

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FROM PARALYSIS TO ACTION:  
ROBERT HARRISON AND THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

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## **“I’m Sorry, My Brother”**

Graduation day 1951 stood just two weeks away for Robert (“Bob”) Harrison. Though Bob Jones University had rejected his application due to the color of his skin, Bob found a home at an Assemblies of God (AG) school, Bethany College, in Santa Cruz, California. Knowing Bethany’s president, Bob’s grandmother, the Rev. Cornelia Jones Robertson, marched her grandson-of-promise into the president’s office, where Bob was welcomed as Bethany’s “first negro.”<sup>1</sup>

Bob Harrison’s music and preaching ministry blossomed at Bethany. He represented the school across the state and conducted numerous evangelistic services. Nearing graduation, his anticipation intensified as he readied for one last matter of business—his interview for ministerial credentials with the Northern California-Nevada District of the AG. Despite the fact that the AG had many years prior ordained his grandmother,<sup>2</sup> Bob was soon to face the most painful rejection of his life—the denial of credentials to him because of his race. As he stood before the district credentialing committee, the superintendent looked Bob “square in the eye and said, ‘I’m sorry, my brother (sic), but it is not the policy of our denomination to grant credentials to Negroes.’”<sup>3</sup> Stunned and hurt, Bob left the interview, rejecting the superintendent’s offer to return his \$2 credentialing fee. Not until 1957 would the district grant him a ministerial license, and only in 1962 would he receive General Council ordination.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Harrison, *When God Was Black* (Canoga Park, CA: Bob Harrison Ministries International, Inc., 1978), 19.

<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Robertson, an Azusa Street revival participant, “was one of the first blacks to be ordained by the Assemblies of God. She founded and served Emmanuel Pentecostal Church and House of Prayer in San Francisco for more than 30 years and established a mission in the nearby Barbary Coast area.” Glenn Gohr, “For Such a Time as This: The Story of Evangelist Bob Harrison,” *Assemblies of God Heritage* (Fall 2004): 6.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, *When God Was Black*, 29. Perhaps Bob Harrison’s inclusion of (sic) in his quote is because he considered the superintendent’s reference to “brother” an inappropriate notation considering his rejection.

Why the delay? What attitudes and events within the Assemblies of God with respect to the credentialing of African Americans contributed not only to Bob's 1951 rejection but also to the long delay on his road to ordination? This paper puts Harrison's situation within the historical context of the AG struggle over racial issues. It demonstrates how various mounting pressures from many venues facilitated a context in which Harrison could serve as a catalyst for change, helping to carry the movement beyond its paralysis to a point of action with respect to ministry to, by, and with African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

### **AG Credentialing "Policy"**

At some point after his licensing in 1957, Bob saw himself as the first African American granted a ministerial license by the AG.<sup>5</sup> However, as Howard Kenyon points out,<sup>6</sup> ever since the early years of the movement, the AG had received Black ministers into fellowship. It remains important to consider, then, what happened between the time of ministry by those Kenyon

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<sup>4</sup> The focus of this paper is not Harrison's full biography, though the numerous Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center (FPHC/ifphc.org) and *Pentecostal Evangel* resources listed in the "Sources Consulted" section of this chapter will direct the reader to significant biographical information. Harrison's autobiography, *When God Was Black*, and Glenn Gohr's article, "For Such a Time as This: The Story of Evangelist Bob Harrison," provide excellent overviews of Harrison's life and ministry.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, *When God Was Black*, 92.

<sup>6</sup> Howard N. Kenyon, "Black Ministers in the Assemblies of God," *Assemblies of God Heritage* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 10. Ellsworth S. Thomas, pastor in Binghamton, New York, was the first minister granted credentials by the AG, in 1915. Kenyon's excellent article recounts the important contributions of numerous African American ministers (Pastor G. T. Haywood, Pastor J. Edward Howard, missionaries Isaac and Martha Neeley, evangelist and Pastor Bruce Gibson), as well as the support shown to Black ministers by (White) Pastor Robert Brown of Glad Tidings in New York City.

Gibson, ordained in 1933, left the AG on good terms in 1937 to work with "the colored organization" (most likely the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)). The AG reinstated Gibson in 1952 upon his desire to return. NJ-NY District Superintendent R. J. Bergstrom spoke in 1952 of Gibson as "carrying on a fine work in the Bronx," recommending him for reinstatement "inasmuch as we have other ordained colored Brethren working in our District." (R. J. Bergstrom, Cross Reference Sheet to Letter, FPHC, February 26, 1952.) Interestingly, the unnamed "man of the colored race" referred to in the 1939 General Presbytery case also had "a fine work in the Bronx."

mentions (1915-1937) and Bob Harrison's moment of humiliation before the credentialing committee.

A key turning point toward the ambiguous "policy" the Northern California-Nevada AG superintendent spoke of to Bob Harrison in 1951 was a General Presbytery (GP) ruling in 1939. At the 1939 GP meeting, the question of ordaining a "man of the colored race"<sup>7</sup> arose. Though this man was educated and "qualified Scripturally for ordination ... [with] a fine work in the Bronx [among] educated people, ... [had been] brought up in Glad Tidings Tabernacle (New York) ... [and knew] nothing but the Assemblies of God fellowship,"<sup>8</sup> the GP, after much discussion<sup>9</sup> and an adjournment, ruled the following afternoon that the GP

... express disapproval of the ordaining of colored men to the ministry and recommend that when those of the colored race apply for ministerial recognition, license to preach only be granted to them with instructions that they operate within the bounds of the District in which they are licensed, and if they desire ordination, refer them to the colored organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Without any national policy on the issue, the GP's ruling—though a "delicate attempt to balance things on the floor"—was, as Mel Robeck points out, also a "vote for the status quo."<sup>11</sup> Districts

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<sup>7</sup> Kenyon ("Black Ministers in the Assemblies of God," 10) identifies this man as a "Brother Ellison." The Eastern District Secretary, Newton Chase, had "advised the national headquarters that the Eastern District was willing to refer Ellison to the 'colored' organization." However, Robert Brown—who had earlier endorsed two other Blacks, Ellsworth S. Thomas and J. Edward Howard—had referred Ellison to the credentialing committee "without the committee knowing he was black!"

