

Christians Honor 200th Anniversary Of Cane Ridge Revival in Kentucky

The August conference recalled a 'great awakening' that was a forerunner of modern Pentecostalism

Nearly three months have passed since 5,000 visitors celebrated the 200th anniversary of the U.S. frontier's most notable revival, once dubbed "America's Pentecost" by one historian.

But a charismatic conference leader who organized a three-day prayer retreat during central Kentucky's Cane Ridge Gathering believes its impact has yet to be seen.

Former Church of Christ minister Jim Bevis, blackballed in 1970 for his beliefs in spiritual gifts, says participants must now implement reconciliation in their communities.

"We've got to work it out at the grassroots level," said Bevis, director of CSR (Christians Seeking Renewal) Ministries of Florence, Ala. "One man said if this is taken home and walked out, it will be more significant than what happened at Cane Ridge." Many mark a 1901 outbreak at Charles Parham's Kansas Bible school as the birth of modern Pentecostalism. However, manifestations a century earlier in Kentucky sound like today's Toronto Blessing. It's a fact that wasn't lost on the 75 people at the prayer retreat.

"We recognized the Pentecostal nature of the 1801 revival that helped birth this movement," said Church of Christ elder Jesse

Perry of Genoa, W. Va. "We corporately asked the Lord to forgive us for ignoring, and in most cases denying, His work and power."

Named for the bamboo that grew on nearby hillsides, Cane Ridge attracted as many as 25,000 people, though historical estimates vary. They traveled by wagon, horseback and foot to a camp meeting organized by then-Presbyterian pastor Barton Stone.

Fewer than 5 percent of the state's population identified with a church, making Bourbon County an unlikely location for the outbreak that propelled the Second Great Awakening to prominence.

The gathering featured an emphasis on repentance, impromptu preaching sessions and calls to unite the body of Christ. It also stirred the kind of fervor that still stimulates critics of revival.

A study book compiled for this year's nine-day anniversary observance noted that about 3,000 people were "slain," or overcome, by the Spirit. Others danced rhythmically, barked or jerked. Critics used terms such as "hypocrisy," "witchcraft" and "devil possession" to describe these experiences.

Despite the controversy, Cane Ridge spurred the spread of Christianity in America. Besides increasing the influence of Methodists and Baptists, it became the forerunner of the Christian Church denomination.

Disgruntled with Presbyterian life, Stone left in 1804 to organize a movement that emphasized the local church. Later,

Scottish immigrant Alexander Campbell emerged as its key leader.

Ironically, this nondenominational assembly eventually split into three groups. The Church of Christ parted over its practice of shunning musical instruments, while the Disciples of Christ later formed a dreaded denominational structure.

Although a reconciliation dialogue has begun among the three groups, CSR set up the retreat as another avenue of healing these divisions.

In addition to the intra-Christian Church splits, bitterness lingered over rejection that charismatic believers such as Bevis have experienced. But he believes healing began the second night of the retreat. After sharing about the pain they had suffered, members of various groups washed one another's feet. Bevis also points to tears and warm embraces throughout the retreat as evidence of spiritual progress.

"God showed me He's still alive in the Campbell-Stone movement," he said. "A lot of us have been wounded, hurt and excommunicated. Even though there have been gross abuses and departures from His will, He is still present.

"I also saw a link between the people of Pentecost and people of the Spirit, regardless of what you call it or where it happens—Cane Ridge or Azusa Street. It's all much wider than Pentecostalism or the Stone-Campbell movement."

His wife, Anne, hopes the retreat's spiritual closeness inspires many to see there is a place for remembering events that brought God's presence.

"We look at the the Lord wants us to refocus on Him," Anne Bevis said. "His presence brings everything that's needed."

The event concluded with the Lord's Supper after the Rev. William de Arteaga, an Episcopal priest, traced the role of Scotch-Irish communion festivals in the events at Cane Ridge.

"Cane Ridge was God's mercy, turning around America when deism ruled," he said. "If He's graceful, He'll steamroller through our pagan institutions with the Holy Spirit and re-Christianize America."

-Ken Walker in Paris, Ky.