

THE LIFE, TIMES, AND SOME OF THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

OF

PASTOR HENRY W. GRIGSBY

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If you're reading this paper, more than likely you are a member of the Wisconsin Synod. As members of the Wisconsin Synod, it's important for us to know our synodical history, and the people who played important roles. This paper is intended to give a little information about one of the men who made an impact on our synod. This paper will be focused on Henry W. Grigsby, the first Black minister in the W.E.L.S. Many people may have heard the name before, but don't really know anything about the man. I am hopeful that this paper will enlighten whoever reads it and give a meaningful peek into the life of Pastor Henry W. Grigsby.

A long time ago, in a place far, far away, Dave and Lucy Mae Grigsby gave birth to a son. This boy was the first of ten children. They named him Henry Woodrow Grigsby. The time that seems so long ago to us was January 10th, 1906. The place was Camden, Alabama. Henry grew up like any other ordinary kid in the south. He enjoyed playing with his friends and climbing trees. Early in Henry's life, when he was about seven years old, he had a terrible accident.¹ While playing with some of his second grade schoolmates, he fell and injured himself. In those days, hospitals weren't visited unless there was a life-threatening situation. Henry, although he didn't know it at the time, had maneuvered his hipbone out of its socket. Nothing was really done to correct the problem. His friends made sure he got home safely, he was bandaged up, and told to get some rest. This situation was very unfortunate. Henry remained in bed for five or six days, until the pain became unbearable. It was only then that he was taken to the hospital. Since steps weren't taken to correct the problem when it first occurred, it

¹ The information contained in this paper was gained by interviewing Mrs. Cotty M. Grigsby the surviving wife of Henry Grigsby. The information was pieced together and is presented here in narrative form. This interview was conducted over several months. The interview began in October '99 and concluded January '00.

became impossible to correct in the future. Henry walked with a slight limp from that time on. As the years went by the limp became more and more noticeable. It wouldn't be until May 1952, when he would have surgery to correct the damage done. But by then it was too late. There was never a time after the accident that Henry ~~ever~~ walked the same.

The hip injury that Henry sustained, happened in Wilcox County at Tate Place, which was a Lutheran elementary school- Missouri Synod. During the early 1900's, the years when Henry attended school, the Missouri Synod was part of what was known as the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference consisted of the Missouri, Ohio, Minnesota, Illinois, Norwegian, and Wisconsin Synod. After leaving Tate Place, Henry traveled to Selma, Alabama, where he attended Alabama Lutheran Academy, which was a Lutheran preparatory school.

While attending the Academy, it became apparent that Henry was a great sportsman. He enjoyed hunting, and fishing tremendously. He hunted just about everything. Legends are told of him hunting squirrels, wild turkeys, deer, and even skunks. But fishing was where Henry's heart was. It was during the quiet and tranquil times of fishing that he did ^{the} a vast majority of his thinking. He would go to the lake, creek, pond, or wherever fish could be caught and sit there for hours. Fishing was his way of relaxing. Whenever the weather was right and time permitted, he would pack up his gear and head for the water.

Not only was he a great sportsman, be he also enjoyed playing sports. He was a tall young man, so anytime basketball teams were chosen, he was always one of the first people picked. Even though Henry was a man of stature, basketball wasn't his favorite

sport. Baseball was the game that interested him the most. He loved the way everyone on the field had a very important job to do. Everyone needed to perform his job well in order for the team to succeed. It wasn't enough for one person to do well without the other players doing well also. Henry had huge hands, so it made sense for him to be the pitcher whenever he played baseball. He became so good that people began to take notice of him. He actually played baseball with the legendary Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson. In the late 1920's, scouts approached Henry concerning joining the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League baseball team. Humbly, he declined. Henry knew that as a member of a Negro League team he would have to do a lot of traveling. The only traveling he wanted to do was to Greensboro, North Carolina. North Carolina was a place where young men could go to study for the ministry.

Even though Henry had resolved to study for the ministry, he knew it wouldn't be easy. As was stated, Henry was the first of ten children. In those days, it was customary for the first male to help his father with his work in providing for the family. Henry told his mother that his heart was set on being a pastor, but his father had other things in mind. Henry's mother was very sympathetic to his feelings and desires. His father had a totally different outlook on the situation. For Henry to attend school for theological training would mean that he would have to leave Alabama. If Henry left Alabama, then there was no way that he could help his father work and provide for the family. Understanding these things, Dave was dead-set against Henry leaving home to study for the ministry. Lucy Mae was in Henry's corner, and did everything she could to show Dave that it was best for Henry to leave and follow his desire of becoming a pastor. Begrudgingly, and

with difficulty, Dave consented to his wife's reasoning and Henry was dispatched to North Carolina.

