When I asked Mother Gooden if the Church of God’s acquiesce to these Jim Crow laws was simple obedience to the law or prejudice in their hearts she responded, “They could not help it. It was both.”²⁴

These laws and customs often made it more practical for blacks to be part of predominantly black denominations. Blacks frequently left Pentecostal denominations that were attempting integration. David Michel has noted that by 1916, 95 percent of blacks belonged to black denominations.²⁵ Edmond Barr himself may have been one of those who left for a black denomination. By February 1916 Barr had resigned as pastor of the Miami church and within a few months was no longer a minister in the Church of God.²⁶ C.F. Bright, who later served as general secretary-treasurer for the “Church of God Colored Work” left in 1919 claiming “the colored would never be recognized with the whites.” Yet, after a brief time in the Church Of

²¹ Segregation at the General Assembly existed at least as early as 1920 when the Minutes of the Fifteenth Annual Assembly reveal a separate section for prayer. Albritton said she was turned away from the public seating at the 1960 General Assembly in Memphis where ropes still divided the races. See Church of God, *Minutes of the Fifteenth General Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1920), 54; and Albritton, interview by Roebuck.

²² Albritton reported that two rows were set aside for whites. Heastie reported that the “eastern side” was set aside for whites. The discrepancy may reflect different time periods that they attended the meetings. Albritton, interview by Roebuck. Lois Bright Heastie, interview by David G. Roebuck, Jacksonville, Florida, 31 August 2009.

²³ George Wilson and Dewey Wilson, interview by Roebuck.

²⁴ Evelyn Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

²⁵ Michel, “Importance of Florida.”

²⁶ J.D. Williams, clerk of the Miami congregation, wrote to General Overseer A.J. Tomlinson complaining about Barr since he had been appointed as overseer. According to the letter, dated 10 May 1916, Barr would not listen to the congregation and had abandoned his office of pastor. In a letter from Barr to Tomlinson, dated 12 June 1916, Barr stated that he resigned as pastor in February 1916, but was continuing to do evangelistic work. He apparently continued to serve as overseer. Tomlinson asked Sam C. Perry, overseer of the white churches to investigate the situation. In a letter dated 30 June 1916, Perry reported that he had talked to persons from three black congregations who did not want Barr as an overseer. Perry concluded, “from all accounts it seems that it would only work an injury to the work to place Bro. Barr over it.” A letter from Perry to Tomlinson dated 10 July 1916 reveals that Perry is handling church affairs among the black congregations in south Florida. See Edmond S. Barr Ministerial File, Office of Business and Records, Church of God International Offices, Cleveland, Tennessee.

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God In Christ, Bright came back into the Church of God believing it was God’s church. Like many who stayed, his love for the Church of God and the theological belief that they were restoring God’s church led him to remain committed to the movement.²⁷

The “Church of God Colored Work”

From 1917 to 1922 black churches and members served under the same jurisdiction as white churches. Although not many black members attended the General Assembly, they were welcomed and recognized. Beginning in 1919, black delegates were given responsibility for one service at each Assembly. Tomlinson introduced this new practice to the Assembly by announcing, “We have deviated from our former practice by giving a place on the program for our colored brethren. We have recognized them, and loved and fellowshiped them as brothers and sisters and members, and given them opportunity for extemporaneous utterances, but this is the first time we have given them representation on the program.” Tomlinson further noted that “God is no respecter of persons”; then he continued “in some states in the United States, it is more expedient for them to have their own churches and schools separate, but when it comes to religion there is no difference, and we feel that it is right for them to be recognized in the Assembly.”²⁸ Despite Tomlinson’s insistence that there was “no boundary in the church,” we have already noted that General Assembly services remained witnesses of deep seated segregation as black and white delegates sat and prayed in different sections of the meeting house.

²⁷ This theme repeatedly showed up in interviews. See Trudy A. Pratt, “Building the Kingdom: Memories of Bishop Crawford F. Bright,” *Church of God History and Heritage*, Winter/Spring 2003, 2; and C.F. Bright, “Stick to the Church of God,” in *Church of God Evangel*, 29 March 1924, 2.

²⁸ Church of God, *Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Assembly*, (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1919), 13.

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Because joint meetings continued to prove difficult throughout the south, black members requested their own overseer and structure. General Overseer Tomlinson acknowledged the request in his 1922 address to the General Assembly.

