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***“THE HAPPY PREACHER” TO RECEIVE ITC’S
COSTEN ‘INSPIRATION’ AWARD***

(February 8, 2010, Atlanta, GA) -- While few recognize him by his actual name, Cal Lester Merrell is known locally and nationally by a name assigned to him by Bishop F. D. Washington in 1973 when he spoke to Merrell from the pulpit, calling him *“The Happy Preacher”* from Georgia. It is a tag that would continue to follow him and be a source of introduction to others around the world. In 1974 at Atlanta’s historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, the late Daddy King validated his name as *“The Happy Preacher”* during praise and worship and declared him an honorary member of the congregation. It is the recognition of his free-spirited expressions of joy and happiness in worship, and any other environs where he finds himself, that Cal Lester Merrell will receive the ‘Inspiration Award’ during the 53rd Annual Charter Day and 13th James H. Costen “Tribute to Excellence” Awards Dinner. The event is planned for Friday, March 26, 2010 beginning with a Silent Auction at 6 p.m. and dinner at 7 p.m. at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Atlanta.

Merrell, *“The Happy Preacher,”* is an ordained elder and active member of the Church of God in Christ, but attends churches across denominations. Merrell is known for frequenting special events, worship services, commencement exercises, funerals and even high profile occasions where others are being honored, making his presence known through his lavish praise. It is a mystery to many how he manages to seemingly be on every “who’s who” guest list. However, there is no mistaking that when he is present, he enjoys himself. “I don’t want people to think that I am a clown preacher, or a gay preacher, or a stupid preacher. I have the joy of the Lord and I share that joy no matter where I am. God is just that good to me,” says Merrell. Explaining further that his surname is often mispronounced, he continued. “Some will say Bur-rell, Mo-rell, instead of Merrell, but they all know how to say *‘The Happy Preacher’* and they know who that is.”

Few know about his past, for he rarely talks about himself. Merrell is number five among seven children raised by a strong mother whose husband migrated to Florida deserting the family during his early years. Mrs. Merrell became a pillar in the Pentecostal Church and was, according to her son, “the best cook in the world.” Merrell stayed close to his mother, both in the kitchen and in church and he profited on both levels. He garnered her skill for cooking, which led to a career as a professional chef and caterer. And, the seeds of love and service to the church that she planted in him grew. The trajectory of his life changed with his exposure to two other persons whose names he speaks readily

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and with great admiration as he recalls his youth – the names of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Shirley Caesar. He attributes wanting to be near Dr. King and his work in Civil Rights for his departure from his hometown of Valdosta, GA to come to Atlanta at the age of 18. At the time, he was also an avid listener to “the gospel according to Shirley Caesar”, who was singing with the famed Caravan Singers in Chicago. It was hearing the messages of these two persons that caused him to hear a greater voice, the voice of Jesus Christ that changed his life and set him on a path of faithful worship and praise whenever and wherever he goes.

The Happy Preacher is known for having a camera handy at all times and is proud of his collection of photos taken with everyone from Presidents Obama and Bill Clinton, to the Presiding Bishop of the COGIC Church, to hundreds of other persons of renown in the Church, government, and entertainment. Dr. Timothy McDonald, Pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church and a former Costen “Religion,” said “I was pleasantly surprised to hear that Elder Merrell was receiving a Costen Award. But, it’s appropriate. If there is anybody that serves an Inspiration Award, he does because that’s absolutely what he does.” McDonald continued, “He’s been one of my dearest friends for over 30 years. He is well-loved by pastors because he inspires preachers as well as those in the congregation.” Mrs. Christine King Farris confirmed that her father, Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., Daddy King, always acknowledged Merrell as “The Happy Preacher”. She noted, “He’s a very nice and inspirational person, and supports many worthwhile causes. He is always a part of the King Center activities and is always very lively and upbeat in his participation.”

Merrell is also known for his impeccably neat appearance, oftentimes vivid attire, in addition to his praise that’s audible from any corner of a church or auditorium, and his energetic dance with tambourine in hand if “*the spirit moves*” during worship. “I never would have imagined such an honor,” said Merrell after receiving the letter of invitation from ITC’s former president, now Ambassador Michael A. Battle, to receive the Inspiration Award. He says he never would have thought that he would receive an award for doing what comes so naturally – sharing his joy in response to the prosperity, grace, and numerous opportunities that he has been blessed with by God.

Elder Merrell, who once aspired to attend seminary, will assuredly be “happy” to accept ITC’s first Inspiration Award on March 26th He certainly has earned it.

For more information about the Charter Day Costen Awards, go to www.itc.edu or call 404-527-7718.

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