



Pandita Ramabai



Cornelia Jones Robertson

## Known and Yet Unknown



Maria de Fatima W. Gomes



Aimee Garcia Cortese



Maria Khaleel

## Women of Color and the Assemblies of God

By Jessica Faye Carter

**T**he history of ethnically diverse women in the Assemblies of God is unique, rich, and lengthy, yet it remains largely unknown to many Assemblies of God adherents. Starting before the formal inception of the Assemblies of God in 1914, and continuing through the mid-twentieth century into the present day Assemblies of God, women of color have provided a significant influence on the Fellowship in a variety of ways. They have served as evangelists and preachers, pastors and teachers, sectional and district presbyters, missionaries, and as an overseas general superintendent.

### Pandita Ramabai

Pandita Ramabai, an Indian educator and missionary, was born in about 1858 to Ananta Shastri, a Sanskrit scholar, and Lakshmbai, her mother. Ramabai was born a member of the Brahmin (priestly) caste, and her upbringing was unusual in that her father believed in the education of women, unlike many of his day.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Ramabai was

taught Sanskrit, the language in which classical Hindu works are written. She also became adept in the languages of Marathi, Kanarese, Hindustani, and Bengali.<sup>2</sup>

Through tragedy (Ramabai lost both parents to illness) and famine, Ramabai eventually came to Calcutta, where a group of Hindu scholars were astonished at her knowledge. They allowed her to be called Pandita, which means “learned,” and at the time she was the only woman allowed to be



Pandita Ramabai (left center) with some members of her staff. Her daughter, Manoramabai (sitting at right of her mother); Minnie Abrams (front, center); and Mr. Gadre (front, right).

referred to as such.<sup>3</sup> Ramabai began holding meetings related to women’s rights, with word of her abilities even reaching as far as England.<sup>4</sup>

Ramabai was first exposed to Christianity in India,<sup>5</sup> though she converted to Christianity and was baptized in England.<sup>6</sup> Ramabai’s contributions to global Christianity and to Pentecostalism are quite significant. She was a champion of women’s rights, campaigning extensively against child-brides and speaking against her society’s terrible treatment of widows. Part of Ramabai’s work for Indian women included the establishment of the Mukti Mission in 1889 — mukti means salvation<sup>7</sup> — as a place for young widows to come who were being abused by their families. In addition to her activities with women, she added Hebrew and Greek to her cache of languages, eventually translating the Bible into Marathi.

Minnie Abrams, a missionary, had come to India from Minneapolis, Minnesota two years earlier in 1887, and she was very concerned for the plight of Indian women.<sup>8</sup> In 1899, while preaching itinerantly in India, Minnie Abrams “felt directed of the Lord” to work at the Mukti Mission, and

Ramabai accepted her offer.<sup>9</sup> Ramabai and Abrams worked together, and eventually a significant Pentecostal revival began in Southern India.

As Abrams held meetings in the United States to support the Mukti Mission, she made important connections with the North American Pentecostal movement, and recruited women baptized in the Spirit to join in the evangelistic work. Among the women who joined her were Edith Baugh, Blanche Cunningham, Lillian Doll, Minnie Houck, “Miss Bristol,” and “Miss Dempster.”<sup>10</sup> Ramabai referred to these women as the “Philip Class,” because the women were like Philip’s daughters in Acts 21:9.<sup>11</sup> Other women from the US later joined their efforts, and several of these women eventually ministered with or joined the Assemblies of God.<sup>12</sup>

### Lucy Farrow

Lucy Farrow, an African-American woman, was the niece of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass,<sup>13</sup> and she

served as pastor of a church in Houston, Texas.<sup>14</sup> During her tenure as pastor, in 1905, William Seymour attended her church and heard her speak in tongues. Harvey Cox, in *Fire from Heaven*, notes that

[Seymour] heard a woman pray aloud in a language, or in what seemed to be a language, that no one there could understand. Seymour was touched to the core.... After the meeting he asked Lucy Farrow, the woman who had spoken in the strange tongue, more about her remarkable gift.<sup>15</sup>

Farrow was well-acquainted with Charles Parham and his wife Sarah, and she worked as a governess in their home. She is said to have introduced Parham and Seymour. Eventually Farrow went on to Los Angeles where she ministered and became part of the 1906 outpouring of God’s Spirit.