<sup>8</sup> General Presbytery Minutes, "Ordination of Colored Brethren," FPHC, September 5-12, 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. "Several suggestions were made—one that this brother apply to the colored organization, The Church of God in Christ. Another was that the matter be left entirely to the Districts and that if such an one were ordained, that he confine his ministry solely to that District."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Cecil M. Jr., Robeck, "The Past: Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division in American Pentecostalism," Presented at the October 1994 "Memphis Miracle" Meeting, Pentecostal-Charismatic Theological Inquiry International, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal Charismatic Research*, accessed March 3, 2006, <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj14/robeck.html>. Continued AG activity on this matter throughout subsequent decades was because the movement had only ever appealed to the canon of "American law and society" with respect to race relations, instead of appealing to the biblical canon. By this the AG was able to "wash its hands of the issue by simply referring all such racial questions to the Church of God in Christ as its sibling or else explore ways with

could license capable candidates and yet at the same time those unwilling to ordain blacks would not be forced to do so. The status quo would meet with challenges throughout the 1940s and 1950s, however, in both formal and informal settings. Not only would various individuals and groups challenge the status quo, but also contradictions in “policy” would arise, such as the reinstatement of Bruce Gibson as an ordained minister in 1952, only one year after Robert Harrison was denied licensing credentials.

The following table provides an overview of the AG struggle with racial issues (evangelism/missions, credentialing, establishment of a “Colored Branch/Fellowship,” and integration) throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s:

#### **Harrison’s Context: AG Racial Dilemma throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and Early 1960s**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Brown: General Council; Blue: General Presbytery; Purple: AG Minister or Church; Black: Outside Inquiry; Red: AG Executive; Green: Executive Presbytery</b>
1943	GC Resolution (“to promote <u>missionary activity</u> among our American colored people”). The matter was <u>referred to the Executive Presbytery</u> “in order not to tie the hands of the brethren by a binding resolution.”
1945	A resolution was offered encouraging the “establishment of Assembly [sic] of God churches for the colored race and that when such churches are established they be authorized to display the name, ‘Assembly of God—Colored Branch.’” General Superintendent E. S. Williams introduced Bruce Gibson, an African American ordained by the AG in 1933, who left the AG (on good terms) in 1937, and was reinstated in 1952, to speak on the General Council floor in favor of this resolution. The resolution was <u>adopted</u> .
1946	<b>GP</b> goes on record as “favoring the establishment of a colored Pentecostal Church altogether separate and apart from the General Council of the Assemblies of God.”
1947	Resolution was again offered to establish a Colored Branch since requests were coming in from the black community for help. Moved that a <u>committee</u> of “brethren from the North and the South be appointed ... to give thorough study to this problem” and <u>report back</u> at the 1949 General Council. (This issue was never attended to at the 1949 Council.)
1951	<b>Robert Harrison</b> is denied a ministerial license with the Assemblies of God.
1952	<b>Bruce Gibson</b> receives reinstatement with the Assemblies of God.

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Church of God in Christ leaders about how the two groups might work together” (15).

1953 Aug 31	<b>Selina Kirby</b> , a “missionary among colored” in Illinois, writes a letter to Gayle Lewis that upon inquiring as to the possibility of the AG mothering a church among “some of our needy colored sections of Chicago,” she was told that the AG “voted it out some time ago as our Southern Whites still have nothing to do with them!” She remarks as to the “unchristian attitude” this portrays and reminds Lewis there is “no race discrimination with God.” She accuses the AG of being “worse than the world” in this matter and asks Lewis to have the people “pray about this and ask God to take this hatred out of their hearts.” She is baffled as to “how any Christian can feel this way, especially Pentecostal people!” She points out that Wheaton and Moody have now allowed black men and women, and that “God has blessed them in it” and that they had gone on to be fine ministers, “winning their own people to the Lord.”
1953 Sep 24	<b>Ralph Riggs</b> responds to Selina Kirby’s letter to Bro. Lewis: “You have placed before us a <u>very serious and important question</u> . If it is the Lord’s will for us to consider this matter in the near future, I assure you that we shall be happy to do so. I agree heartily with you that our colored brethren are dear to the heart of God and need the gospel as well as everybody else. The only matter which is in doubt is <u>how we can best discharge our responsibility</u> toward them. Will you please pray that the Lord will give us special wisdom and His divine grace in handling this important question.”
1955	<b>GP</b> records on the “Colored Question” are <u>expunged</u> from the record.
1956	Ruling that granting of a license to preach was a district function. Districts could license Blacks if they so chose. However, Blacks still could not be ordained by the General Council.
1957	<b>Robert Harrison</b> receives ministerial licensing with the AG.
1957 mid-yr	“Segregation Versus Integration” document is prepared by Grady L. Fannin, Chairman; Jesse Smith, Lowell Ashbrook, and W. R. Williamson and submitted to the <b>General Presbytery</b> . Discussed the complexity of the problem, affirmed AG neglect and inequities as well as means to address those. But also conveyed concerns that integration was <u>inadvisable</u> due to larger societal issues. The GP accepted the document’s recommendations.
1957	The <b>EP</b> prepared an “Integration Statement,” that “matters of procedure along these lines are <u>left to local determination</u> and are <u>not established by organizational action</u> .”
1957 Sep?	Evangelist <b>Robert N. Stewart</b> of Newburgh, NY, writes to Ralph Riggs asking, “Will you kindly let me know if you are <u>receiving colored ministers into your fellowship</u> ?” Robert was not interested in COGIC, he says, because he was saved in an AG Church and is a Bible College graduate.
1957 Sep 24	<b>Ralph Riggs</b> responds to Brother Stewart: “Greetings in the name of our Lord! In answer to your letter of recent date asking if we receive colored ministers into our fellowship, I can advise you that our districts are <u>left to operate on their own discretion</u> in this matter. Our friends of the <u>northern states do not find any difficulty here</u> , at least to have such brethren to serve as <u>licensed ministers</u> .” He recommends that Bro. Stewart make application to Rev. Joseph Flower of the NY District if interested.
1957 Oct 3	The <b>Home Missions Department</b> sends out a letter to several mainline denominations regarding the question of what their denomination is doing “among the negroes. We are especially interested in determining the organic relationship of the negro work to your denomination. Is it a <u>branch</u> or is it an <u>integral part</u> of your organization? What services and assistance do you offer to them? What are your plans for the future of this work?” (Summary of the survey findings comes out in May 1958.)
1957 Nov 12 EP	<b>EP</b> addresses the “question of the advisability of receiving congregations of colored people into the fellowship and the ordination of colored ministers.” The question was raised by way of a letter from Joseph Gerhart, Secretary of the Northern California-Nevada District. The EP votes to <u>refer the</u>

