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We've come this far by faith: Pentecostalism and political and social upward mobility among African-Americans

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March 1, 2000, WASHINGTON, D.C. -- If it were not for the suspenders, the Reverend Joseph Clemmons might not be known as a Pentecostal preacher. Hanging on the walls of Clemmons' modest, frame house in Connecticut are theological degrees from Yale University and Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, the same institution that trained Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His desk is littered with various scholarly tomes, as well as legislative information, since he serves as a Democratic representative in the state legislature. Such training and experience have put him in a small class of African-American preachers who are appreciated for using the truths of the Bible to fight for social equality and empowerment of the downtrodden, less fortunate and oppressed.

But at his core, Clemmons is a sanctified preacher. You have got to be, when even your black suspenders say in big, bright, bold white vertical letters C-O-G-I-C.

COGIC (pronounced COE-jik) is an acronym for Church of God in Christ, the largest Pentecostal, and second-largest African-American church denomination in the United States. But more than being an abbreviation, COGIC has become a word of embodiment. Akin to NAACP or GOP, COGIC conjures up images of the expressive and emotionally intense, hand clapping, foot stomping, tongues speaking, bible toting, joyous singing, body healing, Jesus professing, God fearing, Spirit indwelling experience of a group of black religious folk, collectively known as the sanctified church.

Joseph's older preaching brother, the late Bishop Ithiel Clemmons, was equally difficult to peg. Ithiel Clemmons was perhaps the first black Pentecostal to graduate from a major academic divinity school, finishing New York's Union Theological Seminary in 1956. Clemmons rose to the pinnacle of leadership within the denomination, being elected to the church's general board of 12 bishops in 1991. He was as likely to quote the Bible, as he was to quote a theologian like Jurgen Moltmann, Howard Thurman or Henri Nouwen, obscure names to the average churchgoer. Clemmons published a history of COGIC in 1996, which had been part of his studies, though never completed, to earn a PhD in American Church history. He ultimately earned a doctorate of ministry like his younger brother. Young preachers he mentored say he read more than they did right up until his death from cancer in January 1999.

The images of holy rollers jumping and shouting, rolling and rollicking, belies the serene and serious minded Clemmons brothers, with their wing-tipped shoes and three-piece suits. The sounds of guttural groans and growls, of hooping and hollering seem dissonant to these thoughtful and intellectually articulate preachers, scholars and activists, whose historical contemporaries included W.E.B DuBois and James Baldwin, a former teenage-Pentecostal preacher himself.

But it is this very uncontrollable fire, kindled in the furnace of slavery and segregation, and set ablaze by the challenges of the Civil Rights movement that make the Clemmons brothers the atypical Pentecostals that they are. At a time when Pentecostal spirituality (if not doctrine) is being embraced broadly throughout Christianity, its progenitor finds itself slipping down the slope of political infighting that smeared and tarred the character and credibility of the National Baptist Convention. The Clemmons brothers, though, offer COGIC, and the whole church, a compelling (though flawed) model of spirituality and social action.

"I think more of our clergy ought to be as trained as they can possibly be," says Joseph Clemmons. He laughs at the suggestion that he and his brother may be "anomalies" within their denomination, yet Clemmons admits, "Both men and women ought to get as much training as they can get, ought to be as involved as they can be, in terms of issues of justice and systemic injustice, social change. But above all, they ought to live in the presence of God."

The black church generally, and the black sanctified church in particular, have been considered religious institutions that are more concerned with some abstract otherworldly view of life, and some interior, private salvation of the individual.

"There has been an emphasis on salvation of souls that is very key in the Pentecostal tradition. That is the strongest emphasis that I have been aware of," says Dr. James Forbes. The son of a Pentecostal bishop himself, Forbes has been senior minister at the historic Riverside Church in Manhattan, since 1989. He went to Union just after Ithiel Clemmons had gone there, and later would do a doctoral program in black church studies with Joseph Clemmons at Colgate-Rochester.

Forbes says the thinking of the sanctified church has been "If you got individual souls saved, it would lead to transformation of the larger society." He adds that for "People who have a broader social vision," such as himself, "the individualistic salvation model would prove to be too narrow."

Certainly, growing up, Joseph, Ithiel and their three other siblings didn't have social activism or political exploits on their minds, but rather, personal salvation.

"The expectation was that when there was church, as there was Tuesday night, Friday night, Sunday morning, Sunday School, Young People Willing Workers in the afternoon, that we would be there. We got dressed and we went." Clemmons recalls that they did get an occasional reprieve on Tuesday night, because it was a school night, but on Friday night when there was no school on Saturday, the children were in tow. "They had all night prayer, we were at church. Of course, they would make us put chairs together and put pillows on the chairs and we'd go to sleep. And how many times did I fall off those chairs on to the floor? But that is what was expected."

