

Tri-State Defender

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## VIOLENCE FROM THE PEW.

In a strange tale of events that led to the shooting of a Church of God in Christ minister, the accused evangelist seeks exoneration from prosecution.

By Wiley Henry

Ever since Feleciaa C. Futch could remember, she could sing -- her father, Elder Robert Futch, Jr., told her so. No one has to tell her now that she has a melodious voice, for she is famed throughout the Mid-South as a former member of "The Futch Singers and Derrick," a gospel singing group of spiritfilled saints whose only mission is to sing praises unto the "Lord" and win souls for Jesus Christ.

A Pentecostal evangelist (now singing solo) who was ordained in 1988 at Shiloh Apostolic Faith -- a church in the state of Michigan -- Futch, 29, is on a mission altogether different from singing spirituals and magnifying the name of Jesus Christ: She says she is determined to be exonerated from a criminal offense and a smear campaign that allegedly emanated from the pulpit of the Golden Gate Cathedral Church of God in Christ, in New Albany, Mississippi.

"I want people to know that there are ministers in **COGIC** that really aren't what they say they are," Futch lambastes, referring particularly to the assistant **pastor**, Fred Coleman III and Elder Robert L. Hamilton, Sr., the **pastor** of Golden Gate Cathedral whom she charges are "wolves in sheep's clothing."

The ordeal that Futch faces has escalated to immense proportions: She has been charged with criminal attempt of a felony to commit first degree murder and aggravated burglary. The case is still pending with pretrial set for September 21 and a trial date for October 17 of this year. An aggravated burglary charge was dropped.

The evangelist charges that Fred Coleman III physically assaulted her while she was a house guest at the home of Coleman and his wife, Cathy, on Brower St. She says Coleman, whom she's known since childhood, assaulted her around 1:55 a.m. early Monday morning, July 25, 1994, when Coleman's wife was away at a music convention. During the alleged altercation, Futch says she shot him.

When police officers arrived at the scene, Coleman had sustained serious injuries. According to police records, Futch surrendered to authorities at the advice of her attorney on July 27 and was incarcerated for six days before making bail on August 1. Coleman was listed in critical condition but quickly recovered in a private room at the Regional Medical Center (Med). Though the situation looked bleak for the evangelist, she says she continued to do God's work by ministering to other detainees. "I won 45 souls to Christ while in jail," she says.

In an affidavit taken by Sergeant O. W. Stewart on July 29, 1994, Coleman charged that Futch, whom he admitted knowing, willfully shot him after he returned home from church. Coleman's story, however, differs from Futch's. She has yet to give her testimony to refute Coleman's charge, and Futch's attorney, Marvin Ballin, would not offer comment or release any information regarding a pending case.

"He was trying to kill me," Futch contests. "He's going around lying on me. I'm going to continue to

fight this. Jesus knows what he did. The truth will prevail."

A strange tale of events follows: A smear campaign allegedly initiated by Elder Hamilton was targeted at Futch to "discredit, defame and assassinate her character." Also Futch believes that it was Hamilton, Cathy's father, who ordered Coleman to assault her because it was believed that she had some influence over Cathy's decision to leave Golden Gate Cathedral for Miracle Temple Church of God in Christ -- the evangelist's home church in Memphis.

"He (Hamilton) didn't want Cathy to go to Miracle Temple," Futch says. "He tried to sow a lot of discord between Cathy and myself to bring her back to Golden Gate Cathedral."

Futch says Cathy had some knowledge of the indiscretions, misdeeds and scandal surrounding her father.

"The women of Golden Gate were coming to Cathy, letting her know that he was sexually abusing them," says the evangelist. "He found out that Cathy was going to get help for herself and the women. When he found that out, he felt that silencing her would keep her quiet. He was unfaithful all the time and Cathy knew it."

According to Futch, Hamilton's method of silence for Cathy's disloyalty was to "concoct a terrible lie that would divert unwanted attention from himself so that the congregation would not suspect his unfaithfulness and hypocrisy."

"He labeled her as a lesbian to bring shame upon her so that no one would listen to her," Futch says. "She was a directress of the church, national coordinator of music for **COGIC** in the State of Mississippi, and assistant to the minister of music over the District 10 Mississippi Choir."

The women of Golden Gate Cathedral are apparently listening. Approximately 30 women have filed a written complaint to the hierarchy of the Church of God in Christ charging Hamilton with **sexual** misconduct. Efforts to reach Hamilton for comment were unsuccessful.

Though the relationship between Hamilton and his daughter seemed to fester, Futch believes that Cathy was silenced in a mean-spirited way to quell rumors and innuendoes in order to protect his image and the helm of the church where he presides. She also says that her reputation was tarnished by the spread of lesbian rumors and that this was a vicious attempt to defame and destroy both Cathy and herself, to rid them from their positions of respectability in the church community.