... The time has come that some mention should be made about our colored people. There is a problem confronting us that is yet to be solved. South of the Mason and Dixon line it is difficult to show them all the courtesy that we would like to. It is our purpose to make them feel at home with us and they do in a sense, but on account of conditions that seem to be unalterable a number of them are going away from us each year. They are joining with an organization of colored people. They say they love the Church of God and would love to remain, but under the circumstances they feel better to be in a church to themselves where they can be perfectly free in every respect.”²⁹

In an attempt to make it easier for blacks to remain in the Church of God, the General Assembly agreed to appoint a black overseer over all the black churches with the same authority as a state overseer. The Executive Committee then appointed Thomas J. Richardson as overseer of black churches.³⁰ By this time there were black churches in Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia in addition to those in Florida.³¹ In 1923 and 1924 black ministers brought to the General Assembly recommendations concerning a Bible training school and an orphanage, which the Assembly approved.³²

Challenges seem to have remained for black advancement in the Church of God, however. In 1926 the black ministers made a recommendation for the Assembly to find a way “better take care of our affairs among the colored work.” In response, the General Assembly agreed “that the colored people be allowed to have a colored Assembly and they still are and

²⁹ A.J. Tomlinson, “Overseer’s Annual Address,” in Church of God, *Minutes of the Seventeenth Annual Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1922), 25.

³⁰ *Minutes of the Seventeenth Annual Assembly*, 49 and 57.

³¹ In the following months financial and leadership disputes brought turmoil to the Church of God, and Tomlinson was removed from the office of general overseer in 1923. He left the denomination and formed what would become the Church of God of Prophecy. Bishop Richardson went with him, and the Church of God appointed David LaFleur as national overseer of the “Church of God Colored Work.”

³² Church of God, *Minutes of the Eighteenth Annual Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1923), 53-54; and Church of God, *Minutes of the Nineteenth Annual Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1924), 37.

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shall be recognized as the Church of God, and that we all belong to the body of Jesus (the Church of God). Neither shall it be construed that they are a body separate and apart from the General Annual Assembly of the Churches of God, therefore the General Secretary and Treasurer shall have charge of their tithes to be used exclusively for them.” The Assembly also agreed that the black churches should be able to promote their orphanage in the *Church of God Evangel*, should be able to select their own general overseer, and “attend to their own business.”³³ Over the next four decades black churches developed their own structure, which was referred to as the “Church of God Colored Work.” These congregations created a national office in Jacksonville, Florida; built an auditorium in Jacksonville for annual assemblies; and appointed overseers of states with black churches. They also built an orphanage and industrial school in Eustis, Florida. Black overseers served over states with several black congregations.

Church of God historian Charles Conn assessed race relations in the following decades with the observation that other than the General Assembly there was little contact between white and black congregations in the Church of God. He wrote: “The Executive Committee and Supreme Council gave occasional consideration to ways of increasing black growth and involvement in general church outreach. Ironically, that concern led to miscalculations and tension that were painful to both blacks and whites. In the setting of that period, answers were difficult to find, or they were typically superficial. In many ways the Church of God reflected the national frustration and inertia of the times.” Conn continued, “...it was felt by some that a more

³³ Church of God, *Minutes of the Twenty-First Annual Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1926), 38-39. It should be noted that the next year a committee of black ministers presented the following recommendation: “We, the bishops of the Colored Work present at the Assembly have agreed that our work shall continue as it was before the action of the 21st Annual Assembly, with a colored overseer to supervise the colored work.” This action allowed black congregations in the north to choose to remain under white state overseers rather than the “Church of God Colored Work.” See Church of God, *Minutes of the Twenty-Second Annual Assembly* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1927), 39.

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vigorous evangelistic leadership would be helpful to the black work. However benign that consideration may have been, its consequence was painful.”³⁴

Beginning in 1958 the Church of God appointed white overseers to supervise the national “Church of God Colored Work.” The reasons for this selection are not entirely clear. In one interview I was told that Church of God leadership selected a white national overseer because the black leadership could not come to an agreement about who should fill the office.³⁵ Bishop James Gooden reported, “Black ministers were not advancing like we thought we should have. I don’t know if it was due to a lack of vision or what. I think headquarters thought the same. Headquarters decided to give us a different leader.We did not know why. But we said we would wait and see how it works out.”³⁶ Whatever the reason, J.T. Roberts served as national overseer from 1958 to 1965 and David Lemons served from 1965 to 1966. Both were established ministers with good reputations. Roberts was a fiery preacher. He had been a national evangelist as well as state overseer of the white churches in Florida and Alabama. Lemons was the son of pioneer M.S. Lemons and was known as a kind and gentle man. Those who knew them testify that they did good work. Roberts had construction experience and was able to build several new church buildings.³⁷

Despite the fact that the white overseers were good leaders with good intentions, these appointments seemed to be backward steps for many. Although black ministers desired to work with denominational leadership, they eventually reached a point where they called for change. Historian Conn, who served on the executive committee of the denomination during this time, wrote, “It was considered an affront to African-American ability that they must be directly

³⁴ Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, 377.