Farrow returned to Houston in 1906 to preach at a camp meeting,<sup>16</sup> where she prayed for people

to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and laid hands on them. One of those for whom she prayed was Howard Goss. Goss had been baptized in the Holy Spirit prior to the camp meeting, but had been unable to speak in tongues since his initial experience.<sup>17</sup> By his own account, after Farrow laid hands on him he was able to speak in tongues “any time [he] yielded to the Spirit of God.”<sup>18</sup> Goss, along with E. N. Bell and others, hosted a conference in Hot Springs, Arkansas in 1914; out of this conference, the Assemblies of God was established.

### Cornelia Jones Robertson

Cornelia Jones Robertson was an African-American woman pioneer in the Assemblies of God. She was active in the Azusa Street revival,<sup>19</sup> and she was one of the first African-Americans to be ordained by the Assemblies of God, receiving her credentials in its Northern California-Nevada district in 1923.<sup>20</sup> Robertson was active and well-known in Pentecostal circles, and was known to be a “close associate” of prominent Pentecostal evangelists Mark Woodworth-Etter and Aimee Semple McPherson.<sup>21</sup> She pastored a church in Oakland, California and was the founder and pastor of the Emmanuel Pentecostal Church and House of Prayer located in San Francisco, California for over 30 years. Robertson



Minnie Abrams (right) sitting next to Jivubai, an Indian woman.



Howard Goss at a camp meeting in 1912. He began speaking in tongues after Lucy Farrow prayed for him.

also engaged in US missions, starting a mission in the Barbary Coast area.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most important aspects of her enduring legacy is found in her grandson, Robert Harrison. As a young man, Harrison was influenced heavily by the faith of his mother, Leona (Schaeffer) Harrison, and Robertson, his grandmother.<sup>23</sup> After his graduation from Bethany Bible College, he applied for credentials in the same district where his grandmother held credentials, but he was refused.<sup>24</sup> After being recruited by Billy Graham for his crusade team, Harrison's ordination by the Assemblies of God was approved in 1962.<sup>25</sup> His ordination was a watershed event and marked a departure from the Assemblies of God's official position as of 1939, which refused to grant further ordinations to African-Americans at the national level, though in practice some districts continued to issue district-level credentials.<sup>26</sup> Harrison's ordination eventually led to the official condemnation of racial, ethnic, and other forms of discrimination by the Assemblies of God in 1965.<sup>27</sup>

### Aimee Garcia Cortese

Aimee Garcia Cortese is the founder and pastor emeritus of Crossroads Tabernacle, and of The Boden Center for the Performing Arts, both located in New York City. Cortese was born in 1929 in the Puerto Rican barrio of the South Bronx in New York City,<sup>28</sup> but her ministry has spanned many different nations and people groups. Cortese was raised in a loving religious family, and by the age of 15 expressed her calling to ministry to her pastor, Manuel López.<sup>29</sup>

Her pastor did not believe that women should preach, but allowed her to do so because of her incessant requests. However, because she had received no ministry training, her first attempt at preaching was disastrous.<sup>30</sup> Afterwards, López began helping her learn the Bible to prepare for ministry.<sup>31</sup> Over time, Cortese was involved in many different ministry roles, being

licensed with the Assemblies of God in 1951, then ordained in 1964 by the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Puerto Rico. She transferred back into the Assemblies of God and served as a missionary-evangelist among Spanish-speaking people in the US and abroad. She was also the first woman chaplain for the New York State Department of Corrections.<sup>32</sup>

Her vision for the church was as an active part of a vibrant Christian community, including community centers and gymnasiums for youth.<sup>33</sup> To that end, Cortese founded Crossroads Tabernacle and The Boden Center for the Performing Arts. Both are in the Bronx area near real crossroads — the Hutchinson River Parkway and Cross Bronx Expressway — and are impacting people at the crossroads in their lives.

### Maria de Fatima W. Gomes

Maria de Fatima W. Gomes is of East Indian and Portuguese descent and currently serves as the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God in East Timor.<sup>34</sup> East Timor is a country located in Southeast Asia, and includes the eastern half of the island of Timor.

Gomes was born in Indonesia in 1928. As a young woman she was hostile to Christianity and rejected the faith, even throwing Christians out of her house! But the grace of God prevailed. In 1968 several pastors began to pray for her, and she eventually received Christ as her Lord.<sup>35</sup> Later that year she and her late husband (José Gomes) began their ministry on the island of Auturo, a small island situated north of East Timor.<sup>36</sup> Auturo, though physically separated from Timor, is politically situated in the Dili district of East Timor.

