



# East Texas Historical Journal

A Publication of the East Texas Historical Association

Volume 44 Issue 1

Article 11

3-2006

## Constructing Good Success: The Church of God in Christ and Social Uplift in East Texas, 1910-1935

Karen Kossie-Chernyshev

The East Texas Historical Journal is a publication of the East Texas Historical Association (ETHA). The ETHA is a membership organization founded in 1962 to support research into the unique histories of East Texas and to educate and engage others in the effort.

More information about the ETHA is available at [www.easttexashistorical.org](http://www.easttexashistorical.org)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

[Tell us](#) how this article helped you.

[Provide feedback](#) to ETHA.

### Recommended Citation

Kossie-Chernyshev, Karen (2006) "Constructing Good Success: The Church of God in Christ and Social Uplift in East Texas, 1910-1935," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol44/iss1/11>

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in the East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized editor of ETHA and SFA. This Article is brought to you free and open access by the Journals at SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

## CONSTRUCTING GOOD SUCCESS: THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST AND SOCIAL UPLIFT IN EAST TEXAS, 1910-1935

*By Karen Kossie-Chernyshev*

I was deprived of a schoolroom education ... However, I was undaunted in my quest for literary training. I studied hard at home by the scant light of the old pine knot fire. Laboring under untoward circumstances, i.e., meager resources, poor facilities, hard labor, with approximately nine months in the school room, exemplifies the object lesson of this booklet that God can make a man. Not a self-made man but a God-made man.<sup>1</sup>

E.M. Page, the first bishop of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Texas, wrote the above passage in his autobiography. Like many blacks whose lives were marked by the rise of Jim Crow, peonage systems of labor, and political disenfranchisement, Page determined to educate himself against all odds, an earnest quest for progress that many early observers of black Pentecostals overlooked. Either enthralled or appalled by the exoticism of Pentecostal worship, onlookers tended to focus on calisthenics: women and men dancing down the aisles of the church, children playing tambourines and clapping their hands in polyrhythmic abandon, and people possessed by the spirit either collapsing under the power or taking victory laps around a wood-framed church. In all the clamor, the unique story of black Pentecostals' progressive ideals was muted.

Zora Neale Hurston, in her anthropological study *The Sanctified Church* (1935) described the African American Pentecostal Church as a "protest against highbrow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations as Negroes gain[ed] education and wealth" and "a revitalizing element in Negro music and religion."<sup>2</sup> Hurston's description conversely suggested that black Pentecostals were anti-educational and that they accommodated poverty. Subsequent scholarly studies investigated Hurston's take but generally presupposed that education and progress were the antitheses of being black and Pentecostal.

Few studies have examined Black Pentecostals in Texas apart from Ada Moorhead Holland's and Reverend C.C. White's *No Quittin' Sense* (1969),<sup>3</sup> an in-depth biographical study of White's life and ministry, and Alwyn Barr's *Black Texans: A History of Negroes in Texas: 1528-1971* (1973).<sup>4</sup> Even fewer studies focus on the Church of God in Christ's commitment to the social uplift efforts that absorbed the creative energies of many Southern blacks at the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the self-published works of members, newspapers, eulogies, city directories, deed records, and in-house COGIC publications, this essay aims to clarify an otherwise obscure story that unfolded in East Texas early in the twentieth-century. The early Texas COGIC leader E.M. Page countered claims of "otherworldliness" by embracing the ideals of the Progressive era, particularly its emphasis on social uplift through civic involvement and education.

E.M. Page's foresight and example made him the perfect champion for COGIC in Texas.<sup>6</sup> He was born on the Marlin Stubblefield farm in Yazoo County Mississippi, May 9, 1871. The eldest son of Richard and Pollie Ann Page, his firsthand knowledge of the rigors of rural life helped him develop the leadership and organizational skills needed to guide the early COGIC church in Texas.

Despite prevalent claims to the contrary, the same held true for members of the Church of God in Christ, spiritual newcomers to a region dominated by Baptists and Methodists. The same decade of his birth, black migrants from Central Texas established "The Little Flock Church" in Hearne, Texas, worshipping in an edifice that had once served as a hospital for railway workmen.<sup>7</sup> The staying power of this group provided the foundation for later families who filled the rolls of the voluntary associations, schools, and churches that rose to address the social needs of a community in transition.

