

He Has Seen the Promised Land

Bishop Charles E. Blake, the new leader of the Church of God in Christ, plans to take his denomination into a fresh season of international impact.

In 1980, just 11 years after Bishop Charles E. Blake was appointed pastor of West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles, the Pentecostal pastor visited the newly constructed Crystal Cathedral, a Reformed Church in America congregation that was—and still is—one of the most ornate houses of worship in the nation.

Sitting in his seat, he bowed his head and asked God to make his church a beacon of light in a city overshadowed by the glare of Hollywood glamour and celebrity.

Since then West Angeles has become the largest church in the Southwest and is well-known for its plethora of outreaches, including a Skid Row ministry that fed more than 50,000 people last year, a 400-unit housing complex for seniors, two schools and the largest literacy program in Orange County, California. Blake also has built a cathedral of his own—a sprawling edifice that can accommodate the church's 24,000 members.

But after 50 years in ministry, Blake is still praying that God will broaden the church's reach. As the new leader of the 6 million-member Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—a position he assumed in March after the death of Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson—Blake is encouraging COGIC members to prepare for a new era of leadership in the U.S. and abroad.

In a letter he wrote to COGIC members in the months before the denomination was to celebrate its centennial this month in

Memphis, Tennessee, Blake challenged the constituency: "If we are to remain a constructive influence in society, we must be guided by godly principles that penetrate the culture and bring glory to our God. We must take the high road of integrity and authentic leadership around the world. Church of God in Christ, we must lead!"

Building on a Firm Foundation

In the early 1950s, when Blake was a boy growing up in his father's COGIC church, the denomination's founder, Charles Harrison Mason, visited the Blakes' home. As was his custom, Mason laid hands on Blake and prayed for him. At the time Blake had no idea he would ever be at the helm of the denomination Mason founded 100 years ago this year. But he says the experience never left him, and in many ways it is what fuels his passion to spread the gospel.

West Angeles is located just seven miles from the historic Azusa Street Mission, where Mason was baptized in the Holy Spirit during the 1906 revival that began there. The small wooden building hardly resembles the ornate West Angeles Cathedral, but Blake says his church hasn't strayed from Mason's vision to see people, especially the poor and oppressed, find freedom and empowerment through an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

As only the seventh leader of COGIC since Mason's death in 1961, Blake, now 67, doesn't want to see the denomination change either. "I don't bring a new vision or reality, but I hope to improve and enhance what already exists in the Church of God in Christ," he told Charisma.

In light of the numerous challenges facing the church in the 21st century, Blake says maintaining COGIC's spiritual foundation is a priority.

"In addition to all the things we must do organizationally, it is the responsibility of the presiding bishop to emphasize the matter of spiritual development individually, the spiritual ministry of our local churches and of course the spiritual focus of all our gatherings as a denomination," Blake told Charisma.

"God must come first; He must be primary. And no matter what organizational or administrative innovations we make, we must not forget that foundation."

In addition to transforming individuals through the power of the Holy Spirit, Blake says the church is called to change communities, cultures and even nations.

COGIC has long been a voice in the public arena. During the 1960s, a group of leaders including the late presiding bishop Gilbert E. Patterson met with Martin Luther King Jr. to discuss unfair treatment of black sanitation workers in Memphis. Blake and other COGIC pastors participated in nonviolent protests during the civil rights era in Los Angeles and other cities. And it was at the 5,000-seat Mason Temple, built in 1945, that King delivered his historic "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech the night before he was assassinated in 1968.

Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan, former dean of the Regent University School of Divinity and author of the Century of the Holy Spirit, says COGIC has been critical to transforming

urban America, partly because its churches are located in areas where poverty and crime are prevalent. "They're on the front lines facing up to these urban problems, and the politicians know it," Synan says.

"All the big politicians always have to come and make contact with COGIC to get the votes. They are a powerful political force. If they withdrew their support, a Democratic candidate would have a hard time winning."

As more and more congregations flee the inner cities for the suburbs, Blake is encouraging COGIC pastors to remain in troubled communities. He says the church's commitment to urban ministry has been critical to its growth.

"We are an urban denomination; our churches are located in the hearts of the cities," Blake says. "We do not normally generate [in] the suburbs. We attempt to impact the inner city, and I'm hoping that the national church will be able to provide programs and strategies for impacting the inner city and reaching minorities."

Blake says community development initiatives, re-entry ministries for released convicts, substance abuse programs and mentoring programs for youth have made a significant impact on inner cities.

A desire to demonstrate God's love to people in need is what has drawn most COGIC pastors into ministry. Ronald C. Hill, pastor of the 1,000-member Love and Unity COGIC in Compton, California, recently opened a Family Life Center adjacent to the church. It is equipped with a counseling center, legal aid office, bookstore and more.

