

Cheerleader for the Lord

Evangelist Joyce Rodgers never runs out of joy. But her positive outlook was forged in the fires of adversity.

With gazelle-like grace, evangelist Joyce Rodgers paces the platform in front of a sea of expectant faces—a myriad of dark brown-, beige- and pink-skinned men and women, youth and seniors. Cheerleader-like, her arm movements punctuate words she boldly delivers in rapid-fire staccato, broken by an occasional emphatic drawl timed to bring home a punch line of inspiration, insight or encouragement.

Unpretentious and upbeat, she almost dances across the stage—energy draped in a black A-line dress. As she preaches, her slender frame poses a marked contrast to the sizeable presence she emanates. Her attitude takes on an air of jubilation as the mood of the crowd peaks from prayer, praise and clapping to foot stomping, laughing-out-loud, near-pandemonium pitch.

“Reach out and tell somebody,” Rodgers shouts, “Tell somebody: ‘After the storm, I’ll still be standing! After the storm, I’ll still be standing—maybe not erect or on my own, but still standing!’”

She stops her stage march abruptly, and bright-eyed and smiling, faces the crowd to deliver head-on a key message point. “When you are going through a test, God will always provide a way of escape. ... But God may not show you your way out until the very end. And the only thing He ma-a-ay show you in the middle is your faith!”

Somewhere in the crowded auditorium echoes an “Amen!” In the

house, more than a few tears suddenly spill out, and like descending waves across the audience, heads nod vigorously then humbly bow.

Breaking the Mold

Rodgers describes her life story as a Cinderella tale “where God takes nothing and nobody and uses them for His kingdom.” While growing up in the small East Texas community of Gladewater, she broke the mold several times, especially when the girl from the projects began pumping up team spirit as a sixth-grade cheerleader.

“God told me I would lead people to victory on the football field and in the church house, and to ultimate victory in Jesus Christ,” she recalls.

Rodgers accepted the call to ministry in the late 1980s under

the late S.E. Mitchell, pastor of St. Andrew Church of God in Christ, her local church in the north Dallas suburb of Denton. "I heard the voice of the Lord calling me to another level, but I didn't know all that it entailed. I was scared and I didn't know who would train me."

In 1999, the presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), Bishop C.D. Owens, first commissioned her for the capacity in which she still serves, COGIC's International Youth Department Chairlady. When the church changed leadership, Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson reappointed her.

Today, under the banner of Primary Purpose Ministries, she seems well on her way to becoming one of COGIC's most compelling female quarterbacks for Christ, embraced by a denomination that is expanding the traditional boundaries that have previously defined first-string evangelists as male players.

Rodgers says her denomination is in transition on the issue of women ministers. "My mama is from the old school. She says to me, 'Women don't preach!' About me, Mama says 'She's not preaching, she's expounding on the Word of God.'" But Rodgers says she believes COGIC has moved beyond this traditionalist school of thought.

"I've heard the horror stories, but I don't have those stories. The denomination has taken a different stand, and my opportunities have been good. I think COGIC is in transition, recognizing the gifts and anointing in people with more of a focus on ministry than gender."

Rodgers says she is purposely feminine in dress and manner,

but not to distraction. “I believe women in ministry should be who they are. Ministry is about purpose, not person. The focus should be on Jesus, not gender.” She believes that because males dominate the ministry they have become the primary role models, so female ministers have a tendency to pick up on the masculinity because that’s what they’ve seen.

Says Rodgers: “I’m from the old school. Women don’t open doors in the presence of men. Lady Diana didn’t do that. I believe you can cast out demons, lay hands on the sick, but I don’t think you have to be masculine. Dainty women can cast out mighty demons.”

Rodgers is no powder-puff player. She estimates she traveled 47 weeks out of 52 last year, honoring about 250 speaking engagements across the country, seeing more than 1,000 people come to Christ and more than 500 youth drop to their knees at the altar.

During those months, she completed her first book, *Fatal Distractions*, and nursed one of her sisters through the final stages of terminal cancer. “It’s been a season of loss in which I could choose to be bitter or better, and I chose to be better. I can’t figure it out but I trust Him.”

Defining Moments

Her life has been marked by potentially fatal distractions. As the middle child in a family of eight, wearing hand-me-down clothes and playing with toys from Salvation Army shelves, poverty could have kept her down. Instead, she says she’s not just survived, she has thrived.