	<u>question to the GP</u> and to write to Gerhart that “a decision <u>must be deferred</u> for clarification by the General Presbytery.”
1958 Jan 9 EP	<b>EP</b> considers a plea from the Northern California-Nevada District to recognize a church “consisting of colored people.” “The motion was made that in view of the fact that <u>we have never been asked</u> to accept a colored congregation in the fellowship of the Assemblies of God that this question of acceptance <u>be referred</u> to the General Presbytery for a decision. The motion was seconded and passed.”
1958 Feb 9	Joseph Gerhart, Secretary of the Northern California District writes Riggs asking for a copy of the “General Presbytery report on the racial situation.” [i.e., The “Segregation and Integration” report].
1958 Feb 11	<b>Ralph Riggs</b> writes to Leonard Palmer, Supt. of the N. Cal-Nev. District regarding Gerhart’s request and points out the GP desire to keep the report confidential. However, he gives him permission to make sufficient copies for his own presbytery board. He notes, “Brother Flower feels that we should remember <u>in accepting people into our churches on the integration pattern we would probably discourage white people attending our meetings</u> . This would cause us to develop into a <u>colored work exclusively</u> . This is a possibility which the <u>General Presbyters pointed out in their report</u> .” He deems the matter “certainly worthy of further discussion” and looks forward to doing so in their September meeting.
1958 Apr 18	Charlotte Lewis of <b>Tuskegee Institute</b> writes Ralph Riggs asking the AG to participate in a survey regarding the “role of the church in desegregation.” She asks for official statements of church policy, inquires as to the extent of racial integration within the churches, and asks for information on any actions taken “to encourage or discourage desegregation in the community.”
1958 Apr 23	<b>J. Roswell Flower</b> quickly responds to Charlotte Lewis on behalf of Ralph Riggs, who is away. He says, “We appreciate your inquiry pertaining to the role of the church in desegregation, but we are afraid that we cannot give you very much information of any value to your study. The Assemblies of God is a vigorous missionary and evangelistic association which <u>has not concerned itself with social and racial problems</u> . <u>No actions</u> of any nature have been taken <u>to encourage or discourage desegregation</u> in any community or the country as a whole. There are a <u>few ordained ministers</u> of the colored race in the Assemblies of God and some of our churches, particularly in the northern states, do have <u>members</u> of the colored race. That is about the <u>extent of the church’s participation</u> in desegregation.”
1958 May 19	<b>R. L. Brandt</b> (National Home Missions Secretary) presents a summary of the survey sent to Mainline denominations regarding their work “among negroes” (sent out October 3, 1957).
1958 Sep 3-5	Leonard Palmer, Supt. of NCal-Nev. District “reported on a problem which he said had developed in his district regarding the receiving of a colored church into membership and of ordaining a colored person who had applied for ordination.” This had come before the <b>EP</b> but <u>they had requested the GP decide on it</u> . Much discussion followed. Wide difference of opinion. “Finally, in deference to certain extenuating circumstances, and in the absence of a unanimity of opinion regarding the matter” it was decided that consideration of the problem be <u>postponed</u> to see whether establishing a Colored Fellowship was advisable.
1958 Nov 22	<b>Gayle F. Lewis, Exec. Director of Home Missions</b> , writes to G. Raymond Carlson (then in Minneapolis) in response to Carlson’s October 29 inquiry relative to a <u>colored fellowship</u> . Apparently, Carlson had written Lewis previously about a certain Black “Brother in Minnesota” <u>interested in affiliating in some way with the AG</u> . Lewis says <u>the matter is a “pretty delicate one at the present time.”</u> Despite the fact that they seemed “almost at a <u>stalemate</u> ” for a time, Lewis expresses assurance the “ <u>God will help us</u> in this matter.” He mentions the provision for an appointment of a <u>committee</u> to study the problem but notes <u>no action on that as yet</u> . He seriously questions how far they will get on the proposed basis and notes he believes “ <u>our colored friends will</u>



	<p><u>desire a closer relationship.</u>” He expresses <u>support for the idea of a colored branch</u> and notes the past General Council proposals and approval for such. He notes in the past there were only two “colored ministers” at the time interested in the AG, both of whom refused to go along with the branch idea. After a more recent meeting involving a day’s discussion, the brethren had “agreed to the forming of a colored branch if that should be approved by the General Council.” Their work in such would be along the lines of other language groups within Home Missions. Lewis plans to present this matter to the Executives and asks Carlson to “hold steady for just a little bit.”</p> <p>Lewis notes that a colored branch “would be a <u>compromise</u> between what the brethren have in mind now which is simply <u>fellowship without organic relationship and complete integration</u>. I told the brethren in Northern California <u>if they were interested in helping their race, a branch would do the job</u> but if they were <u>just simply seeking membership in connection with integration with the white we were not interested</u>. I may be wrong in my thinking on this, but I fear <u>motive has a great deal to do with our approach to this subject</u> and <u>how it will be received in our movement</u> as a whole.” He concludes asking Carlson to pray that “God will help us to find the right solution to this delicate problem which confronts our entire Nation in this hour.”</p>
1958 Dec 10	Letter [from <b>Ralph Riggs?</b> – not noted] to Leonard Palmer regarding committee for the consideration of establishing a Colored Fellowship. Meeting is set to convene January 21 and 22, 1959. Refers to it as a “ <u>very delicate</u> as well as <u>important matter</u> ” and asks for prayer that God will provide wisdom and revelation.
1959 Feb 22	<b>Committee to Consider a Colored Fellowship</b> convenes at Central Bible Institute (CBI). History of proposals is reviewed, report is prepared with the <u>recommendations to establish a Colored Fellowship</u> under supervision of Home Missions to <u>promote evangelism, a basis of fellowship for ministers and churches, training</u> of ministers, establishing of <u>churches</u> , and to provide GC <u>resources</u> . Further recommendation includes the appointment of a <u>Credentials Committee</u> for the Negro Fellowship. <u>This report was tabled</u> .
1959 June?	<b>NJ District Council</b> passes a resolution “inviting Negroes to join the church, and, if they wish, to enter the ministry.” The district goes on record as the first AG Council to pass this type of resolution.
1959 Aug 20 EP	<b>EP</b> committee reports on Colored Fellowship. “The Presbytery was made conscious of the <u>delicate situation</u> now existing and the <u>need of great care</u> in the wording of the report.”
1959 Aug 24-25	<b>GP</b> considers “Report of the Committee to Consider a <u>Colored Fellowship</u> ,” which had been appointed to the committee in the September 1958 GP meeting. Report received “considerable discussion concerning the <u>advisability of forming such a fellowship</u> , and the possibility expressed we might become involved in the present agitation regarding racial problems prevalent in society at large.” It was resolved and “unanimously adopted” that the committee “ <u>lay the report on the table</u> .” The report and the matter itself were to receive “ <u>absolutely no publicity</u> ” and considered <u>confidential</u> for the GP alone.
1959?  1960?	<p>A note is added on to the end of a summary document of official actions taken with respect to the “Colored” question: “<u>In spite of the foregoing</u> [summary of actions] some of the <u>northern districts have ordained colored ministers for years</u>. They <u>have not made an issue out of it</u>, but have <u>quietly ordained</u> those who have applied and who have met basic requirements for ordination. This is particularly true in the <u>New York District</u> and, I understand, in the <u>Northwest</u>. So far <u>no problem has developed</u> with this procedure. There is really <u>nothing in the General Council constitution and bylaws prohibiting the ordination of Negro ministers</u>, and such applications have been <u>honored by the General Secretary’s office in the past</u>, when they have been duly processed and recommended by the District Credentials Committee.”</p> <p>NOTE: A handwritten note on the AG Archive summary document indicates the above quoted paragraph was probably added by <b>J. Roswell Flower</b>. But Howard Kenyon [“Black Ministers in the Assemblies of God,” (p. 20, n. 14)] attributes this same paragraph to <b>Thomas F. Zimmerman</b>. Kenyon says the paragraph came from a November 4, 1960, letter to Joseph Gerhart. However, Zimmerman’s letter to Gerhart in response to Gerhart’s November 2 letter appealing on behalf of</p>