But the sanctified church -- an offspring of slave religion -- perhaps unwittingly prepared its parishioners for the hard fought advances, which came from the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s. With an emphasis on holiness and living a righteous life, Clemmons' COGIC church was an organization that reached out and lifted up rural blacks seeking an escape from the Jim Crow South and migrant blacks who came North seeking a better way a life, but beaten back by the harsh realities of urban existence.

The fanatical insistence on an ascetic lifestyle: of abstinence from alcohol, or cigarettes, sex outside of marriage, dance music and other forms of worldly "pleasure"; along with an emphasis on work ethic, discipline, particularly living a life focused on the felt, active, relational and personal presence of God, actually prepared many black Pentecostal believers for higher education, politics, corporate America and middle-class lifestyles. At the very least, it was salvation for many African-Americans who were seeking ways to buffer themselves against the oppressive and destructive pathologies of urban life, so aptly described in Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1903 novel, *Sport of the Gods*. In that book, Dunbar aptly captures the struggle of a family one-generation removed from slavery moving North for better opportunities. However, the evils of violence, the temptation of sexual promiscuity and the overall harshness of urban reality force the mother and father to return South, choosing to deal with the evil of share-cropping in the Jim Crow backwoods, and evil with which they are familiar.

Clemmons, and his deceased brother, were among a small group of Pentecostals that managed to set the stage for the coming of age of the sanctified church as a spiritual body and as a potential agent for social change.

Joseph and Ithiel broke free of the shackles of black poverty and religious fundamentalism to form a vision of empowerment and possibility within America. Early trailblazers within the sanctified church, which dared to envision Pentecostal spirituality in a holistic way, greatly influenced the thinking of these brothers.

What is now considered the modern-day Pentecostal/Charismatic movement within Christianity, normally traces its roots back to a religious revival led by African-American minister the Reverend William Joseph Seymour at a former livery stable on Azusa Street in Los Angeles from 1906 to 1909.

Seymour had embraced a doctrine that had been taught since 1901 by white minister Charles Fox Parham that speaking in a language not learned by the speaker (or glossolalia) was the proof that a person had been baptized in the Holy

Spirit. This teaching was based primarily on the story of the day of Pentecost, as recorded in the Biblical book of Acts, which recounts how Jesus' disciples were "filled with the Holy Ghost," and preached the gospel that day in languages that they had not learned. But Seymour had emphasized the coming together of both male and female, different ethnic groups and social classes in the first sanctified "storefront" church as a sure sign of the Spirit's presence. The day of Pentecost narrative does speak to devout persons, from the entire known world, being gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Indeed, one early witness of Azusa, journalist Frank Bartleman recorded that the "color line has been washed away in the blood [of Jesus]."

Seymour invited Parham to the revival. But when he arrived, Parham -- a Ku Klux Klan sympathizer -- criticized blacks and whites worshipping together as a "darkie camp meeting". This was the same preacher that had made Seymour sit outside the classroom where he taught his new doctrine. Despite these racial hostilities, Azusa continued as an interracial revival, at least temporarily.

Charles Harrison Mason, who had co-founded the Church of God in Christ ten years earlier in 1897, also made his way to Azusa. Mason, an eclectic and mystical person himself, a southern shaman, would eventually split with his co-founder, Charles Price Jones, on the issue of speaking in other tongues. One of the major influences on Seymour and Mason, an influence that would greatly affect the thinking and social activism of the Clemmons' brothers was the practical doctrinal emphasis on holiness.

While some former Pentecostals have described holiness as legalism -- a set of repressive rules and obligations that almost defy human nature -- Dr. Cheryl Sanders, a Howard University professor and minister from within the holiness tradition, speaks positively of the doctrine in her work, *Saints in Exile; the Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African-American Religion and Culture*. She writes, "The Sanctified church is an African-American Christian reform movement that seeks to bring its standards of worship, personal morality, and social concern into conformity with a biblical hermeneutic of holiness and spiritual empowerment."

Such a definition does not emphasize speaking in tongues, or any spiritual gift that might separate black Pentecostals from the wider church world. The definition, she argues, does require a disciplined, self-sacrificing lifestyle, one that challenges the dominant culture by creating an alternative community of being "in the world, but not of it."

In his later years, Bishop Clemmons would argue, "I am concerned that white Pentecostals in America are often locked into doctrinal, propositional notions, dictated more by Evangelical fundamentalism than by Pentecostal vision." For the Clemmons brothers that vision is one that includes racial unity.