While attending Immanuel in North Carolina, Henry formed lasting friendships with several people, but two in particular. Henry's two best friends were L.H. Means, and Peter Hunt. They did almost everything together. They were as close as brothers were. During the time spent at Immanuel, Henry held various odd jobs to pay his way through school. His family tried their best to support him, but at best what they could send was minimal. Henry mowed lawns, did fix-it jobs, and painting, simply so he could keep up with all his school payments. Needless to say, his hard work and dedication paid off. Henry graduated from school as a full-fledged pastor in May of 1931.

When Henry graduated, his first assignment² was to a small church named Ebenezer, located in Atmore, Alabama. Although Pastor Grigsby served the congregation there many ^{years} ~~months~~ ago, the people who live in the area still have recognition of his name. Even though, most of the people living there now are too young to remember him personally, they have heard about him from their grandparents, and parents.

Henry's next assignment was a very taxing and trying assignment. He was placed³ as shepherd over three flocks (really four). His home congregation, the church where he held membership was St. John. He also was the leader of Holy Ark, which was seven miles away, and Mapleville, which was fourteen miles away. All three of these churches needed Henry's utmost attention. He preached every week at St. John and

² In the Alabama fields where Henry worked, when a pastor was assigned, he functioned as a pastor and a teacher.

would alternate preaching that week at either Holy Ark or Mapleville in the evening. The weeks were long and grueling; there never was a moment's peace. As a pastor-teacher, Henry's schedule was very rigorous and strenuous. He taught school everyday from 8:00 a.m.- 3:00 p.m., Monday-Friday. He taught a half-day of school on Tuesdays. But Tuesdays weren't days to relax. It was on Tuesdays that Pastor Grigsby would drive to Tuskegee, seventy-five miles away to hold Bible classes. This was extremely draining since he had to be back in the classroom on Wednesday morning. But the Lord blessed his work, and his class size grew from eighteen to sixty three.

It wasn't easy to be a pastor back then. It's not particularly easy to be a pastor now, but back when Henry became a pastor, it was difficult. Imagine being a pastor of a church, but there's no copier for you to run off bulletins and newsletters. Everything had to be cranked out one by one. Imagine not being able to pick up the phone and talk to your elders or congregational leaders, because in those days, very few people had a telephone. Imagine trying to have good church attendance when most of your members lived miles away without transportation. Pretty much, everyone got around on foot. Things that we take for granted now, were luxuries then. Some of the things, to which we don't give a second thought, were longed for in the 1930's.

In the south, what was known as the Annual Conference was held each year in August. This was the time when the different districts of the Synodical Conference would send delegates to give and retrieve information. It was at a conference such as this that Henry met the love of his life, Cottye Stoudemire. Pastor Grigsby and Cottye began their life together in September 1939.

³ The word *placed* is used here preferable to *called* because in those times there was a superintendent who assigned the men to their various positions in the south. The churches didn't necessarily call the pastor that

Things went along as they always had for quite a while, but the pressure was mounting. The long hours and the extensive traveling were beginning to wear on Pastor Grigsby. He contacted his two best friends, Pastor Means, and Pastor Hunt to find out their conditions. These two men were dealing with troubles of their own. All three men, Pastor Hunt, Pastor Means, and Pastor Grigsby were wrestling with different issues. All three men looked to the superintendent for support, but none was given. Their problems, seemingly ignored by the superintendent, grew more severe^e until all three men were at a breaking point. The rigorous requirements of Pastor Grigsby's daily job began to wear his body down. He discussed things over with his wife for quite some time. He contacted the superintendent again to voice his concerns, but nothing was done to alleviate the situation. Ella Means, the wife of L.H. Means, had a sister who resided in Pensacola, Florida. Pastor Means offered for Pastor Grigsby to stay with his sister-in-law until he was able to find a place of his own in Florida. Henry agreed. His heart broke with the thought of leaving his congregation, but there was nothing he could do. In 1940, Henry packed his bags and moved to Pensacola Florida.

Ironically, Henry didn't stay in Florida for long. One day a man named Booker T. Tate, undoubtedly named after Booker T. Washington, went up to Henry and said, "I think I know you." Henry replied, "Your face looks familiar, but it belongs to a little boy that I used to know a long time ago. Your name wouldn't be Tate⁴ would it?" Booker was amazed that Henry had remembered him from so long ago. As they began to talk, Booker informed Henry that things were nice in Florida, but jobs were booming in Detroit. Henry, however, didn't know anyone in Detroit. Mr. Tate went on to say that

served them; the superintendent of that particular area usually placed him there.

⁴ It's not unusual for a person to be identified by their family name, or last name.

his sister lived in Detroit and that a place could be found for him and then word could be sent back. Well, the word finally came, and in 1942, Henry and Cotty moved to Detroit, Michigan. Once in Detroit, Henry's first order of business was to find employment. He ended up working at a roller-bearing factory. He and his wife looked around for a Lutheran church to attend. They finally settled on St. Philip, pastored by Raymond Pollotz. Pastor Pollotz approached Henry about teaching Sunday school, not at St. Philip, but at another Missouri Synod church that needed help, St. Titus.

