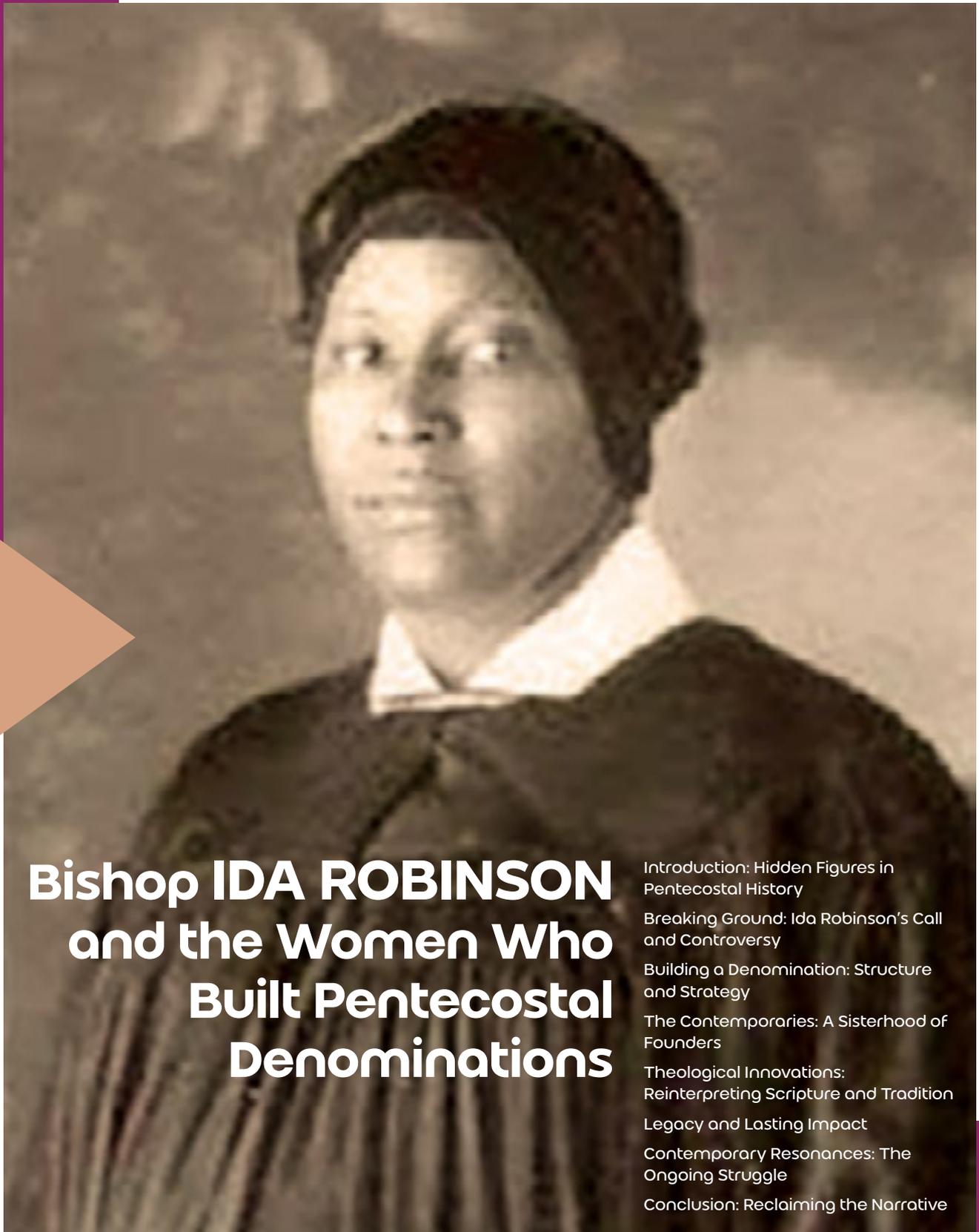


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## **Bishop IDA ROBINSON and the Women Who Built Pentecostal Denominations**