Although "separate but equal" policies guaranteed these men and women limited support from public and private funding sources, they and other blacks in East Texas were just as interested in educational progress as were their white contemporaries. In separate contracts dated February 15 and March 7, 1918, the William M. Rice Institute for the Advancement of Literature, Science, and Art sold four blocks and two lots to Robertson County residents for \$400 and \$115 in separate transactions.<sup>8</sup> On March 18 of the same year, "patrons of the Colored School District No. 16" purchased a one half acre lot near Zion Hill Baptist Colored Church from the Mumford School District, No. 16, Precinct 7 for \$125. The deed stipulated that the plot be used for "School purposes, exclusively."<sup>9</sup> Several months later, on June 18, Baylor University sought to clarify ownership of "several pieces of land" in the area.<sup>10</sup> In short, for blacks and whites, secular and sacred, education was serious business. "Black" and "Pentecostal" and stereotyped as poor, ignorant, and otherworldly, they had to struggle for acceptance and against marginality. E.M. Page noted that "it hurt him so bad" <sup>11</sup> to think of moving to Dallas, Texas, where the second COGIC church of Texas was officially organized in 1910 "amid great turmoil and religious intolerance."<sup>12</sup> Because many black Dallasites "viewed" COGIC newcomers "with a sense of alarm," D.J. Young, the first representative appointed to the region, "met ... the combined opposition of a unified community of homes, other churches and schools."<sup>13</sup> Before his Texas appointment, Young ministered in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, for seven years and established a church in Beaumont, where membership grew from fifty to 250. Success in Beaumont notwithstanding, life for blacks in Dallas was different. The level of "persecution" was "so widespread" "in certain quarters that it flared into outbursts of violence, vandalism and sabotage against the members and property of their church."

Frequent reports reached the public that attempts had been made, not only against the church, but [also] on the life of the pastor himself." Protesters of COGIC presence allegedly doused the tent where the early church met with kerosene and "set it afire" in a futile effort to destroy "the very symbol" of the

COGIC.<sup>14</sup> Petitions were circulated to have the church declared a public nuisance because “services tended to disturb the tranquility of the neighborhood.” It “became increasingly difficult for the church to purchase property and expand its efforts,” one writer noted, “[a]s if the Church of God [in Christ] were something loathful [sic], people everywhere seemed to resent its very presence.”<sup>15</sup> Given the “bitter opposition” facing the COGIC, it seemed that the organization’s efforts in Dallas were “doomed.” But in January 1914, Bishop C. H. Mason, after “carefully” assessing the situation, “sent the young, energetic and astute Elder E.M. Page to take charge of the church.” Page arrived in Texas from Memphis on January 27, 1914, and the church received him “gladly.”<sup>16</sup> The same reporter wrote: “On that “bleak January day, when a small group of oppressed and greatly discouraged members gathered about him with their stories of woe, [Page] issued this reassuring statement: ‘If God is for you He is more than a whole world against you. The church will carry on!’” And so it did, thanks to Page’s decisive leadership. More diplomatic than his predecessor, Page won “almost universal praise and respect” from the community. As opposition decreased, the membership of the church grew to more than 100 members from January to May 1914. As a “reward for Page’s outstanding contribution to the Dallas church,” Bishop C. H. Mason appointed him overseer of Texas at the state convocation held in Houston in July 1914. Houston was a fitting place for the convocation as the “Mother” COGIC church of Texas, Center Street COGIC, now “First COGIC,” was founded in the Bayou City in 1909. Page Temple in Dallas, named in honor of E. M. Page, and an unnamed church in Hillsboro vie for second place.

