

God's Man in Memphis

Narrowly escaping death twice, Gilbert Patterson has long known that God had a plan for his life. Today he believes he was spared to lead the Church of God in Christ into the 21st century.

On June 13, 1975, a lone gunman named Willie C. Cheatham positioned himself across the street from Temple of Deliverance Church in Memphis, Tennessee, waiting for the young pastor of the congregation, Gilbert Earl Patterson, to exit the building. Cheatham peered through the scope of his .22-caliber rifle, his chin propped against the gun's shoulder stock, waiting. He was angry at Patterson for preaching against domestic violence.

As Patterson exited the church building and walked toward his car, he noticed Cheatham. "What's that?" Patterson thought to himself before he realized it was a weapon Cheatham was holding and aiming at him. Pop! Pop! Pop! retorted the rifle as the gunman started firing at the preacher.

Maybe it was the noonday prayer that preacher Patterson had just finished that kept him from sudden death. Or perhaps the Lord dispatched a legion of angels to protect him. One thing is certain—when the shooting stopped, 14 bullet holes lined the old meat market next to the church, but Patterson had reached his car before the shooting started and sped off.

Twenty-one years later, October 1996, Patterson was in a car with three other men as they drove west on Interstate 40 en route to Memphis from a preaching engagement. Suddenly, the driver slipped into unconsciousness. The man's body went rigid, causing his hands to freeze to the steering wheel and

his foot to force the gas peddle to the floor.

Patterson grabbed the steering wheel with his left hand, but did nothing to pry the driver's hands free. Instead, he says the Lord spoke to him and told him to take his right hand and place the gear shift in neutral. The car slowed down.

When Patterson recalls the near misses that almost took his life, he says he is certain of one thing: "God didn't allow me to die, because I have a call on my life. I'm destined."

A Man of the People

Recent events in the life of Gilbert "G.E." Patterson indicate destiny is still his close companion. Just 11 months ago he was elected presiding bishop of the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), headquartered in his hometown of Memphis.

Patterson took office with a passion to serve his denomination in the same dedicated way as its founder, Charles Harrison Mason. He continues to pastor his 14,000-member Temple of Deliverance COGIC in Memphis, and with a million-dollar multimedia ministry at his disposal he believes he has a mandate from heaven to storm the country with a no-frills, life-changing gospel.

As a third-generation preacher with the soul-winning zeal of a Billy Graham, Patterson doesn't take lightly the responsibility of fulfilling the Great Commission. "We must pursue people and compel them to turn to Jesus. He's our only hope in a world that hardly knows Him," he says.

Patterson has carried that fire with him since his last year of high school, when he started preaching at age 17. When he was 22 he became the co-pastor of his father's church, Holy Temple COGIC. Today the Patterson name turns more heads in Memphis than most of the city's politicians.

Patterson's first cousin, J.O. Patterson Jr., was a former acting mayor of Memphis and chairman of COGIC's general assembly—the voting body of the denomination. Patterson's father, the late Bishop W.A. Patterson, was the jurisdictional bishop for churches in North Carolina. His uncle, Bishop J.O. Patterson Sr., married COGIC founder Mason's daughter and was the denomination's presiding bishop from 1968 until he died in 1989.

Yet, the new bishop's influence extends well beyond the city—which is famous both as the last home of legendary entertainer Elvis Presley and the site where civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down in 1968 at the Lorraine Motel.

Most observers attribute Patterson's prominence to the millions who watch his weekly broadcast on Black Entertainment Television (BET), Word Network and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). Vinson Synan, author of *The Century of the Holy Spirit* (Thomas Nelson) and dean of the divinity school at Regent University, calls Patterson "one of the best preachers on the face of the planet."

Some attribute Patterson's success to his willingness to confront sensitive issues, such as race and gender, and to cross cultural boundaries to preach to diverse audiences. Still others believe the reason for Patterson's popularity is his love for people. They jokingly say he is so well-liked

that even as a Pentecostal pastor he could run for president of the non-Pentecostal National Baptist Convention and win.

With all the attention he receives, one might think Patterson is untouchable. "Not so" says Bishop Jerry Maynard, the bishop's chief of staff. "Bishop Patterson is a down-to-earth leader who is sensitive to the people's needs."