³⁵ George Wilson and Dewey Wilson, interview by Roebuck.

³⁶ James Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

³⁷ James Gooden, interview by Roebuck; and Sanders, interview by Roebuck.

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supervised by white leadership. There was no question of their loyalty to the Church of God, for many of them had been a part of the church longer than most white members. They simply wanted African-American leadership of their endeavors, an understandable desire.”³⁸

The response of the Church of God was to move toward integration. The General Assembly passed a resolution on Human Rights in 1964 and dissolved the “Church of God Colored Work” in 1966. Yet, what might be seen as a victory for equality was seen as a step backward for many black ministers. Most of the black ministers who had been state overseers, youth directors, evangelism directors, and members of state councils were now out of office. Opportunities for leadership were radically reduced and black churches fell under the leadership of white overseers. This reduction along with the perceived lack of consultation with black leaders and the swiftness of the change led many to question their place in the Church of God.³⁹

Although there were black churches in several states, the largest number were in Florida. Black ministers in Florida asked the Executive Committee to appoint an overseer for the black churches in Florida—in effect returning to the days of Edmond Barr when there was both a white and black overseer in Florida.⁴⁰ The Executive Committee agreed and appointed Walter Jackson as overseer of the black churches in Florida. This action was too little too late for some black ministers who under the leadership of Bishop J.B. Ferguson left the Church of God to establish a new denomination by the name “National Church of God” with offices in Ft. Lauderdale.⁴¹ For those that remained, the former national office in Jacksonville served as the state office until the denomination purchased property in Cocoa in 1978.⁴² Today the office in Cocoa serves most of the black congregations in Florida. Black congregations in other regions work under the office

³⁸ Conn, *Like a Mighty Army*, 378.

³⁹ James Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

⁴⁰ George Wilson and Dewey Wilson, interview by Roebuck; and James Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

⁴¹ James Gooden, interview by Roebuck; and Beatrice Davis Marcelle, interview by David G. Roebuck, West Palm Beach, Florida, 24 August 2009. Gooden was on the black national council that made the request.

⁴² C.C. Pratt, interview by David G. Roebuck, Cocoa, Florida, 8 October 2008.

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in that regional jurisdiction. In a few geographical areas, Church of God membership is predominately black, although in several areas such as New York, New England, and Canada, these members are from more recent immigrant groups.⁴³

Tensions remained high among the Church of God’s black constituency following integration in 1966. In an effort to increase communication, the Executive Committee established a black liaison office in Cleveland and appointed H.G. Poitier to fill the post. Bishop Poitier was well respected in the black community and was able to resolve problems and keep some black ministers from defecting. Civil Rights legislation in the nation and integration in the Church of God did not immediately change hearts, however. When the Poitier family relocated from Florida to Cleveland, his appointment as a denominational leader did not negate the fact that their race limited the neighborhoods they could reside in and motivated multiple death threats in the southeast Tennessee town that many Church of God people euphemistically refer to as the “Holy City.”⁴⁴

Outside of Florida there continue to be few black leaders. In 1978 the Church of God created the office of Southeastern Regional Evangelism Director and appointed Wallace Sibley Sr. His responsibilities included emphasizing evangelism among blacks in the states of Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, North Georgia, South Georgia, and Tennessee. In 1983 the position was expanded to Evangelism Director with national responsibilities. C.C. Pratt served in this office until 1992, when with the appointment of Joseph Jackson the name of the office was changed to Director of Black Ministries. This remained a full time office until 2010

⁴³ Joseph E. Jackson, *Reclaiming Our Heritage: The Search for Black History in the Church of God* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Black Ministries, 1993), 14-15.

⁴⁴ Xenobia Anderson and Treva Culpepper, interview by David G. Roebuck, Virginia Beach, Virginia, 30 July 2005; and Clinton Culpepper and Treva Culpepper, interview by David G. Roebuck, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 24 August 2009. Anderson and Treva Culpepper are daughters of Poitier and reported the difficulties of not being able to live near other Church of God officials along with death threats made to their family.