Dr. Russell Spittler, provost at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., admits that white Pentecostals have a much more narrow definition of the experience than their black counterparts.

"White Pentecostals are by their doctrines very otherworldly," says Spittler, an ordained minister within the predominantly white Assemblies of God. "North American white Pentecostals are far more influenced by fundamentalism than blacks are. And blacks are far more influenced by factors and forces in social change."

Both Joseph and Ithiel were exposed to pioneers like Bishop Mason through their father, the late Bishop Frank Clemmons, who started the "first" Church of God in Christ in Brooklyn, N.Y. in the early 1920s.

Joseph Clemmons doesn't recall any explicit racial hostility in Washington, N.C., where his father was from; but the elder Clemmons, like many blacks of that time, thought opportunity awaited him in the big city.

"He had grown restless and weary in his spirit about the South and sensing a lack of the possibility of realizing his potential there," says Clemmons. When friend and fellow sanctified preacher Peter J.F. Bridges suggested that Frank Clemmons come to New York, it was not a hard decision, Clemmons says. "He developed a love for Brooklyn and didn't care very much about going back down South. And he definitely did not want to be buried down there. On holidays and what have you, [Dad] would say 'No, I don't want to go to North Carolina, I don't want to go to Washington, I don't want to go down South.'"

Ithiel, the oldest surviving child of seven of Frank and his wife Polly, had been born in Washington in December of 1921, but Joseph, the baby, was born in Brooklyn during the early days of the Great Depression, in June of 1929.

Joseph and Ithiel pressed through those early days of poverty and even public assistance and focused on church life. In Brooklyn, they both found the opportunity to influence and be influenced by various black and white church traditions. Unlike the stereotype of sanctified church folks living in isolation and damning all others to hell, Frank Clemmons interacted with some of the prominent black church leaders in Brooklyn at that time, including the late Rev. Sandy Ray of Cornerstone Baptist Church, and later Rev. Gardner Taylor of Concord Baptist and Rev. William Augustus Jones of Bethany Baptist Church.

"My father always had the greatest admiration and respect for men like Sandy Ray, [and] the pastors of Mt. Sinai and Berean Baptist Church. And those folks had a great deal of respect for us because they came to our church on Sunday nights. My father was praying for the sick and the sick we're being healed, lame folks being made to walk," says Joseph Clemmons.

Not only were these "high church" blacks coming down to the sanctified church for some of that "old time religion", but Clemmons and others within COGIC were embracing the idea of using the church to promote upward mobility, even in the 1930s and 40s.

Church historian and COGIC minister, Dr. David Daniels of Chicago's McCormick Theological Seminary, says that a handful of COGIC preachers, including Philadelphia's Bishop O.T. Jones Sr., Newport News, Va.'s Bishop D.L. Williams (an uncle of the Clemmons brothers), and Brooklyn's Bishop F.D. Washington deliberately began to de-emphasize the storefront character of the sanctified church.

Ithiel and Joseph Clemmons both have described Bishop Williams, considered trained from Bible college, as a scholarly and pastoral mentor. Williams was very active in the nationally recognized black Ministers' Conference held annually at Hampton University and was in fact the first Pentecostal preacher to head the group. His nephew Joseph would become only the second Pentecostal to lead the group in the 1980s.

"Many of these clergy preached from a manuscript and intentionally went beyond the so-called storefront model, with its emphasis on ecstatic worship through testimony service, preaching as hooping, tarrying service," says Daniels. These congregations also began to emphasize the working class mix of their congregations, the fact that government workers or schoolteachers were members.

This approach would be similar to the movement of the black bourgeoisie to embrace and emulate white middle-class culture as a means of being accommodated within American society and culture. Much of the black church's rejection of its sanctified roots had to do with the politically expedient desire to embrace white liturgical Protestant worship for upward mobility and acceptance. However, such an embrace did mean an actual rejection of the content and meaning of blacks' slave religion experience.

And while Ithiel did not abandon the sanctified church, he was developing quite a fascination with evangelical liberalism. Unlike the so-called "liberalism" of today, that is defined in narrow political terms, evangelical liberalism was for Ithiel Clemmons an opportunity to develop and interpret his sanctified spirituality in a much broader context than how it was being defined by primarily white Pentecostals seeking acceptance from Fundamentalists Christians.