Maybe that's why Patterson, who turns 62 this month, doesn't surround himself with an entourage of yes-men and instead is most often seen with an attractive, poised woman—Louise Patterson—his wife of 34 years.

Charisma spoke with Bishop Patterson in Birmingham, Alabama, recently, where he talked about his early days in ministry, his views on women in ministry and his vision for COGIC in the 21st century.

Winds of Change

While most Americans focused their attention last fall on one of the most highly contested presidential elections in U.S. history, 850 miles away from the nation's capital, another battle was brewing at Cook Convention Center in Memphis. For the first time in its 103-year history, COGIC made an unprecedented move: The general assembly voted a sitting presiding bishop out of office and selected a new leader to take the helm.

The contest between former presiding Bishop Chandler D. Owens of Atlanta and Patterson ended in a win for Patterson, 2,619-1,786. Unlike the presidential brawl between Vice President Al Gore and Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the COGIC

election ended peacefully and uncontested.

“I will work with the new leader,” Owens said during his concession speech after the election in November. Owens, who pastors Greater Community COGIC in Marietta, Georgia, was re-elected to the denomination’s 12-member general board.

It seems only natural that today Patterson would rise to the position of the highest-ranking official in his denomination—after all of the childhood grooming he received in the church decades ago.

Born in 1939 in Humboldt, Tennessee, to William Archie and Mary Louise Patterson, G.E. Patterson and his other siblings grew up in a Pentecostal home. The family moved to Memphis, and it was there, at age 4, that Patterson started preaching soul-stirring messages to “congregations” of two or three children.

Though she chuckles when she mentions her brother’s preaching debut, Patterson’s older sister, Lee Ella Smith, says he was serious about God even as a child.

“My brother would stand on orange crates and soap boxes and just preach the gospel,” says Smith, who oversees thousands of COGIC women as a denominational state supervisor in Tennessee.

The Pattersons moved to Detroit in 1952, and four years later—on Sunday, Sept. 16, 1956, between 10:30 p.m. and 11 received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It was a life-changing event during his teen years, and it seemed to set the stage for the passionate preaching currently seen by millions of viewers of his TV programs.

That fervent preaching is what caused about 15,000 people, mainly women, who attended COGIC's 51st International Women's Convention in May to go ballistic as the bishop delivered a power-packed message, titled "Togetherness." With uplifted hands, worshipers praised God while waving their Bibles and shouting, "Preach, Bishop!"

"We won't let women come to the pulpit to speak, but we'll let a drunk politician come to the podium, smelling like last night's liquor," Patterson told attendees as thunderous applause ricocheted from one side of the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex to the other.

A holy hush covered the convention center as the presiding bishop went on to explain his view on women in ministry.

"I used to be like many of the brothers: down on the women," he told delegates. "But the Lord showed me that COGIC was started in a prayer meeting that was held in a woman's house." Women are "the envy of the religious world," he added.

"We are grateful to have a leader who appreciates the work that the women in this denomination offer to ministries all across the country," says Mother Willie Mae Rivers, COGIC's general supervisor of women, who oversees several million women. COGIC women are known for pioneering churches in the most impoverished neighborhoods in the country, and they are recognized for their work in remote areas of Third World countries.

Still, some of them are expecting changes under the new bishop's leadership that will give them a stronger voice during the election process. Out of 5,495 registered delegates at the 2000 convention, 900 were female voters according to the denomination's Whole Truth magazine. Some believe that number needs to increase.

"With all the women in the Church of God in Christ, there should be more of us voting, " said one woman who did not wish to be identified.

Patterson says he will work toward giving every card-carrying member in COGIC the right to cast a vote.

"We're working on a system that will give each person who is in good standing with the church an opportunity to vote by means of modern technology," he told Charisma. A technological system is needed because, so far, the denomination has no venue large enough to hold all qualified voters at one time.

The election is held a week after the U.S. presidential election every four years.

With all of the hoopla surrounding the Gore-Bush presidential race, the right to vote seems extremely crucial, not only in the church but also in American politics. Maybe that's why President George W. Bush invited a string of key black religious leaders, including Bishop Patterson, to Washington in late March.

More than a dozen African American leaders convened at the White House and gave their support to the president's plan to give federal dollars to faith-based programs. Patterson told

the New York Times that he did not vote for President Bush, but said that if the president's plan works as intended "there would be no reason for black people not to vote for him four years from now."

