

## Cementing a Legacy: Mason Temple in Memphis

Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, is both a local house of worship and the international headquarters of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Completed in 1945 and named in honor of the denomination's founder, Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, the temple is best known to Americans outside of COGIC as the site where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," on April 3, 1968—the night before his assassination.

Constructed of concrete, brick, and steel, Mason Temple stands three stories high and seats 7,500 people. The vast sanctuary is surrounded by a wrap-around balcony, and in the center is a large platform with a tiered pulpit. The structure, designed by Black architects and built mostly by Black laborers was, when it opened, the largest Black-owned building in the world. The project cost about a quarter of a million dollars—the equivalent of 4.4 million in 2025.



*"Church of God in Christ: World Headquarters" sign outside Mason Temple in Memphis, TN.*

Historian Dr. Robert Franklin told *Christianity Today* in 1996 that Mason Temple gives "[C]oncrete proof that black people could build, own, and operate their own nationally recognized institutions." He compared this effort with Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee experiment, which provided evidence of the full capabilities of Blacks.

Building Mason Temple was no easy task. The original idea for the project was to replace COGIC's flagship church in Memphis that burned down in 1936. However, Bishop Mason and his wife, Leila, believed that a new headquarters to accommodate the rapidly growing denomination was a better idea. In 1940, Mason commissioned Bishop Riley F. Williams to lead the project; Williams selected Elder William H. Taylor as lead architect and Bishop Ulysses E. Miller as superintendent of construction.



*C.H. Mason and Elder James Logan Delk, c. 1950.*

Two serious barriers stood in their way: racial segregation and wartime rationing. Getting the city's White leadership to embrace a Black-led project in the South was difficult enough, but the onset of World War 2 meant that steel and other necessary materials were scarce.

So COGIC's leadership sought help from Elder James Logan Delk, one of the few White COGIC ministers and a longtime confidant of Bishop Mason. Elder Delk, a successful evangelist and radio personality, had run unsuccessfully for governor of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri. Fortunately, he picked up some political friends and allies along the way. Using his connections with regional leaders — including Harry S. Truman and Alben W. Barkley, future president and vice-president of the United States — Delk secured about 48,000 dollars of steel for Williams and his team.

The denomination's female leadership spearheaded fundraising efforts. The building's iconic purple neon sign was erected outside its front doors in 1945, just before the annual national convention, called the Holy Convocation. During this Convocation, the temple was formally dedicated. The funds for the sign had been personally allocated by Elizabeth Woods Robinson—known within COGIC as Mother Robinson—who had helped establish and oversee the COGIC Women's Department for over thirty years.



*The original COGIC National Tabernacle in Memphis, c. 1926. C.H. Mason is standing center-right, holding a Bible.*

Like the original Tabernacle, Mason Temple was built both for regular services and to host the Holy Convocation. To accommodate such a massive event, the temple houses not just rooms for study and prayer but a salon and barber shop, baths and showers, a childcare center, two cafeterias, and a post office, amenities that attendees might not otherwise have access to in segregated Tennessee. Many of those who travelled to Memphis for convocations during the Temple's first 25 years would be barred from the city's hotels; so, local church members opened their homes to the visitors.

The completion of Mason Temple marked a turning point in COGIC's history, where the church experienced a "rise to respectability," according to historian Dr. Calvin White, Jr. The religious movement that Bishop Mason began in the rural South, blending Pentecostal theology with African forms of worship practiced by many slaves, was legitimized, despite the many educated Black Americans that viewed the movement with embarrassment. The Great Migration, along with the church's missionary zeal, brought COGIC to every urban center of the country.

By the 1950s, COGIC was a force to be reckoned with: a wealthy, urban church that claimed millions of members throughout the United States and beyond. Over the years, Mason Temple hosted concerts and events featuring a variety of major Black cultural figures, from gospel legend Mahalia Jackson to actor-activist Paul Robeson. But the most consequential was the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech by Dr. King the night before his assassination. Dr. King had actually spoken at Mason Temple many times over the years, and the church had a warm relationship with the Baptist minister and Civil Rights leader.

On April 3, 1968, he spoke to a gathering of sanitation workers who were striking for better pay and working conditions. In his speech, King seemed to prophesy his own tragic death:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land."

In building up COGIC from a handful of small rural churches to an international denomination of millions, Bishop Mason and his co-workers also helped Black Americans on their path to the “promised land.” Mason Temple, as a physical hub of Black life, culture, and spiritually, and as a symbol of Black dignity and self-reliance, is an enduring part of COGIC’s rich legacy within and beyond its own congregations.



*Doors to the sanctuary in Mason Temple, with tributes to and images of its founder. Photograph by Karen Pulfer Focht, Religion News Service, March 2018.*

## **Discussion and Research Prompts**

- When you imagine a house of worship, what do you picture? What features do you expect it to have, and why? What purpose do they serve? How might these features be different in another culture, tradition, or religion?
- Research the history of a historic building in your hometown. Find out why it was built, who built it, and how the project was brought to completion. If possible, look into local news archives to find out about significant events that have taken place there.
- What is the religious significance of the “promised land” that Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about in his final speech at Mason Temple? What Biblical narrative was he referring to when he said “I’ve been to the mountaintop?”

## **Sources**

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