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when the Church of God International Offices made numerous reductions. The now part-time office is called Coordinator of Black Ministries.⁴⁵

Assessing a Racially Divided History

Charles W. Conn

There have been several published attempts to assess race relations in the Church of God. *Like a Mighty Army* by Charles W. Conn is the authorized history of the denomination. First published in 1955, Conn revised his magnum opus two times, and the denomination published a posthumous tribute edition. The first edition, written in the morning of the Civil Rights Movement, suggested that the efforts of the black churches lacked “drive and vigor,” judged that creating a separate black national assembly while including blacks in the General Assembly facilitated “harmonious fellowship and cooperation,” and emphasized the faithfulness of the black constituency to the Church of God. Although this edition recounts that some black churches in the North were dissatisfied with a separate Assembly, there was little that suggested awareness of the problems of segregation or of the discomfort black ministers and members may have been experiencing due to a segregated church and society.⁴⁶ The third edition, published in 1996 and again as a tribute edition in 2008, was much more aware and forthcoming regarding the challenges of race relations. It gave substantially more attention to the history of black congregations, ministers, and the “Church of God Colored Work.” This edition expressed an awareness of the challenges that faced black members in a segregated society, acknowledged the

⁴⁵ Jackson, *Reclaiming Our Heritage*, 44.

⁴⁶ Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army, Moves the Church of God, 1886—1955* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Church of God Publishing House, 1955), 132-33, 182, and 201-203. Conn was an astute observer of the Church of God; and it is likely that he was aware of the problems of segregation. All histories are selective in what aspects of the story they tell. Although Conn likely did not avoid the inbred paternalism of southern leaders, he came to champion human rights over the course of his lifetime.

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lack of fellowship between the races, recognized that actions taken by one race were too often misunderstood by another race, and admitted that social realities affected the Church of God.⁴⁷

Harold D. Hunter

Harold D. Hunter has reminded us that there were influences in the Church of God other than the social prejudices of the South.⁴⁸ General Overseer A.J. Tomlinson, without a doubt the most influential person prior to his impeachment in 1922, grew up in the racially diverse community of Westfield, Indiana, with a family heritage that included active participation in the Underground Railroad. Tomlinson imbibed the waters of the radical holiness movement, which included the influence of Charles G. Finney and his racially inclusive Oberlin College, Martin Wells Knapp who preached racial equality, and Benjamin Hardin Irwin’s inclusive Fire Baptized Holiness Association. Tomlinson was quick to acknowledge the important theological role of William J. Seymour in the emergence of the Pentecostal movement. As general overseer Tomlinson brought black members into the church, credentialed black ministers, appointed black overseers, publically lamented the challenges to racial inclusion in the south, and only reluctantly agreed to a separate black structure. According to Hunter, this racial inclusiveness was profoundly influential on the Church of God and the alternative group Tomlinson continued with that became known as the Church of God of Prophecy. Tomlinson later articulated a theology of inclusion proclaiming “The middle wall of partition is broken down between the races...when

⁴⁷ Conn, *Like A Mighty Army* [2008], 150-51, 221-22, 224, 239-41, 249-51, 253, 269, 295-96, 377-78, 418-20, 469-70, 476-78, 500-501, and 521-22.

⁴⁸ See especially Harold D. Hunter, “A Journey Toward Racial Reconciliation: Race Mixing in the Church of God of Prophecy,” in *The Azusa Street Revival and Its Legacy*, ed. Harold D. Hunter and Cecil M. Robeck Jr. (Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway Press, 2006), 277-96.

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they get into the Church of God.”⁴⁹ Yet, Hunter acknowledged that Tomlinson was also paternalistic and an advocate of separate schools and churches.

H. Paul Thompson

H. Paul Thompson examined race relations in the Church of God during the years 1909 to 1929. According to Thompson, the relatively large number of congregations and ministers joining the Church of God is significant and calls for an explanation. Although early data can support the idea that there was discrimination, there is an equal amount of data to the contrary including the high percentage of blacks who were ordained as bishops, the relative freedom given to blacks, and the promotion of blacks to some leadership positions such as state overseer and membership in the Council of Seventy.⁵⁰ When surveying the various ways in which denominations dealt with issues of race, Thompson concluded, “The Church of God did not experience a total separation because the leaders—both black and white—did not want one. They differed from the leaders of other Pentecostal denominations.”⁵¹ Thompson attributed this difference to the mindset of white leaders who wanted to keep blacks with the church, but also recognized that Tomlinson was “more open to true racial equality than most Pentecostal leaders of his day, no black leader emerged to lead blacks into a separate denomination, and some blacks likely stayed due to the emerging exclusivity doctrine”⁵² of the Church of God.

⁴⁹ Hunter, “Journey Toward Racial Reconciliation,” 293.

⁵⁰ H. Paul Thompson, Jr., “‘On Account of Conditions that Seem Unalterable’: A Proposal about Race Relations in the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) 1909-1929,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, 25: 2 [Fall 2003], 247-54. Thompson listed five practices that might be interpreted as racism: 1) lack of attendance of blacks at General Assemblies; 2) segregation at the General Assemblies; 3) absence of blacks on the Elders Council; 4) instability among black congregations and ministers; and 5) Tomlinson’s theocratic government may not have allowed for sufficient freedom.