In particular, Bishop Clemmons was drinking from the well of the Riverside Church and its then famous pastor, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Riverside was the early twentieth-century religious vision of business baron John D. Rockefeller. The church was built in Harlem in 1927 from Rockefeller's generosity. Adjacent to Columbia University, Riverside was designed to be a bastion of institutional faith in action. Clemmons recounts the influence of Fosdick and Riverside in a sermon he delivered at convocation at Riverside in 1997, entitled, "When Prayer Means Power -- Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Art of Praying." Recalling his original reluctance to accept an invitation to speak, Clemmons says, "I was not sure that there was any real interest in Dr. Fosdick's meditations and musings on Prayer; that segment of his prophetic ministry that did the most for my own personal life and vocation over the course of my ministry. There is usually an inner tension that causes some suspicion between those whose major emphasis is on the Church's

activism in society and those whose major emphasis is on the Church's spiritual accent."

Ithiel's uncle Bishop Williams introduced him to Riverside, and the preaching of Fosdick, Clemmons says. Fosdick was also seminal to several key friends, from the churches of Jones and Williams, which were actively seeking to move away from the limitations of traditional storefront religion. But as Clemmons suggests, not from that "inner life."

Spittler says it is critical to know when Bishop Clemmons and his brother were influenced by theological education, to know what kind of impact and impression it made on their social conscience and on their formulation of faith and action.

"When did that education occur? If he were at Union in his twenties, then it would be more formative, then he would have more exposure to persons and forces and [an] intellectual climate that would support and extend and apply the emergence of a social conscience," says Spittler, who admits, "in those years, I was in an [Assemblies of God] bible institute, then went to an Evangelical Christian institution. I did not have that exposure until later on [during] my doctoral work."

Although Bishop Clemmons was 30 years old when he entered Union, he had been exposed to the ministry of the Riverside Church, right next to the seminary, several years prior, at a point when he was in undergraduate and graduate school.

"I was exposed to Dr. Fosdick's ministry as a very young adult in 1948-49," Clemmons preached that day in 1997. "As a Holiness-Pentecostal young person just beginning college, brought up in a morally rigorous environment of home and church; a church with a dialectical vision of being 'in but not of the world;' with a circle of friends who placed great emphasis on the 'life of the mind,' we were embarked upon a project of 'faith seeking understanding.'"

Clemmons acknowledges, "Dr. Fosdick among others, became an important resource and fount of Christian thought. His signature sermon, *Will the Fundamentalist Win*, was not that significant for us, because the Black Church was not a part of the fundamentalist-modernist debate. We were more interested in his, *Manhood of the Master*, *On Being a Real Person*, his *Understanding the Bible*, and his trilogy: *The Meaning of Prayer*, *The Meaning of Faith* and *The Meaning of Service*, that was pivotal for me."

While it may seem odd that a liberal protestant was a model, Alonzo Johnson -- a professor of religion at the University of South Carolina at Columbia and protégé of Clemmons -- says the world of Union Seminary and Riverside provided both a spiritual and an institutional model for Clemmons.

"The whole Union lifestyle became very important, because he was trying to find different ways to model spirituality. And Riverside was always a model for him, a frustrating model," says Johnson, who worshipped at First Church while pursuing his doctorate at Union in the late eighties. "I remember him telling me on several occasions that that set a model of ministry for him. For what liberal Protestantism offered through Riverside, I think he thought that there could be a counterpart to that, within the COGIC tradition, [a] counterpart in terms of building institutional ministry. A church that could meet needs on every level: culturally, economically, socially, theologically and otherwise. It was frustrating, because I don't think he ever realized that."

For those like Daniels and Johnson who were mentored by Bishop Clemmons, this period is indeed seminal, and determines the direction of his uniquely Pentecostal theology, ministry and involvement in a social justice agenda.

Daniels says Bishop Clemmons was "challenged at the core, especially with the conflicting doctrine of Scripture and the liberal exegetical method, which influenced how [he] interprets texts in preaching and teaching." But Daniels thinks there was a more profound impact, one that would echo in the ministries of those who followed in Clemmons' footsteps to Union, like Forbes.

"The Pentecostal emphasis on the miraculous, supernatural, as well as Heaven and the holiness emphasis on 'living free and separated from sin' was also challenged by seminary," says Daniels. He says Clemmons and others, like contemporary and close friend Bishop O.T. Jones, Jr., "Broaden the Christian life to go beyond being mere preparation

for Heaven; there were significant things God was concerned about in this life and conversion prepared one for living today as well as in Heaven. They dealt with the critique that sanctified churches spent much [time] discussing 'What is one saved from?' but inadequate attention was paid in discussing 'What one is saved for,' besides soul winning. They grappled with the pastoral issue of the spiritual struggle people had 'living saved all day and all night', and stress the role of God's grace and love, meaning loving even when we fall or what their peers called backsliding."

Clemmons did not only broaden his view of the sanctified church, but the church period, says Forbes. "I always thought that Ithiel, while deeply immersed in the Church of God in Christ, felt called to ecumenical ministry."