St. Titus was a small church that had a quick turnover rate for pastors. Pastor Theodore Hoffner pastored there but soon took a call elsewhere. Pastor Jeff Johnson soon took up the mantle for St. Titus and things worked out well. Soon, however, there was friction between Pastor Johnson and Pastor Pollotz⁵. While attending one of the Annual Conferences, Pastor Johnson found out some disturbing news. The church building where St. Titus held their services had been put up for sale. None of the members of St. Titus had any knowledge of this prior to the conference. The congregation was told to find a new church home at one of the two Missouri Synod churches in the area. St. Philip, or Berea, were the choices that were presented to the St. Titus members. Not soon after the congregation was told that they needed to find new church homes, the Missouri Synod dispatched a Mr. Hack to make sure that the building was locked up permanently. Mr. Hack pulled up in a station wagon and entered the church building. A few of the members were present, including Henry Grigsby. Mr. Hack told Henry to do what he could with the congregation, then handed him a German Bible. He suggested that Henry take some hymnals since Henry was determined to keep

the Sunday school going. Mr. Hack did his job faithfully and made sure that the church was locked, not to be opened again.

Henry noticed that across the street from St. Titus was a Baptist storefront church. Henry didn't know what could be done for St. Titus, but he knew that if anything, it had to be done fast. Some of the former members of St. Titus had already pledged membership with St. Philip and Berea. Henry talked to the minister of the storefront church and asked if anything could be worked out so that Bible class could be held in their church when the facilities weren't being utilized. The Baptist minister knew something about Lutheranism and remarked, "That may just work out, since your services are so short." They agreed to a payment plan, and St. Titus, now renamed Zoar, was resurrected.

Henry, and a few of the devout members, began to circulate the word that Zoar would begin to hold services and Bible classes. The small membership was blessed by God and began to grow tremendously. The Missouri Synod had cut ties with St. Titus so there was no way to get a pastor to serve Zoar. Elders and respected leaders in the congregation preached the Word, while Henry tended to the Bible class. Things were finally falling into place and Henry and Cottye both knew that God had led them to Michigan.

As newfound residents of Michigan, the Grigsby's needed to make some adjustments in their A.A.L. policy. A Mr. Gray dropped by their home to help them with the policy. Mr. Gray found out about the state of Zoar and recounted that he had just recently adjusted policies for a few Wisconsin Synod members. He suggested that since

⁵ Jeff Johnson was a Black pastor that had to conduct his ministry under Pastor Pollotz. Black ministers weren't given free reign to minister as they saw fit. If they served in the south, they were placed under a

Zoar wasn't supplied with a pastor, maybe the Wisconsin Synod could be contacted. Mr. Gray dropped the name Valleskey. Pastor Valleskey was serving at Hope in Detroit. Henry contacted Pastor Valleskey right away. Valleskey was eager to serve, but related the fact that it would have to be the general consensus of Zoar that he serve there, not just a few of the members. Pastor Valleskey requested permission of his congregation to serve Zoar until they got a pastor. Even though Zoar was now being served spiritually, they weren't receiving any kind of financial help. The Wisconsin Synod was hesitant to supply a congregation with finance that wasn't a member of the Synod. Time passed and Pastor Valleskey alternated preaching at Zoar with Pastor Fredrich and Pastor Bryant.

Finally, a full-time pastor was sent to aid Zoar. Pastor Dumas was sent to serve by the Wisconsin Synod. As time went on, a parsonage was built. Services were now held in the parsonage. Pastor Dumas retired suddenly and Zoar was once again left without a shepherd. Several calls were sent out, but no one ever came. Zoar had even built a church to go along with the parsonage, but still the call remained unfilled. In 1956, the congregation of Zoar decided to call Henry W. Grigsby to be its full-time pastor. Pastor Grigsby served Zoar faithfully for twenty years.

Twenty years flew past quickly, and in 1977, Pastor Grigsby received and accepted a retirement call to Siloah in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Pastor Grigsby served Siloah faithfully also and was finally called to heaven on August 15th, 1998.

This paper doesn't do justice to the life of a man whose life spanned ninety-two years in five different states. It attempts only to highlight some of the things that he did on his journey from earth to heaven. My grandfather accomplished many things in his lifetime. I don't even know all the things that he accomplished. He touched the lives of

superintendent. If they served in the north, they were placed under the supervision of another pastor.

many, including me. Many people have informed me of how he helped make their life better. He was a philanthropist of sorts. He was a foster parent to over one hundred children. He counseled individuals even after he was bedridden. Hundreds sought his advice if not thousands. Students that he taught twenty, thirty, in some cases forty years earlier, made it a point to come and visit him wherever he was. Pastor Grigsby's favorite poem was *A House by the Side of the Road*. This poem culminates with this final line, which describes the way Pastor Grigsby lived. "*Let me live in a house by the side of the road, and be a friend to man.*"