⁵¹ Thompson, “On Account of Conditions,” 258.

⁵² Thompson, “On Account of Conditions,” 259-60.

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Mickey Crews

In his book, *The Church of God: A Social History*, Mickey Crews discussed race relations in the Church of God in the context of the denomination’s growing involvement in political and civic affairs in the last half of the twentieth century. Crews gathered evidence suggesting Church of God members in the southern United States were racially prejudiced and that they paternalistically supported segregation based on the same claims made by the general white population.⁵³ These attitudes did begin to change slowly in the 1950s. In this context, according to Crews, white leadership was disappointed with the rate of growth of black churches, and some black leaders felt isolated in the separate “Church of God Colored Work.” When the general executive committee appointed a white overseer for the “Church of God Colored Work, black leaders protested but were ignored. Race relations remained particularly strained until the “Church of God Colored Work” was abolished in 1966. Crews praised the Church of God for being one of a few southern denominations to integrate in the 1960s. He conclude that this positive action was the result of outside advocates, the push for equality by black members, and pressure from middle-class, progressive church members.⁵⁴

Joseph E. Jackson

Joseph E. Jackson wrote *Reclaiming Our Heritage: The Search for Black History in the Church of God* while he was serving as director of Church of God Black Ministries, an office that evolved following integration in 1966. Jackson argued that immigrant blacks in the Church

⁵³ Crews cited several items as evidence: a student’s report on a Lee College survey that indicated most Lee students would not receive a blood transfusion from a black person due to fears that the student might also receive undesirable racial characteristics; a pamphlet written by a Church of God evangelist, which argued that God created the races and thus society should maintain segregation to sustain racial purity; and a 1949 *Church of God Evangel* article, which quoted a black reporter as suggesting that the paternalism of southern whites is a natural reaction to the Civil War. See Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 163-64.

⁵⁴ Crews, *The Church of God*, 165-72.

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of God have had little opportunity to give input into the denomination. Further those in Florida have a voice only because they fought for that voice. According to Jackson, those blacks who wished to be leaders were passed over and few blacks knew their historical role in the Church of God.⁵⁵ Jackson suggested that the denomination’s stated position that placing white men over the black national office resulted in growth had the effect of negating all of the good work black leaders had accomplished.⁵⁶ Jackson questioned why the Church of God International Offices did not look more like the “United Nations” in light of the diverse constituency of the Church of God outside the United States.⁵⁷ He further suggested that the Church of God made progress on the issue of Civil Rights only after changes in American society made it impossible for the denomination to do otherwise. Jackson went on to praise the creation of Hispanic jurisdictions as the type of compartmentalization desired by ethnic groups and a necessary means of progress. He warned that without further inclusion many blacks would leave the Church of God.⁵⁸

David Michel

David Michel has written extensively about black ministries in the Church of God. His book, *Telling the Story: Black Pentecostals in the Church of God*, is a survey of the history of black involvement in the Church of God. Michel wrote matter-of-factly about the difficulties of racism, particularly in the southern United States, but ended with a celebration of the achievements of black members and ministers, the recent agitation of blacks for a greater role in the denomination, and increased appointments of black leaders in various areas. Michel noted, “While for the casual observer, these appointments may be just bureaucratic decisions, for

⁵⁵ Jackson, *Reclaiming Our Heritage*, 15.

⁵⁶ Jackson, *Reclaiming Our Heritage*, 43.

⁵⁷ Jackson, *Reclaiming Our Heritage*, 48.

⁵⁸ Jackson, *Reclaiming Our Heritage*, 50-52.

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African-Americans they are quite meaningful. They consider these achievements to be the results of the earlier years of advocacy originated from ministers from the South who experienced less than what they deserved.”⁵⁹

In his important paper presented to the Florida Conference of Historians, Michel argued that while numerous studies of Pentecostalism have addressed racial divisions, few recognized the importance of ethnicity for understanding Pentecostalism. He suggested that ethnicity was an essential component of the Church of God conversation. Probably due in large part to the influence of Edmond and Rebecca Barr, early growth of the Church of God excelled among Bahamian and other West Indies immigrants from British colonies where the black/white dynamics were far different than those in the United States. As a result, the Barrs were more open to a white dominated church and culture than were American-born blacks who had suffered the injustices of slavery and Jim Crow. Despite some tensions between black immigrants and American-born blacks, black immigrants were better equipped than whites to evangelize and incorporate American-born blacks into the Church of God. Michel argued that although the Church of God did not aggressively evangelize blacks, similarities between the denomination and immigrant experiences in the West Indies made the Church of God a good transitional fit for many immigrants.⁶⁰

Hearing Living Voices

With this formal analysis in mind, what are black members and ministers saying about this history and the contemporary divided jurisdictions? I have been interviewing a wide variety

⁵⁹ David Michel, *Telling the Story: Black Pentecostals in the Church of God* (Cleveland: Tenn.: Pathway Press, 2000), 148.

