The Legacy of Bishop James O. Patterson, Sr.

By Harold Bennett

J. O. Patterson, Sr.’s influence on the Church of God in Christ was exceeded only by that of its founder, Charles H. Mason. “Partially because of Patterson’s leadership,” according to historian Ithiel Clemmons, the Church of God in Christ “grew into national and international prominence as a leading Christian denomination.”

James Oglethorpe Patterson, Sr., was born July 21, 1912, in Derma, Mississippi. He had four sisters, Argie, Alice, Retha, and Lillian, and one brother, William. He was educated in the public school system in Memphis, Tennessee, and received further training in religious studies at the Howe School of Religion, which later became a part of LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1934, he married Deborah Indiana Mason, the fifth child born to Lelia Washington Mason and Bishop Charles H. Mason, founder of the COGIC. Deborah M. Patterson died in 1985, and in 1989, Bishop Patterson married Mary Peak Patterson.

J. O. Patterson acknowledged his call to preach in 1932 and was ordained an Elder in the COGIC in 1935 by Bishop A. B. McEwen, Sr. Patterson pastored congregations in Gates, Brownsville, and Memphis, Tennessee, and he served a congregation in East Orange, New Jersey. In 1941, he became pastor of Woodlawn Church of God in Christ (now known as Pentecostal Temple Institutional Church of God in Christ), in Memphis, Tennessee. During his 48-year tenure, the church grew in membership from fewer than twenty to more than three thousand. During this time, Patterson was also owner of the successful J. O. Patterson Funeral Home and was heavily involved in community activities. Church leaders noticed Patterson’s spiritual leadership, business acumen, and ability to communicate.

In 1955, Bishop C. H. Mason elevated Patterson to the office of Bishop of the Second Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of Tennessee. When Mason created the Executive Committee to help carry out his administrative and executive duties, Patterson was appointed to serve on the committee’s secretariat. Following Mason’s death in 1961, the committee was renamed Executive Board and Patterson served on this board as Member-secretary. He also served as the COGIC General Secretary and oversaw the operations of the COGIC Publishing House. Patterson became the Presiding Bishop in 1968. He also served as Prelate of the Headquarters Jurisdiction in Memphis, Tennessee, from 1969 to 1981.

Bishop J. O. Patterson, Sr., a visionary leader, made lasting contributions to the life of the COGIC. Patterson chose Elder Roy L. H. Winbush, a young preacher with considerable administrative skills from Louisiana, to advance his program. This move proved very fruitful. The Pattersonian program impacted the COGIC in the following ways: 1) molding of a denominational identity; 2) development of a denominationally-owned publishing house; 3) institutionalization of educational initiatives; and 4) establishing relationships with other churches.

Patterson transformed a large configuration of sanctified churches into a single, somewhat cohesive religious body. This shift was made possible through the publication of a new Official Manual (1973), which listed in one place the Articles of Religion, the new constitution, and guidelines for various types of worship services. Patterson also encouraged the adoption of common vestments and other liturgical practices. These helped create a national identity by helping persons understand what it meant to be
COGIC.

Patterson consolidated COGIC publishing efforts into a single denominationally-owned COGIC Publishing House. Patterson also established the COGIC Bookstore, a natural outgrowth of the COGIC Publishing House.

Patterson demonstrated a commitment to the life of the mind. He often said: “Get your learning, but don’t lose your burning.” He institutionalized support for theological education. Patterson spent considerable time and effort developing the C. H. Mason System of Bible Colleges and the Presiding Bishop’s Dinner (now called COGIC Charities). It is noteworthy that the Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary, which opened in 1970 at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, was a priority in Patterson’s early administration.

Patterson integrated the COGIC into the broader Christian community. He had an appreciation for the value of Pentecostalism and sought to display its merits to other religious denominations. Patterson made the COGIC a recognized feature on the African-American religious landscape. Patterson established the World Fellowship of Black Pentecostal Churches, and he positioned the COGIC to play roles in the Black Church Summit of the World Council of Churches and the Congress of National Black Churches.

Bishop J. O. Patterson, Sr. died on December 29, 1989, in Memphis, Tennessee.4

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3Clemmons, 125-130.