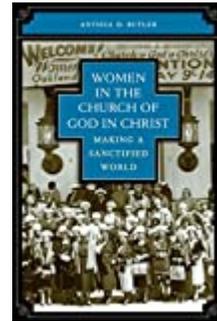


Anthea D. Butler. *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xvi + 207 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3117-5; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5808-0.



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Shifting Sanctification

We have all heard the saying “behind every great man is a great woman,” but within the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in the early twentieth century, the great women did more than just stand behind the men. They carved out leadership positions alongside the men, often surpassing the “brothers” in education, prominence, and spiritual and temporal authority. In doing the “women’s work” under the separate structure of the “Women’s Department,” female leaders created a powerful space for themselves. Anthea Butler’s book, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*, expertly presents the tales of these leaders between 1911 and 1964.

These narratives are pieced together from information gathered digging through many “musty closets and bedrooms,” where much of the denomination’s historical documentation remains, waiting to be discovered by scholars or thrown out by careless relatives. Butler rescues denominational pamphlets and books, newspaper articles, meeting minutes, tape recordings, photos, and other textual relics which prove invaluable in illuminating the role of women in COGIC. She supplements this data with interviews of elderly church members who

were often able to thicken the descriptions of various historical events. The resultant narrative highlights the ways in which COGIC women strategically used their beliefs and their role as “mothers” to empower themselves within the denomination, and eventually outside of it.

Key to Butler’s understanding of COGIC women is an “emphasis on how belief—in this case, belief in sanctification—acted as the impetus for what church mothers actually accomplished” (p. 4). This approach takes issue with other treatments that have suggested that practices like sanctification led to a disengaged and otherworldly stance on social issues. Quite the opposite happened with the second generation of COGIC leadership, among whom Butler sees the focus on sanctification leading to social engagement on issues like education, politics, and civic interaction. Here Butler hopes to push beyond an earlier analysis of sanctified women offered by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes by suggesting that, through their religious beliefs and world view, “it was COGIC women themselves who shaped the denomination’s engagement with the community â through their alliances outside the denomination” (p. 119).

The fray over women's ordination does not play a significant part in the COGIC described here. Although some unnamed women at the peripheries of the denomination sought greater authority through ordination, this was never an issue for the women at the pinnacle of leadership according to Butler. Women like Elizabeth "Lizzie" Robinson, the first general overseer or supervisor of the "women's work," found an avenue to increased status through "teaching" alongside men who were "preaching." Butler acknowledges the tension this relationship caused, but ultimately suggests that women frequently had a heavy hand in the spiritual and temporal direction of the church, through their personal influence and through providing subtle direction for male leaders.

Over time, the use of sanctification and the ideal of a COGIC woman shifted. Early in the development of the denomination Robinson's leadership and direction set forth an ideal of sanctification which was directed inward. This produced strong female leaders who were empowered within the fictive family relationships of the church as "mothers." Such women chose the plain style of dress, abhorred heavy make-up, and wore their hair unprocessed—intentionally setting themselves apart within a society with very different fashion standards. Personal presentation was crucial, because "COGIC women were embracing an African cosmology in which there is no difference between the body, its appearance, and the self" (p. 84). Purity in lifestyle and close adherence to the denomination's social and spiritual mores could open doorways to power within the "women's work," where leaders from any social class could run educational classes, teach (as subtly opposed to preach) on street corners, and even "dig out" new congregations. Especially admirable is Butler's recovery of the formative influence of Joanna P. Moore on Robinson's life and thought.

Even during Robinson's lifetime, however, younger leaders were adroitly shifting the type of social engagement called for by ideals of sanctification, as well as the image of female COGIC leaders. Women like Lillian Brooks Coffey, who succeeded Robinson as general supervisor of the Women's Department, would look outside the denomination's boundaries both for support and for a new target of sanctification. It was no longer sufficient to limit sanctification to the church: the world needed sanctification and COGIC women turned outward to provide it. Engaging the broader society meant approaching it on different terms, however. According to Butler, this increasingly external relationship resulted new visions of ideal womanhood. Gone were the plain dresses

of Robinson's day: the new COGIC woman wore fashionable suits and embraced material items like furs, fancy cars, and ritzy homes. While COGIC had always drawn a wide range of people, rural to urban, lower class to elite, there was a perceptible shift towards desiring middle- and upper-class status among the second generation of female leaders. Butler is careful to maintain that this shift was related to the ability to better serve religiously, not simply or primarily to gain respectability.

Through the narrative, founder and denominational leader Charles H. Mason plays an influential role. Few other men are a prominent part of the development Butler traces. While resistance from some male leaders is suggested throughout, it is Mason's overriding support for the "women's work" that sets the tone for the account. Also quietly in the background are the women of COGIC who are not church mothers or leaders in another capacity. Their stories remain beyond the scope of this book. Rather we see women's experiences through the representative figures in leadership positions. Butler's treatment of female leadership wraps up with the death of the last female leaders who worked closely alongside Mason, although an epilogue gives the reader a sense of what the future held for the group.

This future certainly seems to be a disappointment to Butler, who sees the new trajectories of COGIC's women's work as leading to an almost powerless status, wherein women are but a flourish on the arm of their husbands. Beginning in the 1970s the denomination's female leadership saw to the "restructuring of the sanctified life" moving from civic concerns to individual prestige and power" (p. 163). The turn toward personal concerns of sanctification is linked to American preoccupation with individuality and briefly tied to ministries such as that of T. D. Jakes. This fascinating link between concern with material prosperity reaches as far back as the second generation of female leaders within COGIC and could be fruitfully pursued in future studies.

In the end, what Butler offers is a richer picture of female leadership within a sanctified denomination that is often depicted as otherworldly. Readers gain insights on not only the denominational history of COGIC, but also the subtle ways in which a group of African American evangelical women carved out empowering roles for themselves under otherwise unfavorable social conditions. Rich in scholarly detail, yet accessible to a wide audience, Butler's book refines and furthers not one, but many pertinent discussions surrounding the various groups in this admirable study.

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