"We are two women of the Gospel winning souls for Christ," Futch asserts. "This man has defiled our name. I feel I was framed. It's like they (Hamilton and Coleman) framed me to cover their sins of adultery and fornication; Cathy feels the same way."

Though a murky cloud of lesbianism hovers over the heads of both Futch and Cathy, they forthrightly admit that their decision to uncover the "ungodly sins of Hamilton and Coleman" is not an attempt to slander, harass or even conduct a personal vendetta of any kind. They simply want vindication.

In a telephone conversation with Coleman, he insisted that he would not refute or answer to any charges leveled at him by Futch or anyone else, and that any information for this story would require sole authorization from his lawyer.

Also while Hamilton's role in the mix of confusion is believed to be the point of origin that snowballed to gargantuan proportions, the evangelist charges foul play on the minister's part for rumors that are completely unfounded and totally concocted with the intent to salvage his own position as a force in the religious community.

"I was bitter with Mr. Coleman and Hamilton, but I want to get to Heaven. The truth must be told," Futch insists.

"I tried to get help and couldn't," says Cathy, acknowledging that her estranged husband had committed adultery for approximately eight years of their 16-and-a-half-year marriage.

"There are several people in the church (Golden Gate Cathedral) who knew of this," says Cathy. "My husband was unfaithful on the job and at the church. I have never been unfaithful to my husband since we were married.

"My husband was the first person to call me a lesbian," she continues. "I didn't even know what a lesbian was at that time. My mother and father put out the rumors of me being a lesbian, too. There's no bitterness or anger, only hurt. I'm not angry with them. I don't know why they are doing what they're doing. My father believes I'm out to get him. I'm not trying to destroy him. If I'm out to hurt somebody, I could have done it a long time ago. I was trying to help him. The people know what they are saying is stupid. No one has heard our side."

Futch's defense for the alleged criminal offense may depend solely on untangling a web of "lies." She has indicated that throughout the whole ordeal she remains steadfast and prayerful. "God counseled me," She says. "If I didn't have the Lord...I believe I would have lost my mind if it weren't for **Pastor** Smith."

Elder Benjamin Smith, whom Futch confided in and from whom she sought spiritual guidance, is the **pastor** of Miracle Temple Church of God in Christ. "The only somebody who can clear your name is God," she says.

Through it all, Futch says she still has the gift of song and can really hold a powerful note. "I really get into my singing," she says.

The evangelist's world is marred by circumstances that give her the impetus to forge ahead. In no way, she says, will she do battle without the whole armor of God. It's a sticky situation. It may be a fight between principalities in high places, but she says she is determined to go the distance.

"Salvation is an individual thing," she says. "You have bad people. You have good people...and sometimes the bad outweighs the good."

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07-19-1995

COGIC bishop holds inquiry into evangelist's charges.

By Wiley Henry

Top Mississippi church officials probe into charges that two ministers harassed female church members; other charges by evangelist will not be heard, allegedly because of pending criminal proceedings.

In a dramatic move by the Church of God in Christ, the Mississippi state hierarchy plans to conduct an official inquiry into charges alleged against two pastors in New Albany, Miss. of sexual misconduct against female members of their church. What the four-man COGIC panel apparently will not be investigating are other charges made by a COGIC evangelist who shot the church's assistant minister. The attempted murder case of evangelist Feleciaa C. Futch is currently scheduled for trial in Memphis, in October.

Inside sources informed the Tri-State Defender (TSD) that the state's governing board, which consists of Mississippi Bishop T.T. Scott and three other unnamed state church officials, conducted a preliminary hearing on Saturday with several of the church's female complainants, including Mrs. Cathy Hamilton Coleman, wife of the church's assistant pastor, Fred Coleman III, and daughter of the church's pastor, Elder Robert L. Hamilton, Sr. Several female members signed a written complaint and mailed it to the hierarchy of COGIC.

The Tri-State Defender learned that alleged testimony provided by several of the church's female complainants has prompted the panel to hold an official hearing which is scheduled this Saturday in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Both Futch and Mrs. Coleman were present at last Saturday's hearing, but Futch was not allowed to testify. Nor did the panel appear to question complainants regarding any of Futch's other charges including her own alleged personal attack.

The ordeal surfaced last week when Futch, 29, who shot Coleman on July 25, 1994, charged that the victim, the assistant pastor at Golden Gate Cathedral, had sexually attacked her, resulting in the shooting. She also charged that Coleman and Elder Hamilton had conspired to tarnish her reputation, and the reputation of Coleman's wife because of a friendship between Futch and Mrs. Coleman.