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Pentecostal History

Breaking Ground: Ida Robinson's Call  
and Controversy

Building a Denomination: Structure  
and Strategy

The Contemporaries: A Sisterhood of  
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# Honoring Sacred Heritage, The Consecration of Women in Black Pentecostal Leadership

editorial by **Bishop Andy C. Lewter, D. Min.**

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**THE GENTLE TURNING OF HISTORY'S PAGES** OFTEN REVEALS PATTERNS OF DIVINE CONTINUITY THAT BIND GENERATIONS TOGETHER IN SACRED PURPOSE. AS I REFLECT ON OUR CURRENT ISSUE FEATURING DR. MARJORIE L. THOMPSON'S ILLUMINATING ARTICLE ON "BISHOP IDA ROBINSON AND THE WOMEN WHO BUILT PENTECOSTAL DENOMINATIONS," I AM STRUCK BY HOW DEEPLY PERSONAL THIS HISTORICAL NARRATIVE IS TO MY OWN SPIRITUAL JOURNEY AND FAMILY LEGACY.

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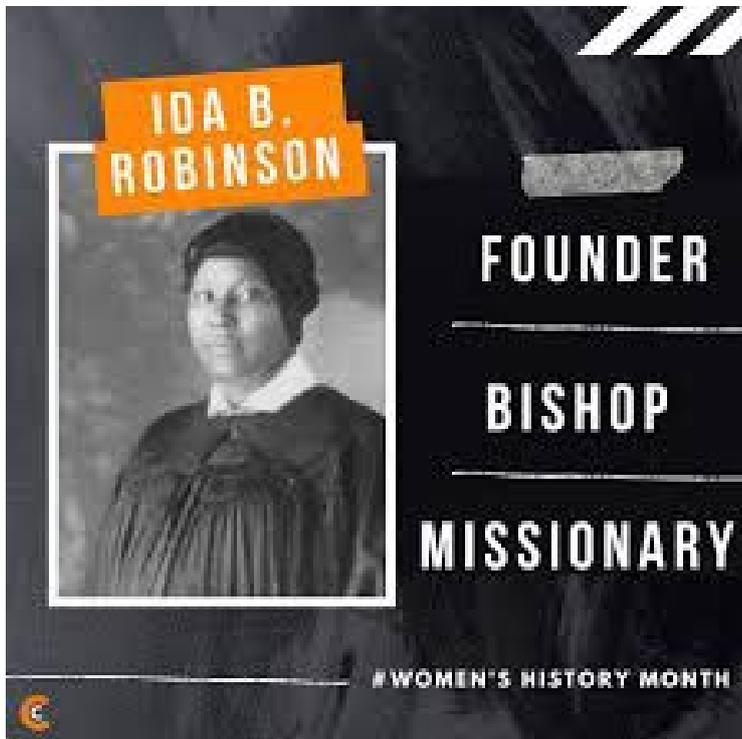
In 1930, my grandfather, Bishop William E. Fuller, Sr., made a decision that would quietly revolutionize American religious history when he consecrated Ida Bell Robinson as the first African American female bishop in the country. This act of ecclesiastical courage came at a time when women's leadership in the church was not merely questioned but often vehemently opposed. Yet my grandfather recognized in Robinson what our Pentecostal tradition has always affirmed at its best—that the Spirit's gifts and callings transcend human categories, including gender.

Bishop Robinson's story, so eloquently detailed in Dr. Thompson's article, resonates with particular significance for me. Her divine visitation in 1924 when the Lord told her, "Come out of the organization and I will make you the head and not the tail," led to the establishment of the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America. But what the historical record sometimes omits is the crucial role my grandfather played in validating her calling through formal consecration, providing the institutional legitimacy that helped

her denomination flourish despite enormous cultural headwinds.

The theological innovations that Robinson and her contemporaries developed—their reinterpretation of Scripture passages like Joel 2:28-29 emphasizing "sons and daughters will prophesy," their references to biblical women like Deborah and Phoebe, and their theology of calling that placed divine authorization above human ordination—created a framework that continues to inform our understanding of spiritual authority today.

As Dr. Thompson notes, Robinson declared in 1936: "When God calls, man cannot uncall. When God sends, man cannot unsend." These words have echoed through my own ministry, particularly in 2006 when I felt led to consecrate Bishop Stephanie Riddle Green (1966-2025) as the first female African American bishop on Long Island, New York. In that sacred moment, I was consciously continuing a lineage that connects my grandfather to Bishop



Robinson to Bishop Green and beyond—a golden thread of recognition that God’s calling knows no gender limitations.