	Harrison for ordination is dated November 9, 1960 (not November 4), and this paragraph does not exist in the November 9 letter. (See below for November 9 letter).
1960 Nov 2	<p>Joseph Gerhart writes Zimmerman (first an undated handwritten note probably from around the same time and then) a letter stating, “It is with much hesitation that I write you but time makes it necessary for us to have a decision in regard to one of our <u>young ministers who is making application for ordination</u>. You may recall that during the General Presbyters meeting in Springfield in 1958, Robert E. <u>Harrison</u>, a young colored man who has been licensed with this District for many years [three], was mentioned in the discussion concerning <u>ordination of colored applicants</u>. Brother Harrison is applying for ordination in this District at this time and there is no question whatsoever about his qualifications and ability except for the position taken by the General Presbytery. We need to hear from you as soon as possible as to what action we should take at this time.”</p> <p>Gerhart’s (earlier?) handwritten note says, “Thom: I am greatly distressed over this <u>ordination problem</u>. I have reason to believe that one of my brethren is responsible for Bob’s coming to us at this time—just prior to election time. My concern is not the election but the issue itself—which is <u>shall we start ordaining our good colored brethren</u>. I need an <i>official ruling</i> [his emphasis] on this matter as early as possible. I really regret having to burden you with this knowing of your condition but if you can help me please do. Love –Joe”</p>
1960 Nov 9	<b>Zimmerman’s</b> November 9 response to Gerhart’s appeal is: “I have given considerable thought to the matter referred to in your correspondence <u>relative to the ordination of the colored minister [Harrison]</u> . I have carefully reviewed the actions taken by the General Presbytery and, frankly, I feel <u>somewhat indefinite</u> as to what specific word to give you. I feel there is <u>wisdom in presenting this matter for the consideration of the Full Executive Presbytery</u> which will be convening here November 29 to December 1. I am sorry to <u>delay in giving you a definite reply</u> , but I feel in a <u>matter of this importance</u> we would do well to get the consensus of the full Board. You may expect to hear further regarding your request immediately following this meeting.”
1960 Dec 18	<b>Zimmerman’s</b> memo to Bartlett Peterson (Gen. Sec.) regarding a call he’d received from Gerhart asking that Harrison’s case be referred for full EP consideration in February. He notes Gerhart feels it is “quite a <u>controversial issue</u> ” that “would probably be best for all concerned if the matter would finally be referred to the Ministerial Relations Committee of our next General Presbyters session for guidance and decision.” Zimmerman says it will be <u>referred</u> to the next “full Executive Presbyters meeting” and asks Bartlett to hold off writing a letter of decision to Gerhart regarding the matter.
1960 Dec 19	<b>Bartlett Peterson’s</b> December 19 letter to Gerhart was not mailed. He states that the EP had adopted that the N. California-Nevada District be “informed that after studying the record on this subject, there is <u>no apparent firm decision on this matter</u> and therefore we rule that the <u>District should take whatever steps it may regard as proper</u> in connection with the application.” He goes on to state, however, that “The above action ... is <u>not intended to mean in any manner that this body is encouraging the ordination of a colored applicant</u> . I am sure, however, that you will recognize that the Executive Presbytery faces a problem inasmuch as the General Presbytery has <u>never been able to solve this matter</u> .”
1961 Aug 21-22	<b>GP</b> considers “Case Number Four” involving the “granting of ministerial credentials [i.e., ordination, as Harrison already was licensed at this point] to a certain Robert E. Harrison in the Northern California-Nevada District. It was reported that ‘It is the opinion of the committee that the <u>District Councils are at liberty to ordain any person they feel to be qualified</u> . Should the Executive Presbytery refuse to grant credentials, the District then has the right to appeal to the General Presbytery.’”
1961 Feb 24	<b>Bartlett Peterson</b> writes Gerhart that his correspondence “relative to the possibility of ordination for a candidate who is colored has been laid before the Executive Presbytery in today’s meeting. After consideration of the matter, the Executive Presbytery has adopted a motion to <u>refer the question to the Ministerial Relations Committee</u> for consideration in their next meeting.”

1961 Jun 30	<b>Bartlett Peterson</b> writes R. J. Carlson, Supt. of the NW District (due to his involvement with the ministerial relations committee). He explains the history of the application (that the EP, in light of decisions by the GP, had laid the matter before the ministerial relations committee). He rehearses Gerhart's letter to Zimmerman and adds, "Attention should be called to the fact that further correspondence from Brother Gerhart indicates that the <u>ordination of this colored brother would pose some real problems within the district.</u> " He closes by requesting for prayer that God would "grant guidance in this <u>very difficult problem.</u> "
1962	<b>Robert Harrison is ordained.</b>

When Robert Harrison stood before the credentialing committee of the Northern California District in 1951, then, the “policy” of not credentialing “Negroes” that the superintendent spoke of was actually the result of a complicated series of decisions made by a movement apparently double-minded on racial issues.<sup>12</sup> For example, though there was a willingness in 1943 to evangelize Blacks, there was an unwillingness to “tie the hands of the brethren” by a binding resolution. Though there was a willingness to establish a “Colored Branch” in 1945 and repeatedly throughout subsequent years, leaders showed little sign of following through. Though leaders willingly discussed racial issues on numerous occasions, they tended to postpone decisions and actions, defer to (and back and forth between) other ruling bodies or committees, and even (in 1955) expunge minutes from the official record. Though some expressed a willingness to have a “Colored Branch” or “Colored Fellowship” (“without organic relationship,” as Gayle Lewis put it), as a movement, the AG was not ready to commit to complete integration. Though some regions of the country showed readiness to license Blacks, the granting of full ordination remained only a story from the past and a distant hope for the future for people like Bob Harrison. Such doublemindedness paralyzed the AG—partially if not

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<sup>12</sup> Harrison’s issue in 1951 and the struggle regarding the credentialing of African Americans must be seen in the larger context of the AG struggle with racial issues in general, i.e., issues of evangelism among Blacks, receiving churches into fellowship, the nature of the AG’s relationship with COGIC, and the dilemma of having to choose between segregation (i.e., the “Colored Branch” option) and full integration. Treating the credentialing issue as separate and outside of this context would make for an artificial and unrealistic handling of the problem.

fully—preventing it from advancing beyond the attitudes and actions of the surrounding society on these issues.