Elected cheerleader and the first black homecoming queen at her high school, and graduating from both high school and college are not the typical pathways of kids from the projects. "God told me that is what my life would be, treading into unfamiliar, uncomfortable territory where I would be different. He said, 'You will always go where you don't necessarily qualify.'"

Perhaps that could explain why Rodgers attended Oprah Winfrey's televised 50th birthday celebration. Says Rodgers: "In high school, my best friends had money and prestige; I was from the projects, and my life was totally opposite."

A few years ago when she married the love of her life and was widowed the same year, that tragedy could have counted as distraction enough to dissuade her from God's calling. But it didn't.

The death of a close friend a few years back, and—this last Christmas—the death of her older sister Rose, were tough times for her, but not the fatal distractions, she says, that they could have been. "I was raised to love God and know that He had a plan for me."

"All of those defining moments provoke levels of anointing and commitment to God.

"In shedding things and shedding people, whether voluntary or involuntary, we become more dependent on Him," she says.

"I never wanted to be a victim: of the projects, of death, of being alone—no husband, no children. Instead of being a victim, I am victorious ... learning how to walk in victory,"

she explains.

Her struggles have framed what she describes as her life and ministry message: “There’s hope in Christ Jesus, no matter what the circumstance ... and that God has a plan and His plan holds no defeat, only victory.”

So she tells her audiences: “All those distractions are designed to ruin your goal or dream, but you must keep your focus. There is a map, God’s map, and He’s got it already figured out for you.”

It’s not that she hasn’t struggled with the distractions. The voluminous amber eyes that dominate her face cloud with remembered pain as she describes defining moments of anguish and growth.

“There was a time four or five years ago when I was trying to find God’s real plan, searching for who I was, who God wanted me to be, depending on friends and the church to give me identity; and everything seemed to be warring against me instead of giving me clarity. Then I lost my closest friend and I remember driving to the lake to end it all, but the Spirit of the Lord stepped in and spoke to me. He told me that all is well with my soul. ... And it was and it is.”

Now, she says she’s clear that her validation comes from God’s plan for her. “I tell women, it’s OK to say no, to back away and shut down to take time to hear the voice of God.”

A Wounded Healer

Rodgers' book details the potentially fatal circumstantial distractions women encounter in their lives: dysfunctional family patterns, job concerns, health issues, biological clocks, marital problems and caring for aging parents. She writes about several emotional distractions—envy and jealousy, loneliness, anger, bitterness, brokenness, and fear and rejection, and then brings the message home with one of the most distracting of the lot—preoccupation with self.

Because her first book targets a female audience, she says she hopes to do a comparable book directed to men that would detail the trials of men of the Bible such as David, Joseph and Peter.

Rodgers describes herself as a wounded healer. "God has sent me out to tell the wounded people I encounter that He will heal, whatever their hurts—physical, emotional, spiritual." She believes the key to her ministry is her ability to speak to people where they are and to tell them that life is a process. "It's never about the person now, but understanding how they got where they are and that this is not the final product ... that God not only sees us, but He is with us."

Rodgers cites her strongest faith anchor and childhood influence as her grandmother—her mother's mother, Bessie Currie—known affectionately by friends and family as Big Mama. Rodgers lived with her late grandmother, who she described as the "community's spiritual voice" and "the epitome of a faith-walker," for most of her childhood years.

Offshoots from Big Mama's influence include Rodgers' own mother, Rosie Allen, who is active in ministry in her East Texas church, and two brothers who grew up under Big Mama's wing to become COGIC pastors. "Living with Big Mama, you did

church and evangelism. My life was centered around the church, and I was always the youngest assigned to read Scripture at the revivals, even when I couldn't read very well."

"Big Mama called me to the altar when I was 8 years old. I'm not sure if I accepted Christ that night out of fear or reverence, but I accepted Him," Rodgers says.

Big Mama often told her granddaughter that life was like a patchwork quilt. "Each piece represented a phase in life, and pieced together made one big quilt with the purpose of covering, so that we see that God works all things together for the good," Rodgers says.

And since Big Mama sewed, her granddaughter's favorite playthings were thimbles and buttons. "The buttons were the congregation and the thimble was the preacher-me!"

Rodgers says her early years as a Christian were spent mimicking the life of a Christian, but the routine and lifestyle developed a pattern for her. Big Mama instilled in Rodgers the perspective that Rodgers would be a blessing to the nation and that she would find favor with God and man.

