

A Mother of Mothers

When Willie Mae Rivers was raising her 10 daughters, she didn't realize God was preparing her to give spiritual direction to millions of women.

When Willie Mae Rivers was a girl, she felt called to preach. Too young for a larger venue, she would stand up on a stack of soft drink crates and minister to whatever handful of family or friends she could gather. Little did she know that this exercise was great practice for her future role—international general supervisor of women for the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination.

Mother Rivers, now 76, had no idea she would end up in the position she is in today. "I knew there was a call, and there was a push in my spirit to do things for people, to serve," she says. "But when I came into COGIC I was only 20 years old."

She was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination and began teaching Sunday school at age 12. But after she turned 20, she heard about a Pentecostal group that was having revival services in her hometown of Goose Creek, a few miles north of Charleston, South Carolina, and went to one of their meetings.

"It really convinced me that I needed more than conversion. They taught me about great power," she told Charisma magazine a few years ago. "I was a delegate to conventions, I sang with the senior choir and all of that in the AME church, but when I heard about holiness and sanctification, the Lord just filled me with the Holy Ghost."

Ultimately Rivers left the AME denomination with her pastor's blessing and joined Calvary COGIC in Goose Creek, where she has been a member for the last 53 years. She didn't set her

sights on gaining a position in the church, but she had a heart to serve and willingly worked wherever she was needed—leading the church choir, playing the piano, assisting the pastor and helping in the radio ministry. Her devotion earned her the title of local church “mother” at the tender age of 20 and the distinction of being the youngest woman ever appointed to this role in COGIC.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Sometime after her appointment, Mother Rivers, who had been married for five years by then and had three daughters of her own, realized that the call on her life included giving direction to other women. “I felt a responsibility to guide the other young women [in my church],” she says.

The only problem was, she didn’t know exactly what to do. She herself was young and inexperienced, and her church was little more than a mission at the time. Rivers told Charisma that when she confessed her need for direction to the Lord, the Holy Spirit gave her a mandate that still guides her ministry: “Take the same love and concern you have for your own children and share it with the women of the church, and I will lead you into greater knowledge.”

The Lord was faithful to fulfill His promise as Mother Rivers did her part. He gave her opportunities to observe the work of more experienced church mothers and learn from what they had done, she says. Rivers traveled with the woman who was the South Carolina state supervisor at the time, Alice Marie Saunders, driving her to the various churches in the state and attending national meetings with her, so she was able to glean from Saunders as well as from other supervisors.

God also prepared her on a natural plane by quadrupling the size of her family to an even dozen children—10 of whom were girls. These girls were Mother Rivers’ training ground for her ministry to the women of COGIC. She instilled in them the value of teamwork, a value she now encourages women in the

larger body of Christ to espouse.

Over time Rivers fulfilled her role as a spiritual leader at the local level by developing a full-blown program for the women at her church, including Sunday school classes, Bible studies, workshops and leadership training sessions. Her dedication, diligence and rapport with the women did not go unnoticed by her superiors in COGIC, and she was appointed to increasingly responsible positions in the women's department, including district missionary, assistant jurisdictional supervisor and then jurisdictional supervisor for the state of South Carolina. She also served at the national level on several boards and committees.

MOTHER OF MOTHERS

In April 1997, then presiding bishop Chandler D. Owens appointed Mother Rivers the international general supervisor of women—the “mother of mothers”—for the entire denomination. As such, she oversees nearly 3 million women worldwide and has the responsibility of setting policy for and disseminating information to all of them via the denominational “chain of command.” She interacts directly with the “state or jurisdictional supervisors,” who in turn teach small groups of “district missionaries,” who then direct women in local congregations throughout the world—more than 15,000 in the United States alone.

Mother Rivers also has opportunities at times to address women in local congregations, particularly abroad, as well as large groups of attendees at two annual COGIC events: the women's convention and the leadership conference associated with it, and Holy Convocation. In this way she is able to impart vision, teach, give direction and encourage women at all levels of leadership and lay ministry.

What does she tell them? At the 51st annual women's convention in Birmingham, Alabama, last year, she challenged them to become “holy women commissioned to move the agenda,” she says.

In other words, she told them to “go back home and get busy in the various ministries of the church.”

“There were many we challenged the women to go back and get involved in,” Rivers says. “Promoting evangelism on a local, district and jurisdictional and national level; encouraging prayer warriors to unite in prayer for the church and for the world; publishing God’s Word—to write, to speak, to proclaim in teaching methods [or] preaching—whatever the Lord gives them to do.”

But Mother Rivers didn’t send the women out unprepared. Equipping them for ministry was an important focus at the last convention. This mother of mothers believes “God is preparing take on a greater portion of ministry,” she says.

“And when I say ministry, it doesn’t necessarily mean standing behind the pulpit preaching. I believe God can use women in ministry on a local basis beginning in our homes,” she explains. “I find that women are influential, and I feel that if we our rightful place and get under the anointing of God, God will see us through and we will be able greater things for the Lord.”

Mother Rivers’ ministry is not limited to COGIC women, however. She hosts a once a week radio broadcast, “Evangelist Speaks,” on four different stations throughout the country that is accessible to anyone close enough to tune in. “What I do is a kind of teaching ministry,” she says. “Most of the time it’s a message from the Bible.”

In all her ministry, Mother Rivers is dedicated to encouraging the saints—particularly women—to “first of all be committed to God [and] to strive for a consecrated, Spirit-filled life,” she says. Then to “seek God for His perfect will for your life and do everything you can to pursue that to the full.” The result, she believes, is that “the Spirit will lead and direct women to move forward in doing a greater work for the Lord.”

She is also dedicated to raising up leaders. “It is my aim as I speak to people to motivate them to move forward in their walks with the Lord. I want to be able to produce leaders. When I’m [gone], I don’t want my ministry to die; I want it to go on through the lives of others.”

Energetic and active, this saintly powerhouse shows no signs of slowing down. But judging by the numbers of gifted COGIC women whom she has trained and inspired to take their rightful places in the kingdom, there will be no shortage of qualified ministers to carry on the work when she is no longer able to serve. In her opinion, she couldn’t leave any better legacy than that.

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