### **“Quietly Ordaining”**

With the intensification of the civil rights struggle, however, it appears that pressure mounted on and within the AG to come to grips with the issue some may have considered resolved in 1939. Within the AG, hopeful examples of pro-activity in the context of a history of paralysis do exist. The efforts of district superintendent Leonard Palmer and secretary Joseph Gerhart in the Northern California-Nevada District<sup>13</sup> played an important role in Robert Harrison’s situation. Other examples of pro-activity include the New York District’s choice to “quietly ordain” Blacks, the role of Teen Challenge in breaking down the “color barrier at the grassroots level,”<sup>14</sup> and the 1959 New Jersey District Council Resolution “inviting Negroes to join the church, and, if they wish, to enter the ministry.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, clearly, full action on this issue was not impossible, only improbable, in such a climate.

Though top AG leaders often found themselves unable to resolve or act upon their many discussions regarding racial issues, it remains evident from GP and EP minutes and executive correspondence that official efforts to deal with racial concerns certainly intensified toward the end of the 1950s. This increased effort in itself indicates a growing realization that the situation

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<sup>13</sup> It appears from Bartlett Peterson’s June 30, 1961, letter (see table above), that even though Gerhart had repeatedly appealed to Zimmerman on behalf of Harrison, that he, too, felt torn about the issue. Peterson interprets some of Gerhart’s correspondence as indicating that “the ordination of this colored brother would pose some real problems within the district.” It is unlikely that Gerhart personally would have any problem with it because he was supportive of Harrison. However, he realized that not all those within his district would agree.

<sup>14</sup> Kenyon, “Black Ministers in the Assemblies of God,” 11. David Wilkerson began Teen Challenge in 1958 and received “immediate fame for his work among Spanish, black, and Anglo youth.” Assistant general superintendent Charles W. H. Scott noted in 1970 that Teen Challenge had played a “major role” in “reaching into the black community.”

<sup>15</sup> “Church Unit Invites Negroes to Join,” Atlantic City, NJ Newspaper (no name or page number given on clipping at FPHC), 1959.

for Blacks with respect to the AG needed to change somehow, someday, and in a not-too-distant future.<sup>16</sup>

A handful of outside pressures existed as well. No small motivator was the May 17, 1954, Supreme Court ruling that declared racial segregation in the public schools as unconstitutional. Somehow, the AG would need to begin to resolve its decades-long racial dilemmas given the growing national trends. If the highest court in the country had ruled such, certainly the AG faced the necessity of reexamining its alignment with American law and society.

Tuskegee Institute's interest in the role of the Assemblies of God in desegregation four years later—and the immediate AG executive reply—is telling. As well, Robert Stewart's inquiry in 1957 as to the AG policy on "receiving colored ministers"<sup>17</sup> also provides evidence that (at least desire for) change was in the wind. Moreover, perhaps the words of Selina Kirby regarding the AG's unchristian attitude, her shock that "especially Pentecostal people" could act this way, her forthrightness regarding the AG's race discrimination, her accusation that the fellowship was "worse than the world" because of hatred in people's hearts, etc., echoed in the consciences of AG leadership at the time. Clearly from his own words, Ralph Riggs struggled

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<sup>16</sup> Riggs' comment, "It is certainly high time in American living and in our church experience that we come closer together" indicates both his personal commitment to better racial relations as well as his sensitivity to change. However, as Robeck points out, Riggs walked a careful line between those against and those in favor of full integration. To those for integration, he could point to actual attempts to cooperate with COGIC. For those against, he could "safely say that he had intentions which merely recognized a sister organization with a fine ministry in the black community. In this way, Riggs could avoid the pressure to integrate on the one hand the pressure to segregate on the other. In either case he would not extend the Assemblies of God beyond the limits common to American law and society. But Riggs' letter must also be placed within the context of a white dominated and racist society. Conformity to American law and society would have left Riggs blind to his own racial presuppositions" (Robeck, "The Past: Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division in American Pentecostalism," 16).

<sup>17</sup> To which Ralph Riggs responded in his October 23, 1957, letter, "I can advise you that our districts are *left to operate on their own discretion* in this matter. Our friends of the northern states do not find any difficulty here, at least to have such brethren to serve as *licensed ministers*" (emphasis mine).

with how the AG could best discharge its responsibility toward Blacks.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Kirby's comments regarding the bold steps Wheaton and Moody had taken came to their remembrance and provided some impetus to look again at the problem in the latter part of the decade.

### **Querying the Mainline**

Though apparently double-minded and partially paralyzed, the AG genuinely struggled with respect to racial issues, and—though not quickly enough for folks like Robert Harrison—did increasingly make strides in the right direction. One of the most significant efforts made by AG leadership was their querying of several mainline denominations to determine the nature of the work these organizations were carrying out among “the negroes.” An October 3, 1957, letter sent out by Victor Trimmer, National Secretary of the Home Missions Department of the Assemblies of God, notes that the AG was keenly interested in “determining the organic relationship of the negro work”<sup>19</sup> to the respective denominations. Having struggled with the question of a “Colored Branch” now for a dozen years, the AG wanted to know whether the work among Blacks by these denominations was characterized as a “branch,” or as an “integral part” of the organization.

Responses arrived from the Southern Baptists, National Baptists (the nation's oldest and largest African American denomination), American Baptists, Methodists, Lutheran Synod, United Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA) and Evangelical United Brethren Church. By May 19, 1958 R. L. Brandt, the new National Home Missions Secretary, presented a nine-page summary of “Negro Work” among these denominations to

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<sup>18</sup> Reared in Meridian, Mississippi in the early twentieth century, yet having spent six years as a missionary to Blacks in South Africa, no doubt Riggs had mixed impulses.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Trimmer (National Home Missions Secretary), Letter to Mainline and Evangelical Denominations (Re: “determining the organic relationship of the negro work to your denomination”), FPHC.org, October 3, 1957.

Gayle Lewis, then Assistant General Superintendent.<sup>20</sup> Brandt's bottom line deduction from the survey was that "by far the majority of denominations contacted have begun, or have had in effect for some years, a policy of de-segregation."<sup>21</sup> Areas summarized included membership, ministerial credentialing, and education. The SBC report includes "areas for advance."