Bishop Green’s recent passing makes this issue of our journal particularly poignant. Her nineteen years of episcopal service demonstrated the same organizational acumen and spiritual vision that characterized Bishop Robinson’s ministry. Like Robinson, who grew the Mount Sinai Holy Church from a single Philadelphia congregation to dozens of churches across the Eastern Seaboard, Bishop Green expanded her ministry’s reach while maintaining a commitment to the same innovative practices—formalized leadership training for women, economic cooperation among congregations, missionary outreach, and clear paths of advancement for female ministers.

The parallels between these women’s ministries, separated by nearly eight decades, remind us that the struggle for full recognition of women’s spiritual authority is both historical and ongoing. As Dr. Teresa Fry Brown observes in Thompson’s article, “The questions Bishop Robinson confronted nearly a century ago—about scripture, tradition, calling, and institutional power—are still being debated in many denominations today.”

Our Pentecostal heritage offers a distinctive witness within this continuing conversation. While many Protestant traditions have struggled to reconcile their theological positions with women’s leadership, the Pentecostal emphasis on direct spiritual empowerment provided openings for women like Robinson, Mary Magdalena Lewis Tate, Aimee García Cortese, and Rosa A. Horn to establish denominational structures that institutionalized their vision.

This is not to suggest that our tradition has fully resolved these tensions. Even within denominations founded by women, there have been periods of retreat from the founders’ commitment to female leadership. Yet the historical record preserved in articles like Dr. Thompson’s ensures that we cannot easily forget the women who shaped our spiritual landscape.

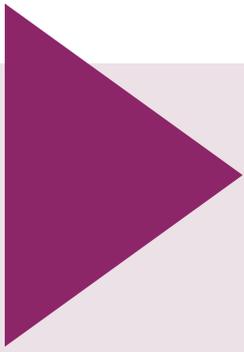
When my grandfather consecrated Bishop Robinson in 1930, he could not have fully anticipated how that single act would ripple through generations. When I consecrated Bishop Green in 2006, I was consciously affirming that same recognition of divine calling that transcends human categories. And as our readers engage with the history preserved in this issue, I pray they will recognize their own place in this ongoing story of spiritual empowerment.

feature

# Bishop **Ida Robinson** and the Women Who Built Pentecostal Denominations

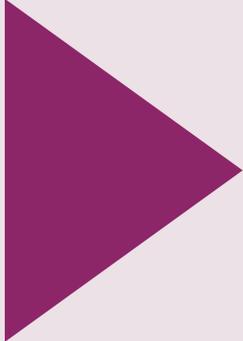
by Dr. Marjorie L. Thompson





## **Introduction:** Hidden Figures in Pentecostal History

In the richly textured tapestry of African American Pentecostalism, certain threads have remained largely invisible to the casual observer. Among these are the contributions of women who, despite significant theological and social barriers, established enduring denominational structures that continue to shape the spiritual landscape of Black America today. Most prominent among these pioneering women was Bishop Ida Bell Robinson, founder of the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, whose life and ministry exemplified both the challenges faced by Black women in religious leadership and the remarkable resilience with which they met those challenges.



## Breaking Ground: Ida Robinson's Call and Controversy

Born in 1891 in Hazlehurst, Georgia, Ida Bell Robinson experienced her conversion at a young age and soon felt called to preach—a calling that would place her at odds with the prevailing religious establishment. After moving to Philadelphia and joining the United Holy Church of America, Robinson's ministry flourished, but she encountered increasing resistance from male church leaders who believed women should not hold positions of authority.

In 1924, Robinson reported receiving a divine visitation. As she later recounted: "The Lord spoke to me and said, 'Come out of the organization and I will make you the head and not the tail.'" This revelation would lead her to establish the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, one of the first Pentecostal denominations founded by an African American woman.

Church historian Dr. James Tinney notes, "Robinson's decision to establish a separate denomination wasn't just about women in ministry—it represented a fundamental challenge to the patriarchal structures that had dominated Black Protestant churches since Reconstruction."