Knowing that leaders such as Patterson have the oversight of millions of Christian voters, political analysts say the president is trying to heal wounds left from last year's bitter presidential election.

Tried by Fire

Whether he's preaching to massive crowds of African Americans or to white Christians or even laying hands on an alcoholic who stumbles into his church, Patterson's appeal crosses just about every barrier imaginable.

"If anybody can bring racial healing to the body of Christ, Bishop Patterson can," Synan says of the bishop's enormous influence.

That's because Patterson doesn't preach as if the "black" church and "white" church are separated. He promotes unity in the body of Christ among all groups and says Christians should map out ways to bring white, black, Hispanic and other groups together under one roof.

In fact, his involvement in the civil rights movement in the late 1960s is what has fueled his message of unity. He was involved in the strike of 1968 that centered on black sanitation workers in Memphis and was a member of the nine-person strategy committee that brought Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis. After King was gunned down while standing on the

balcony of the Lorraine Motel, many grief-stricken people from all over the city joined Patterson's church.

The bishop remembers briefly talking with King on two occasions and says his denomination has played a key part in major historical events. Many of COGIC's leaders marched hand-in-hand with other black and white Christians who wanted equality for blacks. And it was at COGIC's Mason Temple that King delivered his famous final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

"There was a severe thunderstorm that night," says Patterson, rehashing the events of King's final visit to Memphis. "After Dr. King finished his speech, you could hear sobbing and weeping in the rafters, and everybody knew that was it. That was a prophetic moment."

But other difficulties in ministry, such as weathering church splits, seemed to be the training ground for the bishop's date with destiny. In fact, some of his most grueling tests and hardships in life have come through the church.

Although the church Patterson co-pastored under his father, Holy Temple COGIC, grew during many of the city's hardships, it went through a painful church split. In 1969, a young Patterson found himself in a heated battle with his father's brother, J.O. Patterson Sr., who was the presiding bishop.

Local pastors had voted Patterson's father to fill the void left by the death of Memphis Bishop A.B. McEwen. But J.O. Patterson Sr. disagreed with the vote and placed himself in the position.

"I thought my father should have been the bishop of West Tennessee," Patterson says, as he reminisces about his early struggles. "My uncle thought that just like the pope is over the Vatican in Rome, the presiding bishop should oversee churches in Memphis, the headquarters for the denomination."

As the family feud escalated, Patterson realized he would have to leave the denomination or stand by as the presiding bishop and other high-ranking officials removed him and his father from the pastorate of the church. "I didn't understand it then, but in hindsight it was nothing more than God preparing me," Patterson says.

Destined for Leadership

In 1975, Patterson left COGIC and organized a string of independent churches called Bountiful Blessings. The same year, he opened the doors to Temple of Deliverance Cathedral of Bountiful Blessings with 436 members.

His departure from COGIC, however, unleashed a wave of criticism against him. For 13 years he was shunned by other COGIC leaders and constantly referred to as a "defector."

In the meantime he managed to build a flourishing congregation, a radio ministry and TV ministries, as well as hold crusades and tent meetings across the country. After recalling the events that led to his departure from the denomination he had grown to love, Patterson admits his experience was God's way of training him for leadership in the future.

"In reading the Scriptures, you'll find that when God used

someone to lead a particular group, He had a time when he pulled the person away from the people they were to lead," he says.

In time, the Pattersons healed their old wounds, and in 1988 G.E. returned to COGIC. The lessons he learned during the turmoil in ministry proved beneficial during his first few months in office. In January, he intervened in an ongoing bitter court battle between former presiding Bishop Owens, Bishop H. Jenkins Bell and Orlando, Florida, pastor Derrick W. Hutchins, chairman of the national pastors' and elders' council.

The case ended up in court when Owens, along with Bishop H. Jenkins Bell, had Hutchins removed from the pastorate of Orlando Institutional COGIC. Owens told an Orange County, Florida, judge that the presiding bishop had rights similar to the pope and that he could remove a pastor without charges.

Hutchins says he was removed because he didn't support Owens for the office of presiding bishop. In an effort to keep the denomination out of court and give Orlando congregants a place to worship, Patterson brought an end to the highly publicized ordeal.

In March, Bishop Patterson settled the matter out of court. Hutchins and his congregation received \$170,000 toward the purchase of a 1,500-seat church.

