

Annual Convention Marks 'Defining Moment' for Assemblies of God

The denomination set new guidelines for marrying divorced couples, and sought ways to grow and remain relevant

Leaders and pastors at the Assemblies of God (AG) 50th General Council meeting in Washington, D.C., wrestled with tough issues facing the denomination. They voiced concerns about the AG's tepid growth in the United States versus overseas and a waning of the AG's Pentecostal distinction.

"This is a defining moment for the Assemblies of God," General Superintendent Thomas Trask said during the opening service July 31. "Either we will be a Spirit-filled movement, or we will become a monument."

The AG recorded a net gain of only 51 churches in 2002, bringing the total to 12,133 churches, and saw only a 3.4 percent increase in domestic membership, rising to nearly 1.6 million U.S. participants. Ethnic groups claim a major share of this increase, especially Hispanic and Portuguese congregations.

"The Assemblies of God was raised up to be a Pentecostal church in practice and not just in doctrine," Trask told Charisma, referring to churches that soft-pedal the Pentecostal experience and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He also bemoaned the trend of eliminating Sunday evening services, a long-held AG practice, where believers are encouraged to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit and are called to ministry.

The AG's executive leadership presented a blueprint for change labeled Vision for Transformation (VFT), resulting from 18 months of 300 meetings and input from 5,000 clergy and lay people. "Everything was put on the table but our doctrine," said Charles Hackett, executive director of U.S. home missions.

The VFT process was wholeheartedly endorsed at the business sessions along with raising more than \$1 million for church planting. Lively debates focused on local church governance and ministerial credentialing, and new guidelines for marrying divorced couples.

Instead of official disapproval and possible dismissal from the fellowship, AG ministers will only be discouraged from marrying anyone who has been divorced and whose former spouse is still living. A proposal to add specific slots for women in the General Presbytery was defeated in a 299-467 vote.

Local churches will receive more freedom now to follow their own models for ministry and have the green light to credential people for up to four years.

"We have given more power to the local church, but I think that what we need to do is be more inclusive, instead of exclusive," said Tommy Barnett, pastor of the 15,000-member Phoenix First Assembly. "There are many great independent churches that I feel would love to be AG if we would open that door a little bit more."

The AG recently ordained Ricky Del Rio, senior pastor of Abounding Grace Ministries in Lower Manhattan, N.Y., after he spent 20 years as an independent minister. "I never thought

[the AG] wanted me because our style is very different," he said. "We deal with the people nobody wants, so we kind of look like them. I wear the earrings and the tattoos so the traditional churches in a lot of functions I would go to, would try to get me saved just because of the way I looked."

The council's record attendance of 31,000 made a positive impact on the city of Washington. The Convoy of Hope (COH) ministry enlisted an army of 1,000 AG teenagers and 1,600 local volunteers who distributed 80,000 pounds of food to 6,500 needy residents of southeast D.C. Stressing evangelism, COH provided free haircuts, voter registration and health-care information, children's events, medical care and job-placement opportunities. More than 800 people said they made decisions for Christ.

Trask and the AG leadership are confident that a new emphasis on church planting and empowering local congregations will influence the future positively.

"I think it's a step toward a cultural change in the AG," said H. Robert Rhoden, superintendent of the Potomac district. "We do not want to become crystallized. We are to be empowering leaders, not empowered leaders."

Trask said he anticipates a new outpouring of God's spirit on the movement. "If God could get a hold of the Assemblies of God in totality, I believe we could take America for Jesus Christ," he said.

Peter K. Johnson in Washington, D.C.