## Building a Denomination: Structure and Strategy

What distinguished Robinson from other female preachers of her era was her organizational acumen. She didn't simply establish herself as an independent evangelist but created a denominational structure that would outlive her. Under her leadership as Bishop—a title she deliberately claimed despite its traditionally male associations—Mount Sinai grew from a single Philadelphia congregation to dozens of churches across the Eastern Seaboard.



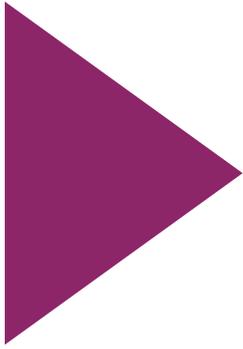
Robinson instituted several innovative practices that became hallmarks of her denomination:

1. Formalized leadership training for women through Mount Sinai Holy Church Bible Institute
2. Economic cooperation among member churches to build financial independence
3. Missionary outreach that extended to Cuba and other Caribbean nations
4. Hierarchical structure that provided clear paths of advancement for women ministers

“What Bishop Robinson understood,” explains theologian Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “was that women needed not just permission to preach but institutional support to sustain their ministries.”







## The Contemporaries: A Sisterhood of Founders

Robinson was not alone in her denominational-building efforts. During the same period, several other African American women established Pentecostal organizations that created space for female leadership:

**Mary Magdalena Lewis Tate (1871-1930)** founded the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of Truth in 1903. Known as “Mother Tate,” she ordained herself as “Bishop,” making her possibly the first woman in America to claim this title. Her denomination eventually split into three branches, all of which continue today.

**Aimee García Cortese (1901-1995)**, though less well-known than some of her contemporaries, established the Pentecostal Church of God and Christ Missionary Association in New York City, serving Spanish-speaking communities largely overlooked by other denominations.

**Rosa A. Horn (1880-1976)** founded the Pentecostal Faith Church in Harlem in 1926 and became one of the first Black female religious broadcasters, using radio to extend her influence beyond the walls of her church.

What united these women was not just their gender but their pragmatic approach to institution-building. Dr. Anthea Butler, historian of American religious history, observes: “These women weren’t just charismatic preachers—they were skilled administrators who built structures that could withstand the test of time.”





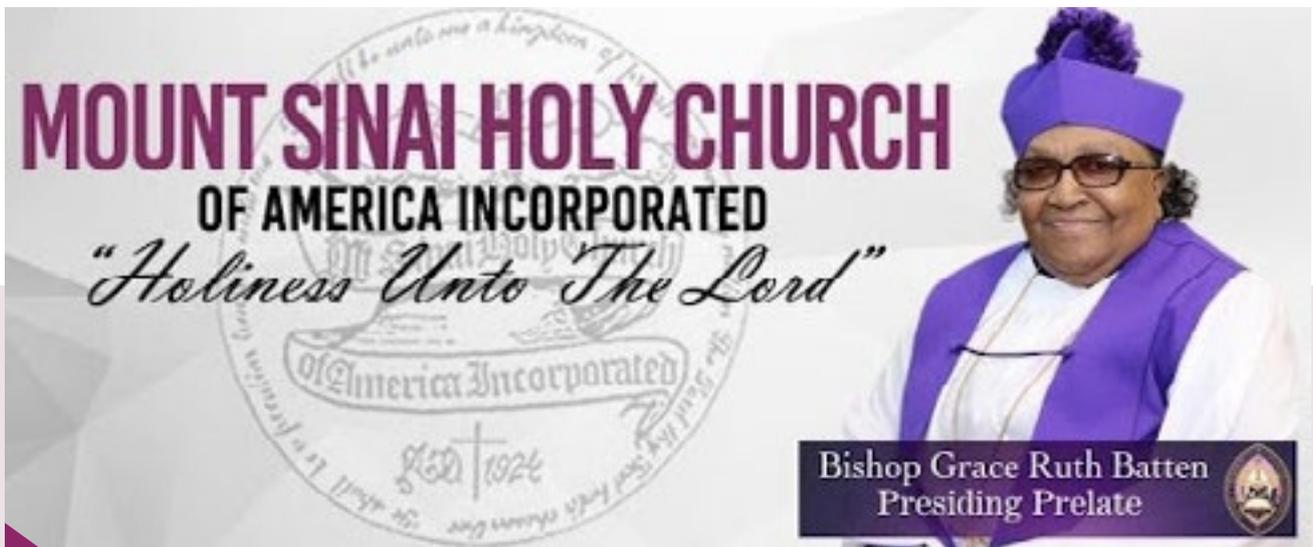
## Theological Innovations: Reinterpreting Scripture and Tradition

The denominational work of Robinson and her contemporaries was undergirded by theological creativity. They developed exegetical approaches to scripture that challenged traditional interpretations limiting women's roles in ministry.