From 1914 on, the organization’s efforts were defined by establishing churches and encouraging education. The COGIC Educational Board first considered founding a “holiness” school in Texas at a “Ministers’ and Workers Meeting” in 1917, ten years after Bishop C. H. Mason founded the denomination and only two years after E. M. Page assumed his position as overseer of COGIC efforts in Texas. Also in 1917, the General Council of the predominantly white Assemblies of God, many of whose early leaders were ordained by C.H. Mason,<sup>17</sup> encouraged holy-spirit filled young people to enroll in “some properly and scripturally accredited Bible training school.”<sup>18</sup> Page Normal Industrial and Bible Institute was one of three COGIC schools established in the United States South.<sup>19</sup> Saints Industrial and Literacy School, located in Lexington, Mississippi,<sup>20</sup> though conceived the same year, was the first, and the Bible College, in Little Rock, Arkansas, the second. In 1918 the Texas COGIC Educational Board purchased 268 acres in Hearne on Henry Prairie Rd.,<sup>21</sup> where the administration building and the girls’ dormitory for the Page Normal Industrial and Bible Institute were the first two edifices constructed.<sup>22</sup>

Although Page asserted that organizers began the school “on a small scale,” with only \$1000 “in the bank for school purposes,”<sup>23</sup> the Page Normal School attempted to combine the approaches of both its COGIC predecessors.<sup>24</sup> Course proceedings of the Bible Institute fill pages of the *Texas Bulletin*, a monthly magazine of the Texas COGIC Jurisdiction printed in San Antonio and published “in the interest of Christian religion and Christian education.”<sup>25</sup>

Highlights from a homiletics class appeared for the benefit of aspiring ministers throughout the state. Less visible to the newspapers, the "Page Industrial and Literary School" trained students in the principles of holiness and the fundamentals of education through activities on and off campus.<sup>26</sup>

Historian Grant Wacker in his recent work *Heaven Below* (2001) noted that the general Pentecostal interpretation of the "social gospel" outlined in William Gladden's *Tools of Men* (1893) focused on the immediate moral behavior of individuals rather than on larger social ills such as poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth.<sup>27</sup> Black Pentecostals in Texas, however, showed a dual commitment to spiritual and intellectual growth; in their view "holiness" was the spiritual foundation for success. By becoming upstanding members of the community, students were better positioned to address social problems.

The declaration of principles set forth by the organization encouraged supporting the church financially, entertaining and contributing to home and foreign missions, and providing COGIC youth with a religious education. It forbade drinking, going to the movies and other places of amusement, dancing, card playing, furnishing intoxicating drinks to guests on any occasion, and participating in secret, oath-bound societies.<sup>28</sup> Anything perceived to be a "stumbling block in the way of the unconverted, and a grief to brethren whom we should not willingly offend" was to be avoided.<sup>29</sup>

In "Following His Steps," O.T. Jones, Overseer of Pennsylvania and National President of the Young People Willing Workers, reiterated the churches' moral charge to COGIC youth, stating that "[t]he great need of the young people of this present age is a deeper consecration when we realize that the multitude still follow[s] the broad way of ease and pleasure, which only lead[s] to shame and degradation."<sup>30</sup> Outlining the COGIC moral prescription for success, Jones argued that "[t]he epicurean philosophy, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,' is the general creed of the vast majority. But no great achievement, no good influence, no real success ever comes from that source." Emphasizing the importance of building character, Jones also noted:

We may be sure there was a life of consecration and obedience at the foundation of the achievement. The earnest praying, studious person is often shunned by the thoughtless, frivolous crowd. But when his earnest praying and consecrated efforts have bourn their first fruit in character and achievement, the crowd will look on him with envy and regret, that they did not follow the course that led to some worthwhile end.<sup>31</sup> Young people, in striving to build for ourselves a strong character, we must, however, be careful not to confound reputation with character. A good or malicious character is not inherited like riches; man is his own tutor for his character. It is true that life itself is given of God, but it is also true that the character of each life is determined by his possessor. Let me urge you then as young people to build your character on [a] Christian foundation.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to offering students lessons in character building, Jones demonstrated his commitment to educating COGIC youth during the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the COGIC in 1926, when he donated fifty of the total \$339 dollars pledged for "Educational Work." Only Charles

Harrison Mason, bishop and founder of the COGIC organization, matched Jones's contribution.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the philanthropic disposition that Jones demonstrated was evident in COGIC donations to the poor, imprisoned, and "a blind girl," for whom \$128, \$100, and \$23.64 were collected respectively.<sup>34</sup> Students affiliated with Y.P.W.W. and other departments within the organization also learned to raise funds, a skill that COGIC members from Texas had practiced to near perfection. For that year, under the direction of State Mother Hannah Chandler, Texas raised \$3489.90 to support COGIC operations. The "Women's Work" faction of Oklahoma, also under Page's jurisdiction, reported \$3503, and Arkansas, \$5,046.<sup>35</sup>