Hill says he started a ministry for young men and boys in hopes of curtailing the violence that characterizes the small city.

Many other COGIC congregations have built schools, facilities for senior citizens and even low-income housing. COGIC also owns real estate across the United States and in Memphis, where the denomination is headquartered, across the U.S. and in foreign countries such as Haiti.

A Global Vision

As COGIC meets domestic needs such as education and affordable housing, Blake is also challenging members to address global issues such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has devastated parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where roughly 1,000 people die of AIDS each day and millions of children have been orphaned by the disease.

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In 2000, Blake founded Save Africa's Children (SAC), a nonprofit organization that provides financial support and relief to children affected by HIV/AIDS, poverty and war in sub-Saharan Africa. "We have an obligation to help Africa," says the Rev. Eugene Rivers, pastor of Azusa Christian Community church in Boston and Blake's adviser for SAC.

"More than anyone else Bishop Blake has used his influence, authority and wealth to advance the kingdom of God in serving the interest of the poor," Rivers adds. "Pentecostals are now the power players and don't even know it. We have an opportunity to bring change worldwide."

Blake travels to Africa frequently to observe the SAC's

work—providing free health care, housing and food to some 200,000 orphans. Blake has personally donated several million dollars to the outreach and has received support from COGIC congregations, as well as the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and megachurch pastors such as Kirbyjon Caldwell, Frederick K.C. Price and Marvin Winans.

Pastor Derrick W. Hutchins, chairman of COGIC's pastors and elders council, says Blake's vision for global Christianity is a blueprint for the thousands of pastors and elders in the denomination. "He is encouraging us to reach beyond U.S. borders and plant churches wherever needed in the world," Hutchins says.

But as Pentecostalism's influence has grown, so have calls for greater financial transparency among the numerous high-profile, Spirit-filled ministries across the nation. As presiding bishop, Blake says he will give an account for "every dime of the church's money. We will operate with integrity, transparency and accountability."

There are no signs that COGIC leaders plan to revise the denomination's constitution to allow women to be ordained as pastors and elders. But Mother Willie Mae Rivers, general supervisor for the Department of Women, says her focus is to train women to be change agents, not just in their homes, but also in their communities and the workforce.

"Our country is in a state of moral decay and we can do something about it," Rivers says. "I want the women to mentor younger women and girls, so they will be ready to stand for God. Speaking from the pulpit is good, but we must go where the people are, in the communities, to reach them. "

Men may dominate COGIC's leadership positions, but women fill the church's pews. Blake estimates that women make up 60 percent to 70 percent of the denomination. "We certainly intend to ... speak to the needs of black males, who are especially vulnerable in a number of ways to the pressures of today's world," Blake says, adding that pastor Darrell Hines of COGIC's Christian Faith Fellowship Church in Milwaukee leads the denomination's outreach to men.

Peter Berger, professor emeritus of religion, sociology and theology at Boston University, says COGIC has grown far beyond its Southern roots. He told the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that "the century-old Pentecostal Church of God in Christ ... now stretches beyond traditional storefront 'Holy Ghost' or 'blessing station' ministries in the South ... to a 26,000-member congregation in Los Angeles, the West Angeles Church of God in Christ, where Hollywood celebrities crowd into cathedral pews next to inner-city poor."

Blake believes there is much more. Some 50,000 delegates are expected to attend COGIC's centennial celebration this month. But as members prepared to celebrate the denomination's history, Blake was already telling them what he sees in the church's future. "Each of you who make up this great constituency is essential to the work God has called us to do," Blake wrote in a letter to church members in August.

"Bishop Mason received the baptism of the Holy Ghost during the Azusa Revival. We must continue to spread that same fire throughout the world. Church of God in Christ, I see you in the future, and you look [even] better than you do right now!"

Valerie G. Lowe is associate editor of Charisma magazine.

COGIC'S – Emerging Leaders

Ronald C. Hill – Passionate about evangelism, pastor Ronald C. Hill, 63, is co-chairperson of the Church of God in Christ's intercessory prayer ministry and coordinates many of the denomination's corporate prayer and fasting initiatives. As pastor of Love and Unity Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Compton, California, Hill says prayer and evangelism have been key in helping him minister to gang members, unwed mothers and others in need of God's saving grace. "We have knocked on the door of every home in Compton at least twice sharing the gospel with residents. They need to know Jesus loves them," Hill says.

B.J. Warren – A veteran attorney, Barbara J. Warren is the first woman to be elected to the Judiciary Board of the Church of God in Christ, which is the denomination's supreme judicial body. A native of Wichita, Kansas, Warren has practiced law for 25 years, and works with COGIC's national attorney. Prior to moving to Nashville, Tennessee, she was the owner of BJ Warren & Associates, P.C. , in Dallas.

