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Historical Sketches

# Annie C. Tuggle

## Historian and Educator for the Black Churches of Christ

by Michael W. Casey

Annie C. Tuggle, a key female leader for the black Churches of Christ, was born in 1890 near Germantown, Tennessee. The granddaughter of a slave, she was to experience many of the typical upheavals for African Americans in the twentieth century. At age 17 she was baptized by her brother-in-law. This began her love for the Bible and for the church. She later wrote: "The Bible was indispensable for me. It was my all and all. I used it for a reader, a story book, a poem book and every other literary help."<sup>1</sup> She also was aware that the Churches of Christ were different from typical African American Christianity:

I was encouraged by this new doctrine, as the people of the world called it, because it was so reasonable. No whooping or hollering and trying to get something you knew nothing about—a religion. The terms of entrance into the kingdom of God were so easy, fair and practical, that I rejoiced to have the opportunity to accept them.<sup>2</sup>

Tuggle was able to secure a different teaching positions at various public schools before she completed her high school education. While teaching she caught the attention of G. P. Bowser, a leading black educator and preacher for the black Churches of Christ. In 1913 Bowser invited her to come and study at Silver Point Christian Institute in Silver Point, Tennessee. After she came, Tuggle com-

plained about the poor conditions of the facilities, so Bowser made her a "field agent" or fund raiser for the school. She traveled in Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi as a single woman raising funds for the school.<sup>3</sup>

Tuggle realized that she needed more education, so at age 30 she enrolled at Walden College to complete her high school diploma. In 1923 she graduated as the valedictorian and then she enrolled at Fisk University as a 34 year old Freshman. She dropped out of Fisk after she learned she would be forced to attend their chapel services on Sundays and miss worshipping with her congregation. Tuggle later attended A & I State College in Nashville.<sup>4</sup>

Tuggle was active in church wherever she lived. Once she was asked by a preacher in the middle of a sermon to answer a question because she was "well versed in the scriptures . . ."<sup>5</sup> On another occasion she helped an evangelist in a meeting by reading "certain Scriptures that he needed while preaching. There were no men able to help him."<sup>6</sup>

Tuggle endured many hardships in her long life. In the summer after she dropped out of Fisk, Tuggle decided to move to Chicago. Blacks all over the South were moving to the great cities of the north, seeking jobs and escape from the prejudice and paternalism of the South. In Chicago, historian Ronald Takaki notes, World War I "opened unusual opportunities for blacks in industry." In the 1920s, "the majority of black men were employed in factories rather than domestic and personal services." Even black women made some similar inroads—"15 per-

cent of them had become factory operatives.”<sup>7</sup> Chicago was attractive to Tuggle because “it was a great manufacturing center

and jobs were easy to get and the pay on the jobs was great.”<sup>8</sup> She operated a laundry mangle for a hotel before returning to college.

Tuggle often worked as a maid to pay for her educational expenses. Her experience as a maid taught her a creative way to deal with southern white prejudice. When she traveled as a single black woman, she would dress as a maid because “we could get in the front door, get our money’s worth and get first-class merchandise, because the merchant thought we were buying for white people.”<sup>9</sup> Once in the 1940s when she developed an arthritic condition she decided to pick cotton so her joints would be in the hot sun. The overseer at one of the plantation wanted to have sex with her. When she refused his advances, he cheated her on the weight of the cotton she picked.<sup>10</sup> Despite these hardships, she remained a faithful Christian.

Tuggle worked with G.P. Bowser and Marshall Keeble, the two “founding fathers” of the modern day black Churches of Christ. Tuggle raised funds for Bowser Christian Institute, Bowser’s new school at Ft. Smith Arkansas in the early 40s. Later she moved to Nashville and taught at Nashville Christian Institute run by Marshall Keeble. One of her students was Fred Gray who later was to become

Martin Luther King’s and Rosa Parks’ lawyer.<sup>11</sup>

Joining the great migration of blacks to the north, Tuggle moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1944 where she lived for 20 years. Here she sold insurance, operated a restaurant and established a Christian school for young children and a night school for teaching Bible to adults. In the late 40s she published her first book, **Our Ministers and Song Leaders of the Church of Christ**. This book was a directory for the Black Churches of Christ.<sup>12</sup> After living a few years in Memphis, Annie moved to Southern California in the early 1970s. Here, in 1973 she wrote her autobiography, **Another World Wonder**, which is in reality a history of the black Churches of Christ. Tuggle died in 1976 and was buried in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>13</sup>

Tuggle wrote in one of her tracts for her Christian school in Detroit:

Life is made up of accumulations — here a little, and there a little. So the person who fills his todays to the brim with life and service for God, finds himself in old age drinking from the fountain that never runs dry. His memory, then instead of being the handmaid of bitterness becomes the minister of peace and gladness.<sup>14</sup>

Tuggle truly lived such a life.