"I am a very focus-driven person bent on achieving my spiritual goal to be the best example of Christ this world has seen, perfect my teaching and preaching, and to live my life as an example of a single person of integrity."

Rodgers names a succession of mentors to her ministry, including her mother and her local pastor, Superintendent Kenneth D. Davis. She doesn't know of many evangelists with a national following who, like her, serve under the authority of

their local church. Rodgers has served and been a member of St. Andrew's for some 20 years.

"Evangelist Rodgers has worked faithfully in the local church. She attends Bible study and prayer, and she makes herself available Davis explains. "I believe that is one reason her national ministry is blessed," he adds.

Rodgers has been in ministry long enough to know she's standing on the shoulders of others who have mentored her along the way. She names a long list of bishops from both COGIC and other denominations and local and high-profile first ladies and women in ministry who have influenced her path.

An 8-year-old boy's comments a few years ago following her message at a COGIC Auxiliary in Ministry convention, with some 15,000 youth in attendance, cast an affirming light across her ministry path. "He recited my message back to me and then said, 'I'm going home now and make up my bed.' That's change on his level. That's change. ... And I knew I was being heard!"

She says her biggest challenge right now is walking in the areas God has made available to her—"Moving into the unknown and tapping into the things I know God has for me. Feeling unworthy maybe to be there ... and delving in and aligning myself with the resources He's providing, making sure I am equipped for the seasons."

She envisions a more global scope to her ministry this year and hopes to establish an office, hire full-time staff and set up a prayer line. "I sort of did it all backward. ... When God opened the door, the floodgates opened up and I really wasn't prepared. Now I know that women in ministry should make sure

they have health insurance and some kind of retirement plan, a rainy-day stash and always have a place they can call home.”

Rodgers says she is hoping to carry the ball into field-goal territory on a pet project still in the visionary huddle stage—to open a transition home in the Dallas area to help young women move from welfare to work. She’ll call the facility Big Mama’s House, she says, “Because Big Mama said that in Christ, no matter the circumstance, we can do anything, and I know that’s what these women need to understand!”

She concludes: “Every human being is a valuable player in the game of life. I’m just glad God, the scorekeeper, has given us the victory!”

Don't Be Distracted

Joyce Rodgers teaches women how to avoid the devil’s land mines.

Most preachers don’t glean sermon ideas from Hollywood films, especially movies about adultery. But when Joyce Rodgers saw the 1987 morality tale *Fatal Attraction*, which starred Michael Douglas and Glenn Close, the evangelist developed a series of sermons that eventually formed the basis for her first book, titled *Fatal Distractions*.

In the movie, Douglas plays Dan Gallagher, a family man who throws caution to the wind by having a weekend affair with an attractive, sophisticated woman named Alex Forrest. Douglas’ poor choice quickly comes back to haunt him when Alex begins to stalk him and his family. One moral blunder leads to

terrifying consequences.

Rodgers, who directs her book to women, believes the devil has placed many “fatal distractions” before women and that all these hidden land mines have the potential to keep a woman from fulfilling her spiritual destiny. Rodgers identifies several key areas in women’s lives that become breeding grounds for these distractions:

Family dysfunction. A woman will go off-course in her relationship with God, Rodgers writes, if she bases her self-worth on the affirmation she receives from a man.

The stress of work. Whether a woman is a housewife or a professional, she can easily allow the pressures of daily life to crowd out spiritual priorities.

Physical problems. Women often allow sickness or other health-related concerns to consume their lives—when Jesus calls for the focus to be on Him.

Age. Many women spend too much time watching their biological clocks and worrying about whether they will marry or have children soon enough. Rodgers states her case clearly: “If God is in control of your life, He has the perfect timing already planned out.”

Difficult marriage. Many Christian women who suffer in bad marriages allow their circumstance to rob them of spiritual fulfillment.

Aging parents. Rodgers has a message for older women who are

caring for elderly parents: Don't let this responsibility—and the emotional wear and tear that it can bring—stop you from pursuing God.

Rodgers also lists several other “subtle killers” that can steal a woman's spiritual passion. These are jealousy, loneliness, anger, bitterness, brokenness, fear and rejection. But in the end, the author notes that the ultimate distraction is the most familiar.

“Your greatest distraction is you,” Rodgers states bluntly. “Constantly thinking negative thoughts or pursuing self-destructive behaviors and habits can make you your own worst enemy.”

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