Derrick W. Hutchins – As a boy he wanted to be the first black president of the United States, but that was before Derrick W. Hutchins answered the call to spread the gospel. Today the 50-year-old pastor is chairman of COGIC's General Council of Pastors and Elders, a group representing some 10,000 pastors and 40,000 elders. He is responsible for safeguarding the rights of every person in his constituency. Commonly referred to as "a preacher's preacher," Hutchins ministers across the country, and is the pastor of New Life Church of Orlando in Florida and Family Worship Center in Columbia, South Carolina.

Charles E. Brown – When Hurricane Katrina blew through the Gulf Coast region in 2005, Bishop Charles E. Brown, 55, lost nearly everything. But the New Orleans native didn't let the storm stop him from helping others. He purchased food, paid for victims to relocate and provided other necessities with the \$93,000 he helped raise. Today Brown is COGIC's newly appointed chief operating officer, a position through which he manages staff and supervises the denomination's operations. Despite significant damage to his church's property, Brown continues to pastor Full Gospel Cathedral COGIC, which has locations in Houston and New Orleans.

Sylvia Law – She says God had blessed her with skills and talents that allowed her to land jobs as a top-ranking African-American in Maryland, but Sylvia Law wanted to use her knowledge to serve the denomination she's been a member of for 46 years. Law made history in COGIC when she became the first female chief financial officer in 1979, establishing the national accounting department and budget procedures that are still in use today. In 2004 she was elected to the national board of trustees. Law is an evangelist and chairwoman of the COGIC Charities Scholarship committee, which distributes more than \$100,000 to students pursuing higher education.

Otis Lockett – When Otis Lockett was appointed pastor of what is now Evangel Fellowship COGIC, the Greensboro, North Carolina, church had no members. Today 3,000 people attend services each weekend. Because of the growth within his congregation, Lockett was made director for church growth and development for COGIC. In that role, he conducts regional seminars to help pastors develop healthy churches. "Those who do just church have smaller ministries, but churches that meet everyday needs are the churches that grow," Lockett says.

Ron Gibson – As pastor of the 5,000-member Life COGIC in Riverside, California, Ron Gibson is working to empower people not only spiritually but also economically. Founder and chief executive officer of Life Net Community Development Corporation, the 52-year-old is spearheading an affordable housing project that consists of 1,200 single-family homes and condominiums. Gibson was vice chairman of the General Council of Pastors and Elders and worked with COGIC's constitutional committee. He is currently an administrative assistant to Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake in the First Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of Southern California.

Shannon Felder – A personal injury attorney, Shannon Felder, 33, developed a passion for law when she was in the seventh grade, participating in mock trials and working for law firms during summer break. But when she's not standing before a judge on behalf of her clients, she's sharing a message of God's grace and mercy as a district missionary in South Carolina. "I was reared to look at the law as a vehicle for social change and to help people." Felder says. "The message is consistent with the purpose of the church. "

J. Drew Sheard – Detroit pastor J. Drew Sheard, 48, developed a love for God and preaching as a child growing up in Bailey Temple COGIC in Michigan. Sheard is now pastor of Greater Emmanuel Institutional COGIC in Detroit, one of the largest COGIC churches in Michigan. From 1997 to 2000 he was president of the denomination's international youth department, which consists of several million youth. Today he is the chairman of COGIC's Auxiliaries in Ministries (AIM) convention, which comprises the Sunday school, evangelism, youth, music and missions departments.

Joyce L. Rodgers – When evangelist Joyce L. Rodgers was a young girl, her elementary school teacher told her she would

never amount to anything. Instead the Texas native graduated from college and eventually embraced a call to the ministry. Today she is a sought-after evangelist who travels the country preaching both within COGIC and in other denominations and ministries. Rodgers is the chairwoman of the international youth department and a district missionary in Texas. She also founded Young Women of Excellence, a COGIC program that teaches girls and young women to be godly, self-confident, and financially astute.

Frank A. White – Pastor Frank A. White, 46, was enjoying a lucrative career on Wall Street when he sensed God calling him into full-time ministry 13 years ago. Today, he is a twice-elected member of COGIC's national trustee board, which is responsible for overseeing the denomination's real estate and creating an operating budget. He pastors Zion Cathedral COGIC in Freeport, New York, and Kings Chapel COGIC in the Hamptons on Long Island.

Brandon B. Porter – With a call to spread the good news through mass media, pastor Brandon B. Porter is the director of community relations and marketing for COGIC, and a television host. Former president of the international youth department, Porter was re-elected to the national trustee board in 2004, a position he currently holds today. He pastors "one church in three locations," the 4,200-member Greater Community Temple COGIC in Memphis, Tennessee.