Students also gleaned from the self-help philosophy that organization advanced by encouraging members to join the National Burial Association. Page's assistant overseer, J. Houston Galloway of Austin, TX, was president of the association. By 1926, Galloway had been "instrumental in legislating for the success of the Benevolent Burial Association" for eight years, and as a result of his involvement, the association "obtain[ed] membership in several states."<sup>36</sup> Those affiliated with the Dallas church learned the importance of political activism via the church's involvement with the campaign efforts of the local NAACP. On May 31, 1919, the COGIC was listed among the twenty-five area churches that were to host NAACP campaign speakers Sunday, June 1, 1919. Although the COGIC congregation's reaction is unknown, the pastor's invitation affirmed his desire to have a politically informed flock.

Students could also look forward to applying their knowledge and demonstrating their talents at state and national Convocations. Those who attended "Educational Night" on the thirteenth day of the Eighteenth Annual COGIC Convocation were no doubt inspired by the "beautiful program" that students from the Geridge School in Arkansas had organized. The recording secretary noted: "Jesus was magnified in every song, in every speech and in every action. How the power did fall, all the saints going up in a shout."<sup>37</sup>

On the Page campus, civic and moral lessons were reinforced by classes in reading, writing, and mathematics, thanks to the leadership of Principal Emma F. Bradley Barron. Born to Professor Sam Henry and Mrs. Rosie Bradley in 1894,<sup>38</sup> she earned her high school diploma in Tyler and pursued an undergraduate degree at Prairie View A&M University. Under the tutelage of faculty members eager to introduce students to Booker T. Washington's pragmatic philosophy, Emma acquired the knowledge and confidence to become a leader, activist, fundraiser, nurturer, and educator. After graduating in 1915, she followed in her father's footsteps and taught in the Hillsboro school system. When COGIC leaders in Texas decided to establish an academic, industrial, and bible training institute for the COGIC and other children, they called on Emma Bradley Barron to serve as the first principal of the school, a position which put her many skills to immediate use.

For fifteen years, the Page Normal Institute made "rapid progress," thanks to the "jurisdictional system" implemented to raise funds for the institute;<sup>39</sup> moreover, it received an important stamp of approval when the COGIC

founder, Bishop C. H. Mason, sent his son to study there.<sup>40</sup> Progress at Page Normal led COGIC leaders in Texas to expand their efforts. In 1922, the Educational Board and trustees of the COGIC bought an additional seventy acres of land in Robertson County from Martine Altimore for \$225.<sup>41</sup> Page also made a concerted effort to increase the organization's property holdings and presence in the state. More churches meant more members, and more members ultimately meant more funds to enhance school activities.

In this enthusiastic atmosphere of growth and expansion, "several" students were graduated from the Page Normal and Industrial Institute with "high honors and were "sent out to take their places in the world."<sup>42</sup> Emma Francis Searcy Crouch, a Morris County native, was among the stellar students graduated from Page Normal. Having graduated salutatorian from Booker T. Washington High School in May 1932, Emma entered Page Normal to prepare for a life of service to the church. After earning her diploma in 1934, she studied cosmetology at the C.J. Walker School of Beauty and Culture, and enrolled in Bishop College later in the 1950s.<sup>43</sup> Little did she or Principal Barron know at the time that young Emma would one day rise to the highest position a woman can hold within the COGIC organization, that of International Supervisor of the Women's Department, the financial powerhouse of the COGIC. Based on Emma Crouch's eventual success, Page Normal had trained her well.