As for membership, Brandt noted, "In most instances membership is granted on an equal basis to negroes and whites."<sup>22</sup> The American Baptists reported having 400 integrated congregations. They had also adopted a resolution in 1957 that membership was open to all regardless of race. The Methodists had some churches that were integrated. The United Lutheran churches had established congregations that were "wholly or almost wholly negro, as well as others that are bi-racial or multi-racial."<sup>23</sup> The PCUSA was represented as working toward a "non-segregated church and a non-segregated society."<sup>24</sup> The PCUSA was also making every effort to "move in the direction of a completely non-segregated pattern in work and worship."<sup>25</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran United Brethren church reported having a number of churches that had "negro members, and the Organization has set forth the idea that the local church should seek to minister to all unchurched people in its community regardless [sic] of color or other conditions."<sup>26</sup>

Regarding integrated ministry, the American Baptists made a formal statement that "Each church shall choose its minister on the basis of character and ability without regard to national

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<sup>20</sup> R. L. Brandt, "Survey and Summary of Work Among the Negroes," FPHC, May 19, 1958, 1-9.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

background.”<sup>27</sup> The Methodists were reported as having “at least two negro ministers of white congregations.”<sup>28</sup>

This pattern of inclusiveness and openness without respect to race was also evident in the responses of the mainline denominations with respect to education. The Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America had made a formal resolution dated June 8-10, 1954, that its institutions of higher education were “intended for all students without racial consideration.”<sup>29</sup> The PCUSA noted that all its colleges had “moved into a racially inclusive policy and practice.”<sup>30</sup>

Only the Southern Baptist picture was different. Brandt notes that the Southern Baptist policy regarding “their negro work” was “somewhat individualistic.” The Baptists, he points out, ... treat it much the same as another mission field, not integrating negroes with whites but providing for ministry among the negroes. Thus there apparently are many negro Southern Baptist churches, but I find no hint that the Southern Baptists are seeking to integrate negroes and whites. They do, however, provide some white leadership for negroes especially along educational lines.<sup>31</sup>

Included in the detailed report on the Southern Baptist position was a quote from Guy Bellamy, Secretary of the Department of Work with Negroes, who stated, “We have no organic

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2. The National Baptist Churches called for “real harmony in God’s kingdom here on earth,” noting that in recent years just playing “one race” had become “increasingly impossible.” They called for Whites and Blacks to work side by side, “Understanding each other. Sharing with each other. Cooperating together ... Extending the Kingdom of God to all Nations, all kindreds and tongues.” This is not surprising, since this denomination was Black.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1, 5. “Resolution Concerning Schools of Higher Education.” Included as the basis for this resolution were such points as the Lutheran Synodical Conference’s realization of humanity’s inhumanity to other humans, the Supreme Court 1954 ruling that racial segregation was unconstitutional, declarations of the Presbyterian Church and SBC that no distinction should be made “solely on the basis of race” in its program of higher education, and the Lutherans’ view that exclusion based on race was not “in keeping with both Christian principle and practice.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



relationship, as they have their own churches, district associations, state and National Conventions. Our work with them is a cooperative work.”<sup>32</sup> In intention and outcome, however, a huge difference exists between “ministry *among*” Blacks and “cooperative work” *with* them.

The SBC report lists five phases of their work (teacher-missionaries in Negro colleges, Negro Centers, Negro Institutes, Scholarships for Christian workers, and Summer Student Workers). One portion of their “areas for advance” section of the report calls for a Negro Director of Evangelism who would serve “under the direction of the Department of Evangelism of the Home Missions Board.”<sup>33</sup> Another portion calls for “Widespread cooperation” between “each church, pastor, and members of the convention” such that they would “seek opportunities for helpfulness and sharing of ideas with Negro churches, pastors and people everywhere, to the end that the Gospel might more fully be exemplified by both groups and that the Kingdom be advanced among us all.”<sup>34</sup> The SBC saw the “work among Negroes” as soon becoming a “vital part of the missions work of every district association and every Baptist church in the state” if its constituents put it on the “same level” as other mission efforts.

An interesting addendum at the end of the SBC report points out the difference between Evangelical and mainline views on racial issues during this period. Whereas the mainline churches at this time seem to have been moving more in the direction of integration, the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2. One can easily deduce from Bellamy’s language that this Secretary for the Department of Work With Negroes was himself not a Negro. Bellamy provided a detailed listing of Negro workers in the department (60), of students enrolled in classes (52,196), preachers in regular classes (8,140), institutes conducted (122), enrollment of mostly ministers (7,722), extension classes held (656), enrollment—many preachers (13,976), professions of faith (1,815), and additions to churches (2,074). He adds, “We are making much progress and moving forward with our work with negroes over our whole Southern Baptist Convention. Six states have the *right, white,* man as Director, or Secretary, of the Department of Work with Negroes, in cooperation with the Home Mission Board” (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Evangelical churches remained seemingly locked in a paternalistic, White-controlled, outreach-oriented, “non-organic” (i.e., segregated) relationship.

According to some of the Negro leaders, their being members of a minority race has made it necessary, through the years, to follow white leadership. A white man that loves them and that they believe in, can lead them *farther and much faster than one of their own race*. There are some places where I would recommend Negro leaders”<sup>35</sup> (emphasis mine).

Though no official AG response to the mainline survey currently exists in the AG archival material on racial issues, the impact of such a survey should not be minimized. That the AG took the time and, in a sense, humbled itself to reach outside the comfort zone of its own four walls to make the survey in the first place serves as an indication of the developing importance of the issue. How much the mainline attitudes and trends affected subsequent AG action remains unclear. There is no formal indication that the AG was moved by the actions of any of these denominations, as was the case with the Lutheran Synodical Conference.<sup>36</sup> One can only speculate as to the weight the opinions of other denominations had on this issue, especially in light of continued referrals and deferrals regarding the credentialing issue among and between executive ruling bodies.

### **Billy Graham, Catalyst**

If the survey results of the mainline churches on racial issues had questionable impact on propelling the AG to a new *modus operandi* for racial issues (particularly ordination of Blacks), the actions of one man certainly appear to have done the job. As Kenyon puts it, “Whatever happened to that request [Gerhart’s 1957 request for Bob Harrison’s ordination], an event outside the Assemblies of God would soon override all the General Presbytery discussions and actions of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> The declarations of the Presbyterian Church and SBC that no distinction should be made “solely on the basis of race” were influential in shaping the Lutheran position to the point of a formal resolution.