Clemmons was COGIC to the core, but indeed had various ecumenical commitments, including being a founding member of the Congress of National Black Churches, the North American Renewal Service Committee (an organization of participants within Pentecostalism and the Charismatic renewal) and the New York Council of Churches.

In between these associations, Clemmons pastored in Clairton, Pa., for 12 years, married and had three daughters. His first wife, Alyce Wilmer Thompson died in 1968, two years after he came home to Brooklyn to help his father. He re-married in 1969 to the former Clara Cantrell, and in 1975 he took a pastorate in Greensboro, N.C.

While Ithiel became a sort of ambassador for the sanctified church, Joseph grounded himself much more thoroughly in a social activist ministry. Although eight years younger, Joseph had actually entered the ministry about the same time as his brother. Ithiel accepted a call to preach at age 21, and Joseph started preaching at age 14. He also followed his older brother in earning an undergraduate degree at Long Island University.

But unlike his brother, who earned two master's degrees before going into fulltime ministry, Joseph Clemmons, who studied foreign languages, started teaching Spanish in Baltimore and planted a church in 1953 called Zion Tabernacle Church of God in Christ.

Seven years later, at the call of the Bishop of Connecticut, Charles H. Brewer Sr., the younger Clemmons was appointed to pastor Holy Temple Church of God in Christ in Norwalk. It was during that time that Joseph Clemmons decided that he, like his brother, needed seminary training. So from 1965 to 1969 he attended Yale Divinity School. Like his brother, he grabbed hold of the evangelical liberal vision, but not through a massive, historic church like Riverside, but rather through a Congregational Church, which was a part of the ecumenical United Church of Christ.

Joseph Clemmons saw "models and mentors" in preachers like Rev. Henry Yordon of the First Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk. Yordon and Clemmons worked together on several projects, including Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now and the Norwalk Area Ministry, which focused on young people.

"Those who were in the mainline churches, I knew that they had a different emphasis than I had. But it never occurred to me that they were not saved, that they were not Godly. I had the greatest amount of respect and I saw that they were doing some things that I needed to be doing in terms of getting involved in the community and reaching to the hurts and pains of the community. So I learned much of that ... by watching models and mentors in Norwalk."

The Clemmons were not the only model of this upsurge in black Pentecostal consciousness during the sixties. In the nation's capital, Pentecostal Bishop Smallwood E. Williams, of the Bibleway Church Worldwide, articulates the struggle to be Pentecostal and to be ecumenical.

In his 1981 autobiography, *This is My Story; a Significant Life Struggle*, he writes, "I made a lot of Pentecostals uncomfortable. I never purposely set out to be unpleasant, but my emphasis on pragmatic preaching was leading me to get involved in areas where few in my church had ventured. Under my leadership in the late fifties and sixties ... members of Bibleway were getting involved in places that didn't make us particularly popular with some Pentecostals - Christian unity and cooperation ... I had the ability ... to see beyond denominational differences and religious prejudices to apply Pentecostal theology to practical areas of living. That gift of mine wasn't particularly appreciated. No doubt many Pentecostals, like many Christians in many other denominations, were threatened when they took a step outside their own door. This is true to this day, despite all the talk of the ecumenical movement."

It was not so much the outside threat as the fear from within that snared the Clemmons brothers in their efforts to make the broadest impact possible.

Ithiel, who had come back to help his father, never imagined that Frank Clemmons would live another 24 years. The son had the vision to move the church in 1968 from a refurbished garage, adjacent to a garbage dump, to a Jewish temple he had seen years before with his mother. In that move, Daniels and Johnson note, Ithiel Clemmons also tried to institute a more orderly and liturgical form of worship. Clemmons tried to utilize the entire infrastructure of this large temple that had served as the center of life for another group during another age. But he was struggling to create a Pentecostal Riverside, but without the Rockefeller millions, and with a congregation of working class holy rollers, and not affluent white middle class parishioners. And though both brothers don't admit to any ministerial conflicts with their dad, observers point out that First Church was Frank Clemmons' church and no one else's, no matter what Ithiel did.

"It's clear that certain things weren't happening with First Church. He still had the dream, he still wanted it to happen," but no Riverside was emerging in Brooklyn, says Johnson. "By then he's fixed on the idea of being a bishop within the Church of God in Christ; which means that if you're going to become a bishop, you have to have a product, most of the time. And First Church was always going to be his daddy's product."

So, in 1975, perhaps knowing he had to build up his own congregation to attain higher status within the denomination, Ithiel Clemmons agreed to pastor Wells Memorial Church of God in Christ in Greensboro, N.C.