Despite the school's positive example, operations were eventually suspended so that priority could be given to the senior schools in Lexington, Mississippi, and Geridge, Arkansas.<sup>44</sup> By 1920, the Lexington school had become so prominent that "the idea of making it a national institution" was introduced at the National Convocation in Memphis, Tennessee. "After some deliberation ... the [Lexington] school was accepted as a national institution on the endorsement of Bishop Mason."<sup>45</sup> After fire devastated the Page complex in 1932,<sup>46</sup> the institute was never rebuilt. However, the "jurisdictional system" that emerged from its development remains the aegis of national COGIC administration, and the progressive spirit inculcated in Page graduates such as Emma Crouch continues to make Texas a premier state within the COGIC organization. Her dedication to the church along with Emma Bradley Barron's and E.M. Page's contributions to the COGIC organization and the communities it served collectively affirm that education and social uplift were indeed on the minds of the COGIC in East Texas. Territory that had once absorbed sweat from the furrowed brows of their enslaved ancestors had now become a perfect place to plan a better future and construct a better world.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cited in Charles H. Pleas, *Fifty Years of Achievement – From 1906-1956: A Period in History of the Church of God in Christ*, Reprint, 1991. p. 39. See also *The History and Life Work of Bishop C.H. Mason*, compiled in 1924, reprinted in 1987, pp. 103-105.

<sup>2</sup>Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Tustin, California, 1989), pp. 103-105.

<sup>3</sup>Ada Moorhead Holland and Reverend C.C. White, *No Quittin' Sense* (Austin, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Alwyn Barr, *Black Texans: A History of Negroes in Texas: 1528-1971* (Austin, 1988).

<sup>6</sup>Bobby Dean, *This is the Church of God in Christ* (Atlanta, Georgia, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ For the Year 1926*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>8</sup>J.W. Baker, *History of Roberson County, Texas* Fourth edition. Waco, Texas: 1988, p. 282.

<sup>9</sup>Deed Records, Roberson County, Vol. 68, pp. 202-203, pp. 287-288.

<sup>10</sup>Deed Records, Roberson County, Vol. 68, pp. 217-218.

<sup>11</sup>Deed Records, Roberson County, Vol. 68, pp. 387-388.

<sup>12</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ For the Year 1926*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>Dallas, TX, *Negro City Directory 1941-42*, LXIII.

<sup>14</sup>Dallas, TX, *Negro City Directory 1941-42*, LXIII.

<sup>15</sup>Dallas, TX, *Negro City Directory 1941-42*, LXIII.

<sup>16</sup>Dallas, TX, *Negro City Directory 1941-42*, LXIII.

<sup>17</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ For the Year 1926*, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup>Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, pp. 171, 172; Dean, *This is the Church of God in Christ*, pp. 57-59.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001) p. 152.

<sup>20</sup>Dean, *This is the Church of God in Christ*, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup>Pleas, *Fifty Years of Achievement*, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup>Norman Lowell McCarver, Sr. & Normal Lowell McCarver, Jr., *Hearne on the Brazos* (San Antonio, 1958), p. 104.

<sup>23</sup>Pleas, *Fifty Years of Achievement*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup>*The History and Life Work of Bishop C.H. Mason*, p. 99

<sup>25</sup>Pleas, *Fifty Years of Achievement*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup>*Texas Bulletin: A Monthly Magazine of the Church of God in Christ, Texas Jurisdiction* (July 1938).

<sup>27</sup>Glenda Williams Goodson, *I Commend Unto You Phebe: Female Leader-Activists in the Missionary Societies and Ministries of the African American Church 1900-1925* (Rev. ed.; Lancaster, 2001).

<sup>28</sup>Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup>Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup>Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, p. 78.

<sup>31</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 69.

<sup>32</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>35</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 82.

<sup>36</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup>*Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup>Funeral Program, Mother Emma Bradley (1894-1996), Saintsville COGIC, Dallas, TX.

<sup>40</sup>Williams Goodson, Email to Karen Kossie-Chernyshev, Tuesday, March 26, 2002.

<sup>41</sup>Williams Goodson, Email to Karen Kossie-Chernyshev, Tuesday, March 26, 2002.

<sup>42</sup>Deed Records, Roberson County, Vol. 80, p. 276.

<sup>43</sup>Pleas, *Fifty Years of Achievement*, p. 78.

<sup>44</sup>Dean, *This is the Church of God in Christ*, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup>Dean, *This is the Church of God in Christ*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup>Pleas, *Fifty Years of Achievement*, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup>McCarver, *Hearne on the Brazos*, p. 104.