Gomes knew the ministry in Auturo

was going to be very difficult, because it was then an island with virtually no technological advancement, widespread illnesses, and very little food. She was not anxious to go and minister there, but eventually she and her husband followed God's call. For seven years they ministered there, only moving to Timor during political unrest.<sup>37</sup> One major initiative that they oversaw involved the provision of biblical teaching cassettes and cassette players to illiterate local pastors. This ministry helped many budding Christian leaders learn Christian doctrine, and it strengthened many churches in the geographic region.<sup>38</sup>

In 1990, José Gomes died, but prior to his death he felt the Lord directing him to appoint Maria as superintendent of East Timor, then part of Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> When East Timor gained independence in 2002, Maria became the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God in East Timor. It is possible that she is the only female to have served

as the leader of one of the national fellowships within the Assemblies of God. She continues serving in this role and lives in East Timor.

Despite her considerable hardship and personal challenges, she has remained faithful to her commission from

God. Today the fruit of the Gomes' ministry has appeared for all to see. The island of Auturo is known by the locals as "Assemblies of God island" because 5,768 out of the 7,000 people on the island (82 percent) are adherents to the Christian faith through the Assemblies of God.<sup>40</sup>

### Maria Khaleel

Maria Khaleel is a widely respected pastor and former presbyter in the Assemblies of God Peninsular Florida district. Khaleel, who is of multicultural

descent, is the founder and senior pastor of New Life Assembly of God, a sizeable congregation in Pembroke Pines, Florida. She graduated from Southeastern College of the Assemblies of God in 1986, and she was ordained in 1998. Since starting the church, Khaleel earned a master of divinity degree from the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (2002), and she served as a presbyter in the Peninsular Florida District from 1998-2006 — the first woman to hold such a position in that district.

New Life has 700 members, with 30 nationalities being represented in the congregation. A whopping 80 percent are first-time converts to Christianity. Even more remarkable is that each year, approximately 35 percent of the congregants move away from the Pembroke Pines area, so that the city effectively serves as a "gateway" to many entering the US. Some who leave the Pembroke Pines area return to their homelands; others move on to various locations within the US.

Therefore to maintain a stable membership size, the church has to win about 245 people to Christ each year — and this is a challenge they have met. Since its inception in 1992, New Life has led over 5,000 people to Christ.

Khaleel's ethnic heritage is almost as ethnically diverse as that of her congregation. Her mother is Cuban (of Spanish and French ancestry), and her father is Lebanese. Even more interesting is that her parents met in Jamaica, West Indies where she was also born, though most of her upbringing occurred in Oklahoma. Khaleel's exposure to myriad cultures and people groups uniquely suits her to lead such an effective multicultural congregation.

### Conclusion

Women of color have made substantial contributions to the Assemblies of God, and they will continue to play an important role in its future ministry. The pioneers have laid the groundwork for the ministry efforts of ethnically

diverse women in the Assemblies of God for those continuing in leadership today. Though obstacles to women in ministry persist — especially for women of color — the dedication, resilience, and perseverance of these women have set an example of service to God for fellow Christians and for leaders throughout the Assemblies of God. ❖



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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Helen S. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), 13-14.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> "Pandita Ramabai," *Glimpses*, No. 133 (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> "Pandita Ramabai: Her Life in India and Lessons to Be Drawn From It," *The New York Times*, Saturday Review of Books and Art (March 23, 1901): BR20.
- <sup>7</sup> Gary B. McGee, *People of the Spirit: The Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2004), 73.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Gary B. McGee, "Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire! The Revival Legacy of Minnie F. Abrams," *Enrichment* 3:3 (Summer 1998): 86.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 149.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Ethel E. Goss, *The Winds of God* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1977), 98.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Glenn W. Gohr, "For Such a Time as This: The Story of Evangelist Bob Harrison," *Assemblies of God Heritage* 24:3 (Fall 2004): 6.

<sup>20</sup> McGee, *People of the Spirit*, 362; Glenn W. Gohr, "Cornelia Jones Robertson: A Friend of the Needy," *SpiritLed Woman* 7:1 (August/September 2004): 58.

<sup>21</sup> Gohr, "For Such a Time as This," 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> McGee, *People of the Spirit*, 362.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 363; *General Council Minutes, 1965*, 60-61.

<sup>28</sup> Virginia Sánchez Korrol, "In Search of Unconventional Women: Histories of Puerto Rican Women in Religious Vocations before Mid-Century," *The Oral History Review* 16:2 (Autumn 1988): 47-63.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Katy Attanasi, "Prepared Through Hardship," *Pentecostal Evangel* 4522 (Jan. 7, 2001): 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



Maria Gomes (right) shares a relaxed moment with a pastor's wife.