At the same time that Ithiel was attempting to carve out a pastoral identity for himself down south, his brother Joseph was literally being forced out of his pulpit. Joseph Clemmons had finished Yale and proceeded to be a part of the historic Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows doctorate of ministry program at Colgate-Rochester, from 1972 to 1975. The preachers, hand picked by one of the pioneers of black theological studies, Henry Mitchell, included some of the black church's most popular names, even today: H. Beecher Hicks, Jr. of Washington's Metropolitan Baptist Church; then Baltimore-based Bishop John Bryant of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Harold Carter of Baltimore's New Shiloh Baptist Church; Wyatt T. Walker of Harlem's Canaan Baptist Church; and of course Forbes, who was then still affiliated with the Original United Holy Church of America.

These ministers traced their religious roots back to Africa, through South America and the Caribbean on to the American South. Forbes, infatuated with the black power movement and the emergence of liberation theology wrote about "A Pentecostal approach to black liberation." Clemmons wrote about "Ecstasy and wholeness in the black church; with a focus on the Church of God in Christ."

Back home, things were not whole, however. It was during this time Bishop Brewer, who had called Clemmons, was ill and wanted his son to succeed him in the bishopric, not an uncommon practice in the sanctified church; modern-day Levites, if you will. But obviously, a progressive, seminary-trained, community-impacting pastor with deep roots to church leadership might pose a threat.

Joseph Clemmons says Brewer trumped up some accusations while he was out of the country to force him out of Holy Temple. In the end, the two parties wound up in court, and reached an out-of-court settlement that enabled Clemmons to start Miracle Temple COGIC. It was also at this point that he closely aligned himself with the UCC, of which several local Congregational churches opened their doors to give Miracle Temple a place to worship.

Miracle Temple moved on to worship at an Episcopal church in 1973, which was gutted a year later by fire. The UCC helped finance the mortgage that helped Miracle Temple buy the shell and rebuild the church. The deal cemented the church becoming dually affiliated in 1976.

"They wanted me to be a part of that denomination," says Clemmons. In the radical sixties, he says, the UCC became a haven for several black preachers running for cover from their previous denominations. "They saw what had been happening to me, what Brewer wanted to do and all of that sort of stuff. And they knew there wasn't nothing to it. 'Yeah man, you can get funding for your church, you can get a pension for yourself.' It's been the best marriage I've

ever had. And I've found in many senses more true camaraderie and Godliness amongst a number of them, than I have in my own denomination."

With such radical fallout, Joseph's influence fell within COGIC and he was permanently sidetracked from the Bishopric. Ithiel managed to stay on course, helping to craft an autobiography of Bishop Otha M. Kelly, presiding prelate of the Eastern New York first jurisdiction and first assistant presiding bishop of COGIC worldwide.

Kelly had mentored both Clemmons brothers, and Johnson says it was Kelly's desire that Ithiel Clemmons eventually succeed him as presider of the jurisdiction. Just one problem, though, Bishop Frederick D. Washington succeeded Kelly in both of his roles, and Clemmons was not his first choice, Johnson claims. Washington, in his own right was a pioneer COGIC preacher. He had carved out one of the largest churches of any denomination in Brooklyn. Washington was also very politically active, and it was his ministry that mentored and nurtured Rev. Al Sharpton during his childhood.

While the rationale for not being Washington's favorite son is unclear, Ithiel Clemmons did have Washington preach the dedication service of the new building he built for Wells Memorial, named COGIC Cathedral, in 1985. Johnson said building a church, which cost \$1.2 million, was absolutely critical to Ithiel's goal of being elected to the general board of the denomination.

Well, Washington died in 1988 and Clemmons did succeed him, but this jurisdiction, which spread from Long Island to New York City and right up the Hudson Valley to Albany, was cut three-fold, as preachers rose up to challenge Clemmons appointment.

Despite the schism of the jurisdiction, Clemmons managed to be elected to the general board in 1991.

As his older brother adroitly negotiated the increasingly political nature of upward mobility and influence within the denomination, Joseph had to harness all of the resources of seminary, of social action, of ecumenism to build his ministry.

Although his church was able to purchase the former Episcopal church it had shared, which was gutted by fire; it would be 13 years -- 1991 -- before the renovation and reconstruction was complete.

Is a white man washing a black man's feet a simple act of kindness or a move of God?

Perhaps what brought Ithiel Clemmons the most attention on his theology of racial reconciliation and social justice was the so-called "Miracle of Memphis," a conference of Pentecostals and charismatics held in November 1994. It was at this conference that the almost all white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America disbanded, and the new, racially mixed Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America was formed. A white pastor washing Clemmons' feet prefaced the dissolution and reformation of the group.