Robinson frequently preached from Joel 2:28-29: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy..." emphasizing the phrase "sons and daughters" to argue for gender equality in spiritual gifting. She also pointed to biblical women like Deborah, Huldah, and Phoebe as precedents for female leadership.

Beyond biblical interpretation, these women leaders developed a theology of calling that placed divine authorization above human ordination. As Robinson declared in her 1936 address to the Mount Sinai convention: "When God calls, man cannot uncall. When God sends, man cannot unsend."

This theological framework provided a response to those who questioned their authority and offered a foundation for women who felt similarly called to ministry but lacked institutional support.



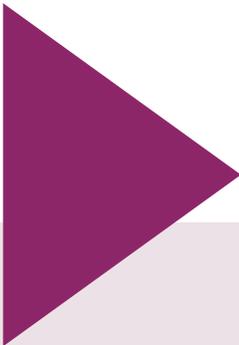
## Legacy and Lasting Impact

When Bishop Ida Robinson died in 1946, she left behind a denomination with more than 40 churches and missions. More significantly, she had created a model for female leadership in the Pentecostal tradition that influenced generations of women ministers.

The impact of Robinson and her fellow denominational founders extended beyond their own organizations:

1. They normalized women's leadership in parts of the Pentecostal tradition
2. They pioneered organizational structures that balanced hierarchical authority with congregational autonomy
3. They developed theological arguments for women in ministry that continue to be cited today
4. They created educational institutions that trained both women and men for church leadership

Dr. Estrelida Alexander, author of "The Women of Azusa Street," argues that these achievements represent a form of "pragmatic feminism" that preceded academic feminist theology by decades: "These women weren't writing theoretical treatises on gender equality—they were building institutions that embodied their vision of women's spiritual authority."



## Contemporary Resonances: The Ongoing Struggle

The denominations founded by Robinson, Tate, Horn, and others continue today, though some have moved away from their founders' emphasis on female leadership. Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, now led by Bishop Melva Burrows, maintains its commitment to women in ministry while facing the challenges of a changing religious landscape.

The tensions these pioneering women navigated remain relevant in contemporary discussions about gender and authority in Black churches. As theologian Dr. Teresa Fry Brown notes, "The questions Bishop Robinson confronted nearly a century ago—about scripture, tradition, calling, and institutional power—are still being debated in many denominations today."

What distinguishes the current conversation is greater recognition of the historical contributions of women like Robinson. Once relegated to footnotes in Pentecostal history, these denominational founders are increasingly acknowledged as essential figures whose work shaped the development of African American religious institutions.





## Conclusion: Reclaiming the Narrative

The story of Bishop Ida Robinson and her contemporaries represents more than an interesting historical footnote—it offers a necessary corrective to narratives of Pentecostal history that have centered male leadership. By examining how these women built denominations that created space for female ministry, we gain insight into both the obstacles they faced and the innovative strategies they employed to overcome them.

As Mount Sinai Holy Church approaches its centennial, Bishop Robinson's vision of a church where leadership is determined by divine calling rather than gender continues to inspire new generations of ministers—both women and men—who believe that the Spirit's gifts know no gender boundaries.

In Bishop Robinson's own words, spoken at the 1940 convention: "We are not building for today only, but for tomorrow and all the tomorrows to come." Her legacy, and that of the women who built Pentecostal denominations alongside her, stands as testimony to that forward-looking vision.

Dr. Marjorie L. Thompson is Professor of Religious Studies at Howard University and author of "Women of the Spirit: Female Leadership in African American Pentecostalism."

Further Reading:

- Butler, Anthea D. *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*
- Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*
- Alexander, Estrela Y. *The Women of Azusa Street*
- Collier-Thomas, Bettye. *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*