"I would like to see this resolved as soon as possible," says Mrs. Coleman. "It's not to expose anybody, but to stand up for right. A lot of people don't want to see the truth.

"The people want to point a finger at me for all this. They think that I'm the reason why all this happened," she continues. "Where were they when I needed help? I didn't open this door, and I can't close it. Whoever started the sin, opened the door. We are just victims. I want the truth to prevail."

Futch says she wants "criminal charges to be brought out against them (Hamilton and Coleman).

"Mr. Coleman will fry in hell before I spend anymore time in jail... And that's in Jesus' name," she promises.

The two women were allegedly verbally attacked for having a "lesbian" relationship, a charge both the evangelist and Mrs. Coleman adamantly deny. And both women insist that the rumor emanated from Mrs. Coleman's father.

Futch also believes that Coleman's alleged sexual attack of her also stems from Elder Hamilton, who she claims wanted to break up the two women's friendship. She said Hamilton believes it was Futch who caused Mrs. Coleman to join Miracle Temple COGIC.

But Mrs. Coleman denies that charge, and told TSD she left for other reasons, one being the manner in which her father ran the church and "misused" her and other "female members," and the other, "an unfaithful husband."

She alleged that her husband had "committed adultery for nearly eight years" of their 16-and-a-half-year marriage.

Mrs. Coleman also said that several female parishioners at Golden Gate Cathedral had come to her complaining of her father's alleged sexual mischief, and that the "rumors" of her alleged lesbian activities resulted "to keep her silent."

Efforts to contact Bishop T.T. Scott and other ranking COGIC officials proved futile. Nor could Elder Hamilton or Coleman be reached for comment.

In last week's report, Coleman was reached but he told TSD he would not refute or answer to any charges leveled at him by Futch or anyone else, and that any information would require sole authorization from his lawyer.

"Everybody is worried about how this is going to make the COGIC look," says Futch. "But what about the church in you? What about the truth that sets you free?"

"Everyone is so busy trying to cover up and no one wants to be exposed," she continues. "Women of Golden Gate, COGIC, Baptist, Presbyterian, CME, AME, God wants you to know this is a judgment call, and he wants his people to get it right. This isn't 'Ripley's Believe It or Not.' This is pure judgment."

While Futch's major complaint against Coleman and Elder Hamilton will probably not be heard by Bishop Scott or the other church state officials at Saturday's reported hearing, she may get an opportunity to air them publicly at her trial.

TSD was able to get one comment from a prominent member of the Black clergy - not a member of COGIC - who requested his name be withheld.

"I think if the Church of God in Christ is willing to honorably and openly address this situation, they are to be highly commended for their courage, fairness and forth-rightness," said a prominent Baptist minister who preferred not to be named. "It will prove they have integrity and are willing to uphold the principles of honesty."

Says Futch: "In spite of all of the cold telephone calls, unpleasant looks and attitudes that we received, it only encourages us and gives us strength to go on. The Lord has let me know that being in a prophet ministry that everyone has something to hide. A lot of people are afraid that their sins will be uncovered."

Whatever the ruling of the church may finally be, Futch still has to face state criminal charges.

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Spirit of Justice.

Today, Memphis Evangelist Feleciaa Futch could well be sitting in a holding cell awaiting processing and transport to a state prison cell. Instead, a 14-person jury, in a unanimous decision, found the 31-year-old gospel singer "not guilty" of criminal intent to commit first-degree murder in the shooting of Elder Fred Coleman III, an assistant church **pastor**, after a week-long trial that ended Dec. 6.

Although offered reduced time in plea bargains, Futch says she was cleared of the charge by her attorney, Marvin Ballin, based on the evidence presented. Burglary charges against the formerly beleaguered, life-long, Church of God in Christ family member had been earlier dropped.

"Now the truth is out," she declares. "He (Coleman) had accused me of breaking into his home, but the truth is out now. I want to let everyone know that Mr. Coleman tried to rape me...there were lies told. I'm surprised they did not have him up on perjury charges.

"I knew it would be nobody but God who would bring me out of what I had been put in - the charges brought against me," an exonerated Futch said Today. "Now that this is over, I'm going on now to a higher level in Christ. I know that God is a deliverer for sure. We all have testimony of God waking us with uses of our limbs, but there is something about God in the court system. Over the years people have limited God in what he can or cannot do...but I stood on what He said and it was Him who freed me...all I can say is 'many are the afflictions of the righteous, but God delivers them out of them all.' It's now a time for restoration."

Futch, also a travel agent, says now she has opened a shirt shop on wheel, a cleaning business and that she will pursue other lawsuits. Now, she says it's time for women in the church to rise and take control of themselves and let God take control of circumstances.