"I was absolutely taken aback," Clemmons told the *Greensboro News & Record* at that time. "I'd never seen him before, never knew him. I just said 'sure' and cried while he washed my feet. It was a poignant moment for the whole group."

But the emotion of that moment was the culmination of years of planning and diligence on the part of Clemmons and several other Pentecostal leaders, black and white. Clemmons also worked with four scholar/preachers: Leonard Lovett (COGIC), Cecil Robeck (Assemblies of God) and Harold Hunter (International Pentecostal Holiness Church) to construct the "Racial Reconciliation Manifesto". That document, in part, says, "I pledge in concert with my brothers and sisters of many hues to oppose racism prophetically in all its various manifestations within and without the Body of Christ and to be vigilant in the struggle with all my God-given might... with complete bold and courageous honesty, we mutually confess that racism is sin and as a blight in the Fellowship must be condemned for having hindered the maturation of spiritual development and mutual sharing among Pentecostal-Charismatic believers for decades."

White Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars and church leaders did not arrive at such a dramatic declaration over night.

At that time, Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan noted a more than 20-year period of working in ecumenical circles led Clemmons to this moment. "He's worked hard, is well-known and trusted," Synan said of the Memphis Miracle. "No other man could do this job."

Clemmons would be elected the reorganized group's first executive chairman.

As early as 1977, Bishop Clemmons had begun his theological process of bridging the ecumenical intentions of the spirit with an agenda of justice and equality. Clemmons was one of the few black Pentecostals to address the North American Conference on the Holy Spirit that year, in Kansas City, Kan., something akin to a charismatic United Nations. Clemmons would note 20 years later that he had introduced his then Presiding Bishop J.O. Patterson to "spirit-filled" Catholic Cardinal Joseph Suenens of the Netherlands at an event at Arrowhead Stadium, years before the massive Promise Keepers rallies.

Then in 1981, in his presidential address to the Society of Pentecostal Studies, Clemmons says, "My church follows its founder, the late Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, in working with groups like SPS. Our approach is one of love and cautious optimism. It is not always clear to us what such groups mean by brotherhood or unity, yet we are open to find out."

But after those conciliatory remarks, he goes on to say that black leaders, like Mason and Azusa Street revival preacher William Seymour have to be restored to the center of the historical accounts of the beginnings of American Pentecostalism, for the movement's real meaning to become clear.

"Seymour championed one doctrine above all others: There must be no color line or any other division of the Church of Jesus Christ because God is no respecter of persons," says Clemmons. "This inclusive fellowship is not a human construct but a divine glossalalic community of human equality. Spiritual power sprang more from interracial equality than from glossolalia."

Spittler perhaps squirmed a little back then, upon hearing those words, maybe thinking back to how he found Clemmons in 1973 after attempts to locate black scholars to be a part of SPS, which was founded in 1970.

"I think he bore witness to the social relevance of Pentecostalism [to] those of us who come from the more separatist traditions [that] keep safe distance from social shifts and changes," says Spittler. "He would say, you can't be Pentecostal without recognizing the social implications of the spirit."

Just a few months before his death, Clemmons wrote, "In April 1960, the Holy Spirit surprisingly broke through the structures and theologies of the historic Protestant traditions with a charismatic outpouring... African-Americans in that period of the 60s were focusing on the Civil Rights movement. The connection should have been, but never has been made. The connection between the quest for righteousness and justice and the surprising charismatic irruptions is yet to be followed to its providential conclusion."

The conclusion -- in both theology and church life -- will have to be arrived at by others.

"I think Ithiel would urge the church try to enter into the discernment mode," says Forbes. "Listen to the Lord because the Lord may be invested in what we do. What is the responsibility of the exercise of our voice? I think he would say, 'Come on let's impact legislation, let's get grants, let's give scholarships. Let us make sure that politicians in our city know the Church of God in Christ is here, and because we have a Holy Spirit vision, you should take us seriously.'"

Joseph Clemmons relaxes in the den of his Norwalk home. His flawlessly shined wingtips and a gray sports jacket are now off, but he is still adorned in the pressed white shirt, cufflinks, suspenders and slacks of a minister of the Christian gospel. Clemmons has just finished delivering a sermon at his Miracle Temple Church of God in Christ, in South Norwalk.

Clemmons relaxes and talks a little about the upcoming legislative session and the vacation he hopes to take with his wife Fran (he remarried after his first wife Geraldine died in 1985).