⁶⁰ According to Michel white ministers did not reach out to blacks because of “indifference, lack of evangelical boldness, pure pragmatism, and the position of the church on the labor movement.” See Michel, “Importance of Florida.”

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of persons from senior ministers and laity whose first-hand experience and knowledge reach back as early as is currently possible to those who are relatively young in their experiences.

These interviews reveal the complexities of race relations in the Church of God. I want to draw from their comments the importance of three areas deserving further attention.

Ethnic and National Divisions

The role of ethnic and national differences has always been a significant factor in race relations in the Church of God as David Michel noted. Much of the early growth among blacks in the Church of God was among Bahamian immigrants, especially in the lower half of Florida where the Church of God thrived,⁶¹ and many of the early black leaders were Bahamian. James and Evelyn Gooden noted that at least four of the six black national overseers were from the Bahamas.⁶² These ethnic differences created tension in both the church and American society. Mother Gooden, whose parents were immigrants from the Bahamas, reported that during her childhood there were fights in the public schools between the children of immigrants and those born in the United States. Those school children were fighting over who was and who was not an American. She believed that in the church ethnic tension was related to the fact that the Bahamians were the first persons of African descent in the Church of God. Because of the chronological primacy of their membership, Bahamians believed they should be privileged in leadership and teaching roles among black members. Not originally from Florida, Bishop

⁶¹ The Goodens reported that due to the proximity between the Bahamas and south Florida, Bahamians tended to settle on the east coast and south of Daytona. Blacks living in Florida north of Daytona tended to be American born from southern states such as Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Goodens, interview by Roebuck.

⁶² These included David LaFleur, J.H. Curry, N.S. Marcelle and George Wallace. They reported that Ford was not Bahamian, and they were uncertain about Richardson. James and Evelyn Gooden, interview by Roebuck. The Bahamian influence did not end with the dissolution of the “Church of God Colored Work.” For example, the family of Bishop Quan Miller, who later served as Florida state overseer from 1990 to 2002 was from the Bahamas. Quan Miller, interview by Roebuck. State Overseer C.C. Pratt stated that he was born in the Bahamas, and Sanders reported that other state overseers with Bahamian roots included Walter Jackson, and W.C. Menendez. Sanders, interview by Roebuck; and Pratt, interview by Roebuck.

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Gooden discovered that the culture in south Florida, where Bahamians were prominent in the Church of God, was very different than what he had experienced in South Carolina and later Ohio. He stated, “The Bahamian culture dominated everything. So I either had to accept it or pull away. And I certainly was not going to pull away because I gave my life to the Lord, and I chose this church as my church. So I made up my mind to adapt into whatever I came into contact with.”⁶³

Viola Albritton, who served as J.T. Roberts’ secretary, reported that the Bahamians had a monopoly on the bishopric, and that Roberts intentionally ordained qualified men who were not Bahamian in order to dissipate this monopoly.⁶⁴ This claim was affirmed by Bishop Percell Sanders Sr., who stated that only a few black men were ordained before Roberts became national overseer. Among those Roberts ordained was Sanders’ father.⁶⁵ Bishop Sanders also said that when integration did occur in 1966, many of those who left the Church of God were Bahamians.⁶⁶ If Sanders is correct, then it is possible that some of the defections that came with the 1966 integration were as much about losing power among black communities as about power issues between blacks and whites.

Added to the conversation about power struggles among people of African descent is the issue of how these various groups relate to the white constituency in the Church of God. Bishop Quan Miller, although his family was from the Bahamas, acknowledged that still today black Americans claim that they experience more prejudice in the Church of God than do blacks who are immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa.⁶⁷

⁶³ Goodens, interview by Roebuck.

⁶⁴ Albritton, interview by Roebuck.

⁶⁵ Sanders interview by Roebuck.

⁶⁶ Sanders, interview by Roebuck.

⁶⁷ Miller, interview by Roebuck.

