The Rev. Dr. Johnnie Colemon

She was an only child, born in Alabama, but was raised in Columbus, Mississippi; and is named Johnnie Mae Haley because her father wanted a boy—instead, he got a girl. She’s one woman who took the bumps and bruises to lead an entire generation to understanding that ‘Prosperity is your birthright’. And, after 45 years of the most successful New Thought Ministry in the world, the Rev. Dr. Johnnie Coleman has just gotten her second wind and says, “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

The Reverend Dr. Johnnie Coleman (JC), Founder-Minister of Christ Universal Temple, has a message: Teaching People How To Live Better Lives. Often referred to as the First Lady of America’s Religious Community, she is the Pastor of the thriving, spirited and progressive New Thought Church, which has nearly 20,000 members.

“JOHNNIE”, as she is affectionately called, is a builder and a teacher; she has built six structures to spread the “better living” teachings, three churches, two institutions of learning and a restaurant and banquet facility. The first church was Christ Unity Temple and its addition. The congregation expanded to the current Christ Universal Temple, located on the sprawling campus grounds at 119th Street (named Rev. Johnnie Coleman Drive in 1996) and Ashland Avenue in Chicago. Close to 4,000 people flock every Sunday and are taught how to think, rather than what to think. Her experiences compel her to share with others: “Change Your Thoughts and Change Your Life.”

THE BEGINNING

However, JC didn’t set out to become a living legend and a minister to millions. Smiling as she expressed her early desires, JC said, “I never wanted to be a minister, so I didn’t expect to be this at all. You know what I wanted to be? A saxophone player, and if I didn’t play the saxophone, I wanted to be in a chorus line like they have in New York on the stage – like the Rockettes. That’s what I wanted to be.”

An only child, JC said, “As a little girl, my father wanted a boy and that’s why my name is Johnnie because his name was John Haley and I was little John Haley—even if I was a girl because that’s what he wanted. Therefore, I had to be like a boy – I had to do all the things in sports that boys would do. My father built me a basketball court right in my yard; but he would lecture to the boys when they would come over to play with
me and the lecture was, ‘remember, this is my baby. If anybody hurts her, you’ve got a problem and you are in trouble. Now, do you want to play or not?’ and the boys would all say, ‘Yes, we want to play.’ They were very careful so that nobody would hurt me and they let me win cause they knew better than to not let me win; because my father was a bad John Haley! He didn’t know anything about truth.”

Her father was also the first African-American Brigman on the Mobile Railroad in Columbus, Mississippi, so a young JC got on the boxcars a road with her father on the train during work. “Everybody knew I was John Haley’s daughter. I could walk in any store and get anything I wanted, walk and say, ‘This is John Haley’s Daughter’, and that was a part of my childhood. Then, my father made his transition when I was 15 and my mother became a single parent. Since my father wanted a boy, I never did what normal girls did in their childhood. For example, I never played with dolls because I had in my mind that my father wanted a boy and boys don’t play with dolls. So, I was to him what he wanted me to be. I could shoot pool and all of those things and do it well.”

BUILDING HER RESOLVE

The death of JC’s father was difficult in the beginning for her to handle. She remembers after getting the news, “I walked in my house, and went straight out the back door over to my neighbor’s house– who was always like a mother to me, and stayed there a whole week before I would go home. I didn’t know how to adjust. I was in the Methodist Church and had been there all of my life. Since I didn’t know how to make the adjustment, I just knew my father was not there and I was not going back there because he was not there. Finally, I got over it and I went home. That put a real test on my mother because like mothers today, they try to make up for the father or whatever they think you don’t have.”

With the influence of her Father no longer in her life, JC recalled, “I had to come back and be a girl; so, my mother had different things for me to be and to do. I had to follow what she wanted for another reason, because you may think I’m funny looking now—you should have seen me when I was growing up in the South. I was almost this tall [5’9½’’], very, very skinny and very everything that you could name except beautiful. Therefore, I had to find a way to say to the world, ‘I’m here because I’m here. So, I had an attitude about how I looked. When I was a baby, they would look over into the buggy and say, ‘Oh, it’s sure is dressed nicely.’ They didn’t know if I was a boy or a girl, and that was the kind of thing I worked through from the beginning. When I went to high school, I had to be the smartest there because once you do that, nobody can take it away from you.”