For over two years Futch has been embroiled in a turmoil that caused her "to lose everything."

"I was homeless, had to sell my clothes to eat and my friends and family turned their backs on me," she explains. Since that time she has left the **COGIC** organization for a church of a different denomination.

Futch's plight and the plot of her situation all began in July of 1994, when she was a guest in the Coleman home on Bower Street. She says that a "personal situation" had caused her to be in their home while she looked for an apartment. Earlier in the week of July 25, she says Elder Coleman had made passes at her - **sexual** comments - and she told his wife, Kathy, who took care of the allegation.

That weekend Futch says she and Mrs. Coleman were to go to Detroit for a music convention. Mrs. Coleman was to leave two days earlier because the then-hospitalized Mrs. Mattie Moss Clark, president of the **COGIC** Music Dept., had requested her to come see her. Futch says she was to stay behind to get a flight that had been discounted. That Saturday, however, Futch says that Elder Coleman and the Mrs. got into an argument over some money that he charged she (the wife) had taken from his briefcase - money he was not aware he had already removed. He took Mrs. Coleman's clothing - and some of hers - and threw some in the trash and some he locked in his car. He was trying to stop them from

going on the trip, Futch explained. He locked them in the house, holding the only key to a deadbolt lock, and refused to let them out of the house. The police were called and in the altercation that followed, she (Futch) prevented him from being taken to jail. She began preparing to move out of the home, but, Mrs. Coleman persuaded her not to, instead cautioning her to avoid confrontation with him. The Mrs. went on to Detroit; Futch temporarily left the house.

That Sunday Futch says that in preparing for her trip to Detroit, she remembered that she had left her gold shoes at the Coleman home and went there to get them. (She still had her keys to the house.) She says that while in her room, she heard the front door close and when she looked out to see who it was, Elder Coleman was coming down the hall and he began to attack her.

He dragged her to front of the house and tried to lock the deadbolt, she says. She broke away and ran, picking up his gun from a telephone counter on her way into the kitchen.

"I yelled to him that I had his gun," she recalled. "He was still trying to lock doors. I fired a warning shot at him, but, it apparently ricocheted off something and struck him in the arm. He then began to chase me through another kitchen entrance. Began shooting - later I found out that I had shot him four or five times - we ended in an entanglement on the floor, both of us fighting for our lives. He had beaten me, kicked me, stomped me and dragged me throughout the house.

"When it was finally over, he left the house, and I drove to my sister's house in East Memphis, about ten to 15 minutes away. I don't even remember driving there I was so shook up," Futch remembers, apparent agony shrouding her countenance.

Futch says she turned herself in that Monday to her attorney and Sgt. O.W. Stewart advised them to come in that Tuesday, when she was officially arrested, booked and jailed for about seven days before Vernon Johnson, a friend and bail bondsman, secured her release.

In an affidavit taken by Sgt. Stewart on July 29, 1994, Coleman charged that Futch had willfully shot him after he returned home from church. Futch had further charged that Mrs. Coleman's father, Elder Robert L. Hamilton Sr., senior **pastor** of Golden Gate Cathedral Church of God in Christ in New Albany, Miss. had initiated a rumor that she and his daughter were lesbians and in "a relationship."

They were members of his church and Coleman was assistant **pastor** there. Futch denies the lesbian charge, noting, "Most preachers are men and they use the lesbian thing as an alibi to do what they want to do. In the end they end up being the whores."

In an earlier report Futch had said that Coleman's attack on her stemmed from Elder Hamilton, "who wanted to break up her and Cathy's friendship." She said Hamilton believes that it was her who caused Mrs. Coleman to join the other church. At that time Mrs. Coleman had said she left the church because her father (Hamilton) had "misused" her and other female members and that her husband of over 16 years had committed adultery for nearly eight years. She had also alleged that women parishioners had come to her complaining of her father's **sexual** mischief and that the rumors of the lesbianism had been lodged to keep her silent on his charges.

Futch says she had gone to "higher-ups" in the church - Bishops G.E. Patterson, T.T. Scott, Chandler Owens and the now late L.H. Ford about what was going on in the church. "Something was not right and they simply ignored me - Bishop Owens hung up on me!" she said.

However, an inquiry was made by the state's governing board into the charges alleged against the two pastors.

In the meantime, an exonerated Futch asks, "Does God have a part here?" Futch, now overcoming bitterness, hurt and personal losses, says, "God has restored me. It's time for restoration. I'm going on with my life now. I was saved at age 8, filled with the Holy Ghost at age ten, and called to my singing ministry at age 14. God has given me the ministry of prophecy, of dreams and interpretation.

Divorced for six years, Futch says she looked forward to marriage again and "somebody is already in the picture."