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The Church of God and Government

Ecclesiology has always been a foundational building block of the Church of God. Through much of our history we have strived to restore God’s church including a biblical church government--sometimes teaching that we were the best representation of God’s church. From the very first General Assembly in 1906, the Church of God searched the Scriptures to discover God’s law and government in order for local churches to execute that law and government. This doctrine of the Church of God and the importance of biblical church government captured the convictions of black members just as it did white members. (One can surmise that the influence of the Anglican Church on Caribbean immigrants from British colonies might even have enhanced commitment to the doctrine.) Although this theology was a more powerful bond in earlier decades, remnants still remained among those I interviewed. Just as Bishop Gooden refused to leave, many blacks stayed in Church of God because they were committed to idea of Church of God.⁶⁸ Evelyn Gooden reported of her father and his generation, “He loved the Church. He loved the Church of God really. Then everybody did. That’s the way it was. When I grew up the Church of God was number one in everybody’s life.”⁶⁹ When describing a significant dispute that developed at the end of Bishop Robert’s tenure, Bishop Gooden noted, “We did not want to leave the Church of God.” When tensions rose again following integration in 1966, Gooden commented, “My wife and I talked, and we agreed to stay with the Church of God.” Mother Gooden added, “I was not going anywhere. This is all I knew.”⁷⁰

This heightened attention to restoring Biblical church government may have appealed to those who desired order and structure, including immigrants arriving in a new land. It also

⁶⁸ George Wilson noted that he liked the teachings of the Church of God and that it was his life. George Wilson, interview by Roebuck.

⁶⁹ Evelyn Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

⁷⁰ Goodens, interview by Roebuck.

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conveyed a strong commitment to the authority of law and government in both black and white communities in the Church of God. When describing black leadership that she knew, Viola Albritton singled out the significance of Peter C. Hickson. A long-time influential pastor in the black community, Hickson served as the state Young Peoples Endeavor leader in Florida and edited *The Gospel Herald*⁷¹ for many years. Albritton emphasized the fact that Hickson followed the rules of the General Assembly and respected authority.⁷²

This emphasis on law and government along with order as an expected outcome may also have contributed to the Church of God’s lack of a prophetic stand against the injustices of racism. Some in the Church of God attributed the growing unrest generated by the Civil Rights Movement to be the result of Devil-inspired Communism seeking to provoke civil war. Segregation was God ordained to prevent mixing of the races. Attempts to dismantle segregation defied God’s Biblical law.⁷³ Although such positions were changing by the 1960s, it appears that leaders in the Church of God believed they could not advance faster than the civil laws would allow. Bishop Gooden reported asking Bishop Roberts why the denomination’s Lee College did not admit black Americans. According to Gooden, “He said we as the church cannot advance beyond the state. He said when the state of Florida integrates, and when the schools in the state of Florida integrate, then Lee College will be open to blacks.” Gooden concluded, “And it did just like he said.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ David G. Roebuck, “Peter C. Hickson: A Pioneer Youth Leader,” *Church of God Evangel*, February 2008, 17; and Irene Gloria Tunsil, interview by David G. Roebuck, Jacksonville, Florida, 6 October 2008.

⁷² Albritton, interview by Roebuck.

⁷³ Crews, *The Church of God*, 163-65.

⁷⁴ James Gooden, interview by Roebuck.

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Symbol and Opportunities

Finally it must be noted that the symbolic meaning of separate jurisdictions in Florida has varied over time. In 1966 black leaders asked for continued segregation in Florida. The national integration that occurred was perceived at that time as diminishing opportunities for blacks and bringing blacks under the authority of whites. The separate black jurisdiction in Florida continues to be seen by some as a necessary antidote to complete subjugation.⁷⁵

But symbolic meaning has not remained static. Many ministers today no longer see a need for segregation in Florida. Clinton and Treva Culpepper lamented that the separate jurisdictions in Florida keep black and white members and ministers from spending time with one another.⁷⁶ Bishop Eddie Solomon reported that while older ministers may need the Cocoa office for opportunities and support, younger ministers are tired of having to explain the segregated offices and would prefer that offices not be divided by race.⁷⁷ Bishop Quan Miller suggested that continued segregation in Florida is viewed by young ministers today as an attempt by white leadership to keep control. He added that his daughter views the Church of God as being behind American culture in regards to race relations. Miller went on to report that many young blacks see membership in the Church of God as a stigma, and the Church of God is continuing to lose young black ministers, especially to the Church Of God In Christ.

Despite this concern about the negative symbolism of a separate black jurisdiction, Miller believes that some black ministers remain fearful that if the Cocoa jurisdiction is integrated with the white jurisdiction, black ministers will lose opportunities to serve as state overseers, district

⁷⁵ Egbulonu, interview by Roebuck.

⁷⁶ Clinton Culpepper and Treva Culpepper, interview by Roebuck.

⁷⁷ Solomon, interview by Roebuck.