Lula Parker, JC’s Mother was a Teacher at the all-black high school, Union Academy in Columbus, Mississippi, where Johnnie attended. JC remembers Mother Parker as, “A very tough lady. It didn’t matter that she was a teacher there, I had to do what everybody else had to do and she saw to that. I only lived one block from the school, but I was late every morning. I never did like to get up in the morning. I could stay up all night, but let me sleep in the morning. I never got to school on time. When I went to Wiley College in Marshall, TX, I was the most versatile four years straight, which meant I could do anything at anytime. At that school, you had to be the right color, which was not my color, or you had to own oil wells. So, if you weren’t rich or the right color, then the Sorority that you wanted to be in wouldn’t let you in. I had to be extra smart in everything to say to them that color does not make any difference and doesn’t make you what you are.
You don't have to tell it or have right signs about who you are, because, as the Bible says, 'By your fruits you are known.' All you have to do is let God do what he has to do in and through you. You get out of the way and God will take care of the rest. He's taken care of me all of my life.

THE CALL THAT OPENED HER MIND TO HEALING
(From Dr. Colemon’s book, ‘Open Your Mind And Be Healed’)

In the early 1950's, Johnnie Colemon was diagnosed with an incurable disease and began her journey to be healed. Her story began with a telephone call. “My phone was ringing at eight o'clock in the morning and I answered the phone and the voice on the other end of the line said, ‘I'm looking for Johnnie Haley.’ I said, ‘speaking.’ And, the person said, ‘Medical science says that you have six months to live – you have an incurable disease.’ I said, ‘What!’ I hung up the phone and sat there for a moment with tears streaming down my cheeks, and then I stood up to go back to my bedroom. As I passed the cocktail table a magazine fell to the floor. I picked the magazine up, I held it up and line jumped off the page. The line said, ‘God is your health, you can't be sick.’ Now, I'm standing in the middle of the floor arguing with a magazine because how can you tell me I can't be sick and the man just told me I'm going to die in six months – something is wrong!

My mother came out and asked, ‘What is wrong with you?’ I told her and then asked her, ‘Who wrote this?’ And she told me, ‘I've been putting this material and literature all over this house for years and you won't touch it; and I see you standing here with it.’ Her Mother continued, ‘If you want to know anything about Unity School or Practical Christianity, you get on the train and you go there and you ask them.’ I said, ‘Fine, I'll go and ask them.’ I got on the train and went to Kansas City and at that time, Unity Farm (now called Unity Village) was located in Lee's Summit, Missouri. When I walked through the gates, something hit me as I walked through and I begin to feel a way that I had never felt in my life. The place was so beautiful. The hedges, the flowers were perfect and the little squirrels were sitting up on their little back legs saying hello. It was the greatest place I had ever seen.”

While standing in awe, one of the Unity teachers walked up to JC and began a conversation with the young Johnnie Haley. JC told the Teacher that she had only a few months to live and the teacher said, “You don't have to die.” JC told the teacher, “I really don't want to die because I have not yet learned how to live. And the teacher said, ‘We will teach you how to live as long as you want to live.’ I said, ‘this is the place for me, sign me up.” JC rushed back home to gather her belongings to prepare for the summer-long sessions at Unity, which lasted four years; making her the first African-American students to live at Unity Village. “I can't tell you when I was healed,” JC offered, “All I know is that the healing took place. My body became whole.”
THE COLOR OF UNITY

After she completed her course, JC became the President of The Association of Unity Churches. “By doing my time at Unity School, I made a discovery very early in the first year I was there,” explains JC. “I thought I was there to receive a healing for Johnnie Colemon. That was not the reason I was really there. I was there because the beautiful literature that they wrote then and still write was all about love and how much we must love each other. But, every night when my classes were over, I would have to drive from Lee’s Summit to Kansas City, which was 15 miles in the morning and 15 miles in the evening because of the color of my skin, and I could not live on Unity Farm. I knew why I was there. I completely took the focus off of being healed and began to say, ‘What am I suppose to do about this situation?’ I could not swim in the swimming pool because my skin was black. When I learned how to pray and they taught me where God really is – not up in the sky, but inside of me. Then, I could talk to God whenever I wanted to, however I wanted to. I began to ask God what am I suppose to do about this situation. However, my answer did not come immediately.”

(1969-1970)

ROCKING THE BOAT

It would be at the end of her third year at Unity that Johnnie Colemon was driving back and forth from Kansas City to Unity that a torrential rain occurred and her car got stuck under a viaduct and was flooded. After wrestling with the ignition, the car finally started, and JC arrived at Unity with words and wisdom that were not Unity-based. “I was really upset. I walked in the dining room where everybody was having breakfast. I was wet and I took my coat off, threw it on the floor and I said, ‘I’m finished with this – you can have it! I told them what had happened to me and I said, ‘I’m not taking this anymore. If I can’t stay on the Farm like everybody else, this is it. They rushed over and begged me and said, ‘Please, you only have one more year and we are going to sign a petition so that you can stay here.’ They passed the petition and everybody signed it, and I got a letter stating that I could stay at Unity Village for my last year in school.”