the previous 2 decades.”<sup>37</sup> In 1962, Billy Graham invited Bob Harrison to join his evangelistic team. In attendance as guests on the platform at one of the 1962 Billy Graham crusades not long after Bob came on board were AG General Superintendent Thomas Zimmerman and the president of Bethany Bible College. Harrison recounts in his book that when they saw him there, “They turned handsprings. They shook hands, they hugged me, they slapped me on the back. ‘We’re so proud to have our boy on the Billy Graham team,’ they chorused.”<sup>38</sup> Two days later, Zimmerman invited Bob to the AG national office at AG expense. Harrison flew down, was introduced to denominational officials, received a grand tour of the facilities, then met with the head of the missions department. “You can write your own ticket, Bob, if you’ll come and minister under our banner,” Zimmerman said.<sup>39</sup> The AG promised Bob a large expense account to travel to places like Africa, the Caribbean, the Fiji Islands, and elsewhere. (Bob noted to himself that these were all places with a large Black population.) Though it all sounded great to Bob, he asked how it could be possible, though, when he was not ordained with the AG. The home missions head “inferred that this might be arranged if I would just come with the organization.”<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, choosing not to “lay sixty years of sin of a whole denomination”<sup>41</sup> on the backs of the current AG leadership, Bob accepted and not only obtained his ordination in 1962 and subsequent ministry opportunities within the AG, but received permission concurrently to retain his ministry involvement with the Billy Graham team. Bob recounts his ordination as an

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<sup>37</sup> Kenyon, “Black Ministers in the Assemblies of God,” 11.

<sup>38</sup> Harrison, *When God Was Black*, 92.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

emotional moment for him. “The very ones...” [who had previously denied him a ministerial license] his mother pointed out, were now the ones congratulating him. Bob chose not to look at the past, though; instead, he looked to the future and saw a “whole new day dawning.”<sup>42</sup> He felt he was just the first of many black AG ministers to come, and that this change within the AG would also challenge other “denominations with a Jim Crow clergy”<sup>43</sup> to change.

Perhaps even without realizing it, in opening the doors of his own ministry to Blacks, Billy Graham had served as a catalyst to propel the Assemblies of God out of their decades-long paralysis on the ordination question. As Kenyon points out, though Harrison’s ordination was not the first in the AG, it was clearly the most visible. In a “very definite sense,” says Kenyon, Bob Harrison broke the “color line” within the Assemblies; his “high visibility ordination and ministry effectively ended once and for all the ongoing ambiguities of the General Council on the matter of inclusion of American blacks.”<sup>44</sup> The “blessing” that Wheaton and Moody had experienced for opening their door to Blacks, according to Selina Kirby’s 1953 letter, now waited just around the corner for the AG. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the AG made great strides to reach and accept the Blacks they had previously shunned. They opened Black churches, gave scholarships to qualified Black students, included Black history in their educational material, and met with Harrison and other Black leaders in order to work together to find ways to “come to grips with the challenge of the black community.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kenyon, “Black Ministers in the Assemblies of God,” 11.

<sup>45</sup> Harrison, *When God Was Black*, 95.

Though Bob already had solid evidence of a powerful preaching, music, evangelistic, pastoral, and missionary ministry, with his ordination breakthrough, his contribution to the AG would increase exponentially. Beginning in 1964, numerous *Pentecostal Evangel* articles about and by Harrison describe that “whole new day” of which Harrison spoke. He conducted revivals across the United States and around the world; preached at the General Council in Long Beach, California (1967); corresponded and met repeatedly with Zimmerman and other AG officials<sup>46</sup> as to how best reach America’s Blacks; helped prepare Black-friendly guidelines for AG publications (1970); was named Consultant on Inner City Evangelism (1972)—aligning his efforts with Foreign Missions, Home Missions, and AG educational endeavors; pioneered a Black church in Oakland’s inner city (1987); was appointed as National Representative of Black Ministries (1990); and played a significant role in the formation of the National Black Caucus (1993)<sup>47</sup> and the National Black Fellowship (1998). As well, Harrison continued to write articles

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<sup>46</sup> The *Pentecostal Evangel* ran articles about some of these meetings, in 1969, 1970, 1981, and 1983. Records of other such meetings (such as one in 1972 to describe Harrison’s ministry and relationship with headquarters and 1980, effectively to reach America’s Blacks) are available in the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center. An AG News release (November 1972) describes Harrison’s service as a consultant for and participant in inner city evangelism and in overseas crusades for the AG. Another release (November 1973) announces his involvement, along with other Black AG pastors, in the cause of strengthening AG inner city ministries.

Proceedings of the Home Missions Consultative Committee (June 11-12, 1968) describe the need, current efforts, and future plans to “get into the Negro community.” The Committee’s subsequent report to the EP proposes a conference “involving negro ministers for the purpose of counsel and the charting of a course of ministry among the black people of our cities,” the development of a scholarship program for “Negro ministerial students” at AG schools, revision of departmental publications to make AG literature “more acceptable by including representatives of other racial groups besides Caucasian,” and the effort to “establish rapport with independent Negro congregations.” The report encourages district leadership to “make discreet contacts with Negro churches who might desire Assemblies of God fellowship and recognition.” The issues raised in the 1968 proceedings are offered as recommendations in the 1969 meeting of the Home Missions Committee. Upon the heels of these Home Missions meetings, the first “Conference on Ways and Means of Reaching the Black Community” (December 15, 1969) was held. This meeting with Zimmerman and top AG leaders, initiated at the invitation of the EP, was attended by “Seven Pentecostal Negro brethren and one lady,” whose names are listed in the report.

<sup>47</sup> “National Black Caucus Holds Annual Meeting in Springfield,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, February 11, 1996, 23-24. This Caucus serves as a think tank, rather than an official body that would pass resolutions. The stated goal of the group included dealing with “issues of our nation and inner cities regardless of ethnic group. Our black ministers want to be equal partners in the gospel mandate to reach all peoples” (23). The group also worked on plans for cooperation between the AG and COGIC, as well as recruitment of Black professors and students for AG

motivating AG leadership and constituency to reach America's cities (1988), reclaim Black America (1991), minister to her poor and oppressed (1993), and overcome prejudice (1998).

Bob Harrison also came full circle regarding Bethany College. In 1996 he received the Founders Day Award, and in 2002, at the age of seventy-three, he returned to Bethany College for a ceremony dedicating a remodeled student union in his honor, as the first African American to graduate from the college. What a telling image to describe the impact Bob had upon the AG—a remodeled building for future generations. Though in 1951 Bob was the right man at the wrong time, he worked toward overcoming his hurt by focusing on ministry within God's Kingdom at large and eventually became for the right man at the right time, helping the AG move from a place of “tabling” proposals and resolutions to participating with African Americans as partners *at* the table.

Not long after changing its position on credentialing of African Americans, the AG passed a resolution on civil rights (1965)<sup>48</sup> and also began more fully to address the question of social concern and evangelistic strategy with its “Statement of The General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God Regarding Social Concern” (1968). Additional related resolutions were passed regarding racism and the use of Black ministries, in 1989<sup>49</sup> and 1995,<sup>50</sup> respectively.

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colleges, the use of Black leaders at District and General Council functions, and a continued focus on racial reconciliation.