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overseers, and board members. According to Miller, black members in the Church of God continue to ask “where are black leaders outside of [the office of] Black Ministries?”⁷⁸

Of course the Cocoa jurisdiction is not the only symbol that matters. For many blacks other symbols have emerged that signal greater opportunities. The 2008 election of Bishop Wallace Sibley as secretary general of the Church of God⁷⁹ and the election of Barrack Obama as president of the United States are both perceived as positive and hopeful signs that church and society will provide increased opportunities. Pastor Kimberly Egbulonu regarded the election of an African-American president as opening up additional possibilities for blacks. With her own increasing comfort as a black, female pastor she affirmed, “Today the sky is the limit.” In her interview this confidence affected her attitude toward the segregated offices in Florida. She noted that at one time issues of segregation troubled her and caused feelings of exclusion and feelings of being less than a full participant in the Church of God. But she no longer sees the Cocoa office, along with the history of slavery and segregation in America, as an obstacle to her ministry.

While Pastor Egbulonu does not feel personally constrained by segregated offices in Florida, she does believe that integration of the Church of God in Florida would be symbolic recognition that blacks can lead; and she is convinced that action is needed to move forward. She noted that the Church of God needs to move beyond the fear of talking about racial issues, and insisted, “It is an issue that needs to be talked about. It needs to be worked on.” In a rapidly changing world the Church of God needs to move beyond issues of race and ethnicity. Yet for Egbulonu moving beyond does not mean forgetting the past. She expressed a desire to see more acknowledgement of black accomplishments in the Church of God so that the “labor, blood,

⁷⁸ Miller, interview by Roebuck.

⁷⁹ Miller, interview by Roebuck; Egbulonu, interview by Roebuck.

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sweat and tears” of those who had come before would be recognized. She recommended that a museum, video, named buildings and scholarships would all be fitting ways to honor the work of black forebears. Finally, noting that the majority of Church of God members are not white, she suggested that a voting system designed to enfranchise those who are unable to travel to the United States to attend General Assemblies would change the landscape and color of Church of God leadership.⁸⁰

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief survey, analysis and contemporary discussion of race relations in the Church of God? While one immediately recognizes that these issues are complex, perhaps an increased awareness of this history, recognition of past failures, and openness to a wide variety of voices will enable the Church of God to move forward.

As the Church of God moves forward it must realize that solutions are not just based on the color of skin. While it is easy enough to observe that Haitian immigrants speaking French or Creole are somewhat different than blacks born from the legacy of American slavery, there must also be an open realization that differences of nationality, ethnicity, regionalism and culture influence human relations. Just as there are vast differences between white persons of European descent, and just as not all people who speak Spanish are alike, so too there are significant differences among people of African descent. Moving forward must include ways of hearing a variety of voices from a variety of backgrounds.

Additionally the Church of God can no longer depend on allegiance to abandoned theologies of church, government and authority. While loyalty was once based on the conviction

⁸⁰ Egbulonu, interview by Roebuck. Upon entering the home of George Wilson I noted a poster of President Obama. This is in stark contrast to many white members of the Church of God who oppose the policies of Obama.

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that the denomination known as the Church of God with international offices in Cleveland, Tennessee, was the preeminent restoration of God’s church in these last days, this theology is no longer a significant bond of unity. The Church of God must realize that in today’s world people of all races and backgrounds have increased options and opportunities. A predominantly white-led denomination must articulate other reasons for unity of the body if it is to be a welcoming place for people of all races.

Opinions continue to vary as to whether or not a separate jurisdiction for black congregations should remain in Florida. The symbolism of this office is not uniformly the same. Yet, behind the symbolism is the hope of black members that leadership opportunities will be available. With or without the Cocoa office, the Church of God can move forward in black communities by finding ways to signal that such opportunities will be forthcoming.

A review of the history of race relations in the Church of God should provoke the denomination to seriously consider to what degree we have been faithful to our commitment to the Bible and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Regrettably the historical evidence demonstrates that too often Church of God members and leaders read the Bible on issues of race through the lens of southern culture rather than with a Spirit-led discernment. Blind loyalty to unjust laws precluded the possibility of a prophetic voice. While we may genuinely repent of such past wrongs, we should at the same time question whether or not we might continue to be swayed by culture on other matters.

The temptation for the Church of God as with all human endeavors is to ask for both forgiveness and forgetfulness in an effort to move beyond the ugly realities of our past. But as William Faulkner’s character Gavin Stevens said in *Requiem for a Nun*, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.” Our past continues to shape our self-understanding, our decision making,

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and our relationships. Regarding race, it may be far more productive for the Church of God to find public ways to acknowledge the past and to honor those black men and women who have labored for the Kingdom in our vineyard.

The story of J.H. Curry pulling down the dividing cord of segregation at a Church of General Assembly remains a powerful symbol in the heritage of black members, while it is virtually unknown among our white majority in the United States. Perhaps hearing this story and discussing the differing interpretations may enable this Pentecostal denomination to move forward in meeting the ongoing challenges of race relations.