So, JC went back but they put her in a workers cottage at the end of the Village. “I had to really work with myself to say, ‘Do it whether you want to or not. Not for yourself, but you will open a pathway for all Black students to be able to come and live here. That last year, I was able to stay there and my mother stayed with me for protection. The first nights were kind of cold; because we didn’t have the proper covers. So, I called one of my friends and she got up and gave us blankets—that was the beginning.” During her final year, she received her teaching certificate and became an ordained minister.

HIGHWAY 50

Out of school, and sitting on every board, JC realized it was time to move beyond the cottage at the end of the Village. “At this time, I’m out of school,” JC explains, “And, I can afford to say the things that I wanted and needed to say. Finally, they moved all of the Black students in the cottage; but I moved out because I didn’t like staying there. So, I moved to a Holiday Inn, which was on Highway #50 at that time. On the highway, there was a Holiday Inn, which did not accept Back people. I went there and said, ‘I want a room.’ And, they said, ‘We will tell you where you can go – it’s down the road.’ I went and never found the hotel
they were talking about and, I came back and said, ‘There was no hotel. I am going to stay here, or you don’t stay here!’ He looked up at me and said, ‘You sure have a lot of nerve.’ And I said, ‘You haven’t seen anything yet; so, you better give me some keys and a room!’ He gave me the keys and a room and we became the best of friends. God gives you whatever you need whenever you need it because I knew that wasn’t me doing that, it had to be the presence of God. I learned enough to know who God is and who Johnnie Coleman is and my relationship to God and how He wanted to use me. This was my assignment from God. At that particular time, I had studied enough to know the principles and the truth that Jesus Christ taught; so I knew this is what I was suppose to do.”

The Reverend Doctor Johnnie Colemon knew who God was so much that she put on a Youth Conference at Unity and invited all of the Black children to attend. “When they got there, I told everyone of them to go to their rooms and put their swimsuits on. When they came down to the swimming pool, I pushed them all in the pool! Then, I had a very lovely statement and affirmation for them at Unity. ‘Black does not come off in water! It’s all right. Be at peace.’ After that, they calmed down and the Black kids danced and swam with the white children and so it was.”

THE PIONEER

Out of a sense of knowing that a need for a vital, new affiliation of independent New Thought churches existed, Johnnie Coleman’s dynamic leadership led to the organization of the Universal Foundation for Better Living, Inc. As a member of the International New Thought Alliance, she served as the District President and was Chairperson of the 60th INTA Congress held in Chicago. Her extensive travels have taken her to London, England to be the guest speaker at the Festival of Mind and Body, accompanied by her children’s choir, Youth Vibrations.

Reverend Coleman was an early pioneer of the media ministry in the 1970s and appeared weekly with her telecast, Better Living with Johnnie Coleman, which aired in (9) markets. She has been the subject of feature articles, broadcasts in major media publications, and is a popular guest on radio and television.

Johnnie Coleman is the recipient of numerous honors and awards. This 21st century began with the unveiling of her oil portrait at Morehouse College, which hangs in the Martin Luther King, Jr. International Center. She holds the distinction of organizing and developing the New Thought movement and received the Ministry of the Century Award from the International New Thought Alliance (INTA). Rev. Coleman was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree from her Alma Mater, Wiley College in Texas. She obtained the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters and another degree of Doctor of Divinity from Monrovia College and the Industrial Institute of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Monrovia, Liberia, West Africa.
The Reverend Doctor Johnnie Colemon realized her calling when she opened her mind and found her body completely healed. Since then, she has led millions to the overflowing cup of spiritual manna. “The only way my body could be healed was from a master physician—by the physician that made me in the first place. I had to realize that if you made me—then if anything gets out of order, you can fix it because you made me in the first place. What God has done for me, He will do for you. But, there are some steps you’ll have to take because sickness does not come from God. None of these so-called negative things come from God. God is good. God is love. God is everything positive that you can name. And, when I found what caused all the negation that we express, I know the only reason people do not do better is because they don’t know any better. They don’t do better because nobody has taught them. When the master physician healed me, I wanted everyone to hear this. So, the only way I could get my message over is when my family would sit down to eat dinner, and I would say, ‘You’ve got to listen to what I’ve learned—whether you want to or not. I kept teaching them every opportunity, my family grew from four to my best friend, and that’s how it all got started—at my dinner table.”

