African-American Contribution to Unity

Here are seven profiles (six with pictures) of African Americans who contributed to the growth of Unity in the early years: Ruth Cox, James Elliot, Henrietta Gorden, Courtnay Johnson, Helen Mouton, Corine Smith, Frieda Ann Whitfeld. I've selected these seven people because they completed a “FIELD DEPARTMENT SURVEY” sometime in 1948-1949. Their survey tells a bit about how they came into Unity teachings and what attracted them to the Fillmore teachings.

The contributions of these seven people are modest compared to the better-known contributions of Johnnie Colemon, Ruth Mosley and Barbara King. But I believe that the story of these seven unknown African Americans is more important than those of their better-known counterparts and I also believe that the story of African Americans in Unity really hasn’t yet been told. Let me explain what I mean.

The Prosperity Gospel and African Americans

A little background about African Americans and American religion. Kate Bowler, a well-respected scholar of the Prosperity gospel, has written that, starting in the 1920s and 1930s, a small but significant number of African Americans drew from New Thought and spread the metaphysical gospel in the urban North, primarily Chicago and Detroit. Bowler writes that “Metaphysical gospels spread in the urban North, as leaders like Sweet Daddy Grace, Prophet James Jones, Father Divine, and, later, Reverend Ike promised to smooth the rough edges of capitalism and industrialism with theologies that countered poverty, disease, and despair.”

However these “metaphysical gospels” were not just an African-American adaptations of New Thought ideas. According to Bowler, they were a “cross-pollination” of New
Thought, pentecostalism and “African-derived traditions” that “asserted the importance of materiality, prosperity and religious access to the good life.” Prosperity theology in African-American religion was prominent by the 1970s and by the 1990s had led to “an emerging generation of black prosperity preachers; reflected the optimism of arising black middle class, who thirsted for a gospel that made sense of their newfound economic gains.”

**African Americans and Unity**

This adaptation and transformation of theology is characterized by Sir John Templeton, who wrote

> “Wherever we find ourselves in life, whatever the circumstances, whatever habits may be influencing our decisions, we can transform each situation into a learning and growing experience. We can determine how to be the masters of our habits so that our habits can be useful servants to us.”

The John Templeton Foundation characterizes this as “universal truths of character development” which are “qualities of character” that emphasize “awe, creativity, curiosity, diligence, entrepreneurialism, forgiveness, future-mindedness, generosity, gratitude, honesty, humility, joy, love, purpose, reliability, and thrift.”

The story that has been written until now about African-Americans in Unity is how white leadership in Unity treated African Americans. But we don’t have the story of why African Americans were attracted to the Unity message in the first place. The story we have about Johnnie Colemon, Ruth Mosley and Barbara King is about white Unity leadership; it isn’t about the success of these women nor about the affinity that African Americans had to the Unity message which led to the success of Colemon, Mosley and King. That is what the article by Kate Bowler and the quotation from Sir John Templeton alludes to and that is the story which remains to be written.

**Why Documenting African-American Contribution to Unity is Important**

These seven modest stories of African American contributions to Unity are important because they give us a foundation to answer important questions. Why is it that New Thought ideas resonated so deeply in African-American culture? And why is it that the growth of those ideas occurred mainly outside of Unity? Why is it that the most successful Unity congregational minister left Unity to found the UFBL? Finally, what
should we in Unity be doing to open our doors to those African Americans who are seeking a gospel of health and prosperity and how would that bless Unity?

I believe the first step in answering these questions is accumulating accounts and testimonies from more early African-American pioneers in Unity. From that base of primary research material, historians, sociologists and religious studies scholars will have the source material necessary for writing about the contribution of African Americans to Unity — documenting their hopes and dreams, their struggle with racism and poverty and their development of “universal truths of character” — and then we will begin to have our answers.

What I can do at TruthUnity is to collect primary source material and make it available for those who are qualified to write.

I am inviting those who have stories and photographs of early African-American Unity teachers and ministers to send them to me so that those stories are available here.

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