God blessed today, he says, but he cannot dwell too long in the place where the Spirit was, for on next Sunday he must journey down to the concrete jungle of New York City, the borough of Brooklyn to be exact, to teach, preach and pray at the Historic First Church of God in Christ. His father, Bishop Frank Clemmons, founded First Church, as it is affectionately called, in the early 1920s.

Rev. Clemmons' older brother -- Ithiel -- helped his father for over 20 years before assuming the full pastorate when "the old man" died at the age of 96 years old in 1990. The younger bishop passed away last January, at age 77, ushering in Rev. Clemmons' tenure.

Surrounded by awards and accolades from some 55 years of public preaching ministry, the casual observer would think Clemmons would be ready for retirement. But hardly. Clemmons, himself a spry 70, is hard at work attempting to breathe new life into his family's legacy. First Church arose from a house prayer meeting, to a storefront adjacent to a garbage dump. It finally entered into its promise land of a former Jewish temple in the racially and religiously diverse Crown Heights section of Brooklyn in the late 1960s.

But after a period where his brother Ithiel tried to not only take the saints (Pentecostals nomenclature for each other) out of the storefront, but also take the storefront out of the saints -- the congregation now finds itself challenged by the very forces that made it grow: migration, but not from South to North as it was two generations ago. The church has been depleted by departures of older church members yearning to return to the new South, which has attempted to expel many of the vestiges of Jim Crow segregation and racism that drove their foreparents away. Moreover, though considered anti-intellectual, the work ethic and passion for discipline instilled in the children of COGIC produced those who are comfortable within the boardrooms of major corporations and halls of legislation around this country. At the same time, those who have benefited from such a spirituality in action, have come to question what seems to be the otherworldly reality of their religious heritage, opting for so-called mainstream Christian churches, who embrace an enthusiastic and emotionally uplifting form of worship, but culturally and intellectually engaging form of ministry.

Johnson sees the issue as timing and tension between interest of Ithiel and the congregation.

"You've got years worth of frustration that were present there. The tension that you felt in that church between Ithiel and some of the others that thought he kind of neglected it, didn't give it enough time and him feeling like it never really satisfied his ego and the vision, relate to the fact that he was more private than public, more intellectual, more comfortable one-on-one, in small groups in conversation and interaction, than in big groups. Preaching is one thing, but pastoring is people; I don't think that was his best suit."

But beyond pastoral weaknesses, Ithiel often spoke of a "post-denominational" age, a period when folks would choose churches based on meeting their needs, not what creed is listed in the liturgy. In this type of culture, the old-school, social club, political pushing and shoving of other black organizations, that has crept into the Church of God in Christ, has made many disillusioned, and asking if the "sanctified church" is still wholly holy?

As the denomination, like our nation, prepares for an election in November, the group, finds itself at a pivotal crossroad. It can keep the status quo in Presiding Bishop Chandler Owens, who was a right hand man to prior leaders and has worked hard to squash resistance to his reign, going so far as to take some popular COGIC ministers to court. Or will the group's pastors and bishops who vote not go with the incumbent, but rather choose from a new cadre of leadership, say Bishops Gilbert Patterson, or Charles Blake?

In the case of Patterson, things aren't so new. He is in Memphis and comes from the family of the late Presiding Bishop Patterson, who was married to a daughter of founder C.H. Mason.

Patterson, known as an evangelist, has been precursor to many widely popular black Pentecostal preachers, like Bishop T. D. Jakes, Bishop Noel Jones and Bishop Carlton Pearson.

Blake's roots run deep as well, but he is best known for building perhaps the largest COGIC congregation in the US, the West Angeles Church of God in Christ. Blake often tells the story of how he came to the Los Angeles church in 1969, on the heels of leading Civil Rights protests as a seminary student in Atlanta, only to almost be forced out by a small group of angry members.

He managed to quell the protests, and now boasts a congregation, which has a great diversity of people, including R&B singer Stevie Wonder and actor Denzel Washington, whose father was a COGIC preacher.

While both offer lively and modern alternatives to Owens, preachers like Clemmons must determine if social change and the emergence of a COGIC middle-class actually compromises the tenets of holiness and impairs the nature of ministry that the sanctified church does in its own particular way. And Clemmons, like his brother, must confront the issue that the saying, "You're never so close to home as when you're at First Church," was a phrase coined by his dad, a lover of people in a way that he may yet still be trying to discover, despite his training.

"My father always expected Ithiel and myself to exceed him in ministry. I'm not so sure if we succeeded at that. We've each been building on the foundation that he laid. In terms of us exceeding him, which is what he would want, to do more than he was able to do because he helped to equip us and to see that we were trained in order to do a better job than he was able to do," says Clemmons with humility, adding "We still [hold] on to the teachings that he and mom laid out for us."

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