JC’s message is clear; ‘As above, so below—as within, so without’. She says, “I never will stop discovering all that God has put inside of me. The greatest discovery that I made was to know that within every man, woman and child there is the Christ. And, the Christ is God’s idea of Himself. Now, when you stop and realize that all of God is inside of you and the only reason you are not expressing it is because you don’t know how. When you realize that heaven and hell are not places; but they are states of mind. Then, you realize when you are sick; you are in hell, when you are broke; you are in hell. To be in heaven is to enjoy prosperity and prosperity does not just mean money. Prosperity means love, health, joy, and peace—all the good things. But, it does include money—so, I include money and I teach money because I need money in this world. I have not learned yet to go in a store and give the lady behind the counter the affirmation that ‘God is the source of my supply,’ and I can walk out with my fur coat—it doesn’t work that way.”
Why do you call Christ Universal Temple a Teaching Ministry?
“I call this a Teaching Ministry because it does exactly what the word teaching means. To teach means to make it clear, and make it simple. Another reason I call this a teaching ministry is because I don't want somebody calling up one of my members the next morning and ask, ‘What was it about?’ And, my member says, ‘Oh, honey I don't know, but we sure did have a good time.’ My church is not for you to come here and have a good time. My church is designated in such a way, that in the event somebody asks you what happened at church, you can give them a principle that you were taught and now its up to you to practice it and use it.”

Why do you give so much information and ask for little in return?
“My ministers have often said to me, ‘Why do you give this stuff away to so many people?’ It’s because, they don’t belong to me, they belong to God and He wants his children to receive them and those that will accept Him and believe in Him, He will set the free. God does not care whether you are black, white, green or poke-a-dot. If you’ve got the principles and believe in them as Jesus did— when the multitudes came to Him with everything all He asked was one question, ‘Do you believe?’ and if the answer was ‘Yes Lord, I do believe.’ His next statement was ‘Go your way, it’s already done.’”

Why New Thought?
“We are metaphysicians. Meta means beyond. We go beyond to the inner part and get the real meaning. We do that with the bible. The bible is your life story, and if you go beyond the physical, you will get the inner meaning. Every character in the bible represents a part of you. God gave us twelve faculties represented by His twelve disciples, and these twelve faculties are located throughout our bodies, and because we are made in His image, we have the power to direct, to give the instructions to these faculties that’s located within our bodies.”

At Christ Universal Temple, the mantra is, ‘It Works If You Work It.’ What does that mean?
“I work with Johnnie Coleman all the time and any lesson, prayer or any sermon that I’m giving, I’m not really giving to the people sitting out there—I’m teaching Johnnie Coleman. One day as I was praying, that statement came—it works if you work it. It comes from within you and if you are not meditating and have your attention stayed on God, you miss it. But, I heard the Father say, ‘It works if you work it.’ It can’t work unless you work it. If it’s not working, it’s not God’s fault it is your fault. In order for prosperity, health and peace to work, you’ve got to get rid of some things. You’ve got to let go of some things. You’ve got to stop gossiping. You’ve got to stop being jealous. You have got to let all of that go and realize that the same God that is within me is within you, and can do for you the same things He has done for me.”

You are the thinker that thinks the thought that makes the thing. Please explain that statement.
“Once again, I am a metaphysician, which means I deal with the mind. Everything begins in the mind. And, if it begins in the mind, whatever the effects are in your world, life and affairs, you must find the cause. There’s a cause for every effect. You’ve got to think the right thoughts because every thought comes back.
Whatever you think, you have made it. How does it come back? It comes back from the substance of God. And, the substance of God is like a big piece of dough; with no form and no shape — just a huge piece of dough waiting for you to use the cutter to make an incision out of this big piece of dough. Your thoughts happen to be the cookie cutter; so, whatever you think says, ‘I am the thinker that thinks the thought that makes the thing.’ Therefore, you must be very careful about what you think, what you say and what you feel. Because what I think will not hurt you—it will only hurt me.”

Christ Universal Temple and The Universal Foundation for Better Living, Inc., with headquarters in Chicago, is an association of independent New Thought (Metaphysical) churches, founded by Dr. Colemon in June, 1974 and committed to spreading the abundant-living message of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Twenty churches and study groups comprise UFBL, located across the USA, South America, Canada and the West Indies.

The Johnnie Colemon Institute (JCI), chartered by the State of Illinois, is the teaching arm of the Universal Foundation for Better Living. JCI offers: The Better Living Program, Teacher and Counselor Training, Ministerial Training, Seminars, Leadership Training and Correspondence Courses.

By Philippe Matthews, Executive Director of the HOWmovement.org

For more information on the Reverend Doctor Johnnie Colemon and Christ Universal Temple, please visit www.cutemple.org.