Bringing healing to people regardless of their circumstances seems to be the call of a man who, as a child, knew he was destined to preach the gospel. Maybe that's why he was elected presiding bishop of the COGIC denomination.

And maybe that's why many years after Cheatham had tried to take the bishop's life with 14 separate bullets, Patterson was able to embrace the gunman when he asked for prayer. No doubt Bishop Patterson prayed the prayer heard by millions of viewers who watch him weekly: "Be healed, be delivered, and be set free!" *

Temple of Deliverance recently opened its new 5,000-seat facility in downtown Memphis (left). Patterson's sermons are aired weekly on Black Entertainment Television.

UP CLOSE WITH TODAY'S LEADERS

Following God's Agenda

During an interview with Charisma, Bishop Gilbert Patterson of COGIC shared his views on world evangelism, racial unity and more.

During the months leading up to his election, Gilbert Patterson addressed everything from finance reform in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) to the future of the youth culture, vowing to make changes to a variety of areas in his denomination if his candidacy for COGIC's top spot were successful.

Today, as presiding bishop-elect of COGIC, Patterson is making good on his promises, saying that integrity, especially in ministry, builds trust among leaders and the people they serve. Charisma spoke with Patterson about the worldwide impact of COGIC, the denomination's direction in the 21st century and his burden to see racial unity among believers.

Charisma As the largest denomination in the United States, the Church of God in Christ has the potential to leave a profound mark on the world. How will the church accomplish this?

Patterson: We have already begun a massive witnessing program. Our soul-winning ministry goes all over the country holding outreaches in the inner city, knocking on America's doors to tell people about Christ. Our program is strategic. We've also arranged a nationwide intercessory prayer ministry that provides prayer coverage for people.

For decades, we have sent missionaries to 58 foreign countries including Third World nations. We do this to minister to people and to maintain our visibility in remote areas. We have pastors and missionaries in Japan, the Philippines, England and in other places in the world.

Charisma What direction is the church headed in the new millennium?

Patterson: To know what is happening in the body of Christ, you have to also have a working knowledge of biblical history. The church basically follows the same trail Israel and Judah followed.

There were spiritual conditions that led to the northern and southern kingdoms splitting. Second Chronicles 15:3 reveals how Israel had been without the true God, without a teaching priest and without the law. Any time the upper echelon of the church does not teach the Word and obey it you are in dangerous territory.

The Church of God in Christ is no longer a babe. We're more than 100 years old, and we must focus on what the Scripture calls "strong meat."

We were jumping and shouting, but from an official position, we were in an era where there was no teaching. I'm not talking about our local churches. It was the national church. But we're now focusing on a steady diet of the Word.

Charisma How will you keep constituents informed of progress in the denomination?

Patterson: On July 1 we launched our national TV ministry. Our coverage extends across the United States on several television networks. Not only does this increase COGIC's visibility, it will expose millions of viewers to the great preachers and teachers in our church.

We also have some programming that will serve as a forum to discuss issues that are pertinent to COGIC and the world. We also have a strong presence on the World Wide Web and radio.

Charisma What are your thoughts on the black church?

Patterson: We must move away from this black church-white church thinking. We've just got to be the church.

The Church of God in Christ did not start as a black church. Historians will tell you, especially Vinson Synan, who has written about the Pentecostal movement in America, that COGIC was about 50 percent white and 50 percent black between 1907 and 1914.

People are marrying across racial lines, and the church has to be able to minister universally. The gospel is the same gospel for whites, blacks, Hispanics, the French, Germans and just whosoever.

Somebody might ask how should we bring about the meshing of the races? By preaching a pure gospel, because people are repelled when they hear slants and ethnic slurs. We must be prepared with a universal gospel for the whole world.

Charisma Is the presiding bishop accountable to anyone?

Patterson: Most definitely. The presiding bishop and the 12-member general [governing] board are accountable to the general assembly—the law-making body of our church.

It's not like the pope, who is at the top, and under him are cardinals, bishops, priests and people. In COGIC, the general assembly—thousands of pastors, elders, women leaders and lay members—is at the top and the general board is under the assembly.

This means I am accountable to the assembly, and every time it convenes I must give an account of my stewardship in the Church of God in Christ. *

The Bishop's Wife

Louise Patterson uses her influence as a leader to point multitudes toward Jesus.