<sup>48</sup> “Civil Rights Resolution.” *General Council Minutes*. Des Moines, IA, August 25-30, 1965, 60-61. <https://archives.ifphc.org/DigitalPublications/USA/Assemblies%20of%20God%20USA/Minutes%20General%20Council/Unregistered/1965/FPHC/1965.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Resolution #20 Presented at the August 1989 General Council of the Assemblies of God: “Racism,” *AG General Council Minutes* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 117. See also 1989 General Council of the AG “Resolution 20, Racism,” February 15, 2010, <https://news.ag.org/en/News/Resolution-on-Racism>.

<sup>50</sup> Resolution #25 Presented at the August 12, 1995, General Council of the Assemblies of God: “Use of Black Ministries,” *AG General Council Minutes* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1995). To read the story of how one Black AG minister, Wanda Carter, played a role in amending this 1995 resolution from the “issue” of racism to the “sin” of racism, see John W. Kennedy, “Still Bugged by Racism,” *AG News*, January 18, 2016,

Though statements are important, follow-through in the form of real action was not always forthcoming. As Gary McGee notes,

At the same time the [1968] Council met, however, America's major cities were seething with racial discontent ... Yet no agency within the denomination was added to work toward those ends [the 1965 Civil Rights Resolution]. White Pentecostals rarely became involved in any prophetic witness against the injustices of the prevailing culture ... Twenty-five years would pass before white and black Pentecostals themselves would begin the painful process of repentance and reconciliation.<sup>51</sup>

Bob Harrison's decade-long ordeal was the culmination in one sense of a sad and shameful chapter of Pentecostal history.<sup>52</sup> In another sense, however, it was just the beginning. Heartening indeed is the trail of effort on the part of the AG since the early 1960s. However, the prejudice and discrimination that took decades—centuries even—to build within American society would not come down in days, weeks, months, or even a few years.

### **Conclusion: Memphis and Beyond**

The road to racial reconciliation, unity, and cooperation in Kingdom business remains a long, hard journey.<sup>53</sup> Ever since the amazing days of racial reconciliation in 1994 known now as

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<https://news.ag.org/en/News/Still-Bugged-by-Racism>; see also John W. Kennedy, "Racism Resolution Revisited," AG News, June 26, 2020, <https://news.ag.org/en/News/Racism-Resolution-Revisited>.

<sup>51</sup> Gary McGee, *People of the Spirit* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2004), 349.

<sup>52</sup> Regarding the debate over the AG-COGIC "split," Anthea Butler recounts the view that the White Pentecostal bodies were "uncomfortable with the relationship to the Negro Church of God in Christ, and wished to issue their own credentials separately." [Anthea Butler, "Walls of Division: Racism's Role in Pentecostal History," Presented at the 24th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, November 1994. See also "Affirming Diversity" Issue, Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College, 10. (Quoting Menzies, *Anointed to Serve*, 91)].

Grant Wacker presents two "readings" of the problem—that of Menzies, above—and another, that "the whites who later organized the Assemblies of God shared minor business arrangements with COGIC but little else" [Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 227]. He sees a "more complex pattern" of initial "unselfconscious mixing," followed by whites pulling away when they "stopped to think about what was happening," blacks then following suit, and then the failure of pentecostal culture "to provide a sustained theology of racial reconciliation for whites and blacks alike" (Ibid.).

<sup>53</sup> See Darrin Rodgers, "The Assemblies of God and the Long Journey toward Racial Reconciliation," *Assemblies of God Heritage* (2008): 50-61.

the “Memphis Miracle,”<sup>54</sup> many continue to ask, “What now?” Some, who perhaps still experience the same sting of rejection, exclusion, or lack of opportunity that Bob Harrison felt in 1951, remain skeptical. Others, working long and hard on the long path of reconciliation, call loudly to move beyond “feel good” meetings and seem more hopeful in the face of continuing signs of progress.<sup>55</sup>

Whether one chooses to be optimistic or pessimistic is often determined by where one stands in the struggle. Those who stand on the sidelines often complain the loudest at lack of progress. Those in the trenches making real efforts know the work is hard but the rewards worthwhile. And what holds true for racial reconciliation also applies to other struggles, such as the ones many women feel concerning lack of leadership opportunities within the Assemblies of God. In many ways, the story of women’s struggles resembles that of Black Pentecostals: strong participation in the early years of the movement, then a pulling back from being regarded as full partners in the work (perhaps due to the influence of the NAE<sup>56</sup>), and then some measure of redress within recent years in the attempt to make real changes within the movement.

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<sup>54</sup> John Maempa, “Interracial Conference Unites Major Pentecostal Denominations,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, December 11, 1994, 24, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, “Pentecostals: Youth are Key in Moving Past ‘Feel Good’ Reconciliation,” *Christianity Today*, November 11, 1996, 87. (Also at *Christianity Today*, “Pentecostals: Youth Leaders Launch Racial Reconciliation Network,” accessed February 9, 2006, <http://ctlibrary.com/ct/1996/november11/6td087.html>.)

For examples, see the efforts of the AG National Black Fellowship founded in 1998 (nbfaq.org), see the AG’s 1999 “Spiritual Life Report” calling for the repair of past racial barriers; the 2000 story of the AG Cornerstone Church, the “most racially diverse church in our city,” revitalizing downtown Fresno; the 2002/2003 stories of First Christian AG in Cincinnati’s efforts at racial reconciliation in their city; the 2004 joint AG-COGIC project of the School of Urban Missions, and the 2005 Intercultural Ministries report presented at the AG General Council. *Note: While this chapter was originally written in 2006 with slight revisions done in 2024, unfortunately it remains outside the scope of this present version to include all of the good work done since that time.*

<sup>56</sup> National Association of Evangelicals.



What remains, however, is to learn from the past in order to avoid similar mistakes in the present, and to continue to set out specific strategies for the future.<sup>57</sup> AG leadership and constituency must fight the paralysis that often comes from valuing societal norms over Scripture, and must continue to commit to real action instead of making empty resolutions, deferring to others to take care of business, or postponing decisions indefinitely. May the AG of the future preempt being embarrassed (by people the likes of Billy Graham) into action on issues it knows are biblically right.

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<sup>57</sup> See Vinson Synan, "The Future: A Strategy for Reconciliation" (Presented at the October 1994 "Memphis Miracle" Meeting), Pentecostal-Charismatic Theological Inquiry International, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal Charismatic Research*; accessed March 2, 2006, <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj14/synan.html>, 3.

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Note: For further information and direct links to many sources above marked FPHC, see the Consortium of Pentecostal Archives, of which the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center (Assemblies of God, Springfield, MO, USA) is a member. The Consortium was established after the writing of this original paper.

<https://pentecostalarchives.org/>