At first glance, she looks like a Spirit-filled fashion model. She's tall and attractive. She has the accent of a Southern belle and the aura of Miss America, but a closer look at Louise Patterson, wife of presiding Bishop Gilbert Patterson, reveals a woman who is used to serving in the trenches of ministry.

Patterson oversees thousands of women in her church and says that as a pastor's wife she ministers to people who are challenged with problems only God can solve. "We're living in a day when men and women are constantly bombarded with situations, and as a leader in my church, I have a responsibility to point them to the Lord."

It was under Bishop Patterson's ministry that she was introduced to the Spirit-filled life. A member of a Methodist church, she decided to attend a revival service conducted by a young evangelist by the name of Gilbert Patterson.

"I was seeking the Lord for the baptism in the Holy Spirit that night, and it wasn't long before I began to speak in tongues," she remembers.

In 1967, the Pattersons married in Memphis. And though the couple never had children, during their first year of marriage they began helping young people with college expenses.

"We decided early on to invest in the lives of other people's children, and as a result, we now have thousands of spiritual sons and daughters," she says.

Also a COGIC missionary, Patterson says being in the "sanctified, holiness church" is probably as close as a person

will ever come to living the kind of life depicted in the Bible. Maybe that's why she refused to accept her doctor's diagnosis of chronic rheumatoid arthritis 13 years ago. When her physician said she would eventually be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, she sought God in prayer.

"My husband teaches faith and healing, and so I did what I've been taught to do—I asked God to heal me, and He did," she says.

During COGIC's international women's convention, Patterson gave a stirring testimony that left thousands of people rejoicing. "It's like being on the telephone with a friend and they put you on hold," she told the crowd. "But when God puts you on hold, don't hang up because He will answer."

Patterson told Charisma she is totally yielded to God's will, which for her includes being the "first lady" of her church and her denomination. Like many other pastors' wives, she doesn't prefer the title of "first lady" and that after being a pastor's wife for 34 years, there were times when she didn't feel like she was first. However, growing up in a large family—as the eighth of 12 children—prepared her for ministry, she adds.

Says Patterson, "I love God, and I'm totally yielded to His will for my life, and I know that part of His will for my life is to be the bishop's wife." *

Leading the Way for Women

COGIC evangelist Deola Wells Johnson symbolizes change for the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination.

When viewers across the country tune in to the Bountiful Blessings TV program, they watch as Bishop Gilbert Patterson delivers a sermon with an evangelistic style characteristic of a masterful orator.

But as cameras pan the cavernous sanctuary, they zoom onto another evangelist—a woman. She's a fiery, third-generation Pentecostal named DeOla Wells Johnson, whose messages from the pulpit at Temple of Deliverance COGIC speak volumes to other women.

"She has profound depth in the Word of God," says Mother Barbara McCoo Lewis, a COGIC women's leader in Los Angeles. "The anointing on her life is so refreshing."

That's because Johnson has spent years studying the Scriptures. Her time with the Lord, she says, kept her dependent on God as a single mother of three children.

Under the tutelage of her father, the late Bishop Wyoming Wells, Johnson inherited a passion to help people. "I enjoy motivating women, particularly single women because I've been single since 1975," Johnson told Charisma.

As one of two assistants to Bishop Patterson, Johnson has a slew of sponsibilities in her full-time position on staff at the Memphis church. She oversees noonday prayer meetings and is responsible for teaching midweek Bible studies at the 14,000-member congregation.

Johnson's role at the church is highly visible, but she says she has never been controversial in regards to the women in

ministry debate. She says she simply read the Word of God and obeyed it.

Notes the veteran evangelist: “Women don’t have to struggle or fret to get to where they’re going in ministry because their gift will make room for them and take them before great men—like Bishop Patterson.”

Patterson says that most COGIC women don’t want the rules about women’s ordination to change. “If you take a poll of women in ministry in the Church of God in Christ, it would reveal they don’t want to be ordained and don’t want to pastor, and they certainly don’t want to think in terms of being bishops,” he said.

After spending years of speaking at conferences, 68-year-old Johnson is grateful to minister to people one-on-one at Temple of Deliverance COGIC.

She offers advice to women who serve in their local churches and to those in full-time ministry: “Stay focused, disciplined and rely on God. Don’t rely on your self-will to do ministry.”

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