

Church of God Gets Tough on Pastor Who Leads Baptist Congregation

Jim Martin may be stripped of Church of God credentials for refusing to bring a Baptist church into his denomination

A Church of God (COG) pastor who agreed to shepherd a Southern Baptist church could lose his credentials for refusing to align his new congregation with the Cleveland, Pentecostal denomination.

Not long after a story appeared in Charisma last February about Jim Martin taking the Baptist pulpit at Harvest Church in Beavercreek, Ohio, the COG's state overseer, Tim Hill, summoned him for a meeting. Although the session was cordial, Martin said, he expects the revocation to occur soon.

"I was aware of the policy but was hoping it wouldn't come to this," Martin said. "God sent me [to Harvest] to teach what they were hungry for. God did not send me there to pull the church into the Church of God."

Nor does the church want to go. When the pastor explained the situation to members in late April, they unanimously rejected the idea of changing denominations.

In a written statement to Charisma, Hill said Martin had been given one year to pursue the opportunity at Harvest, and a six-month extension was granted in February. At times, permission is granted for COG pastors to lead non-COG congregations, especially those interested in uniting with the

denomination. However, such arrangements can't continue indefinitely, Hill said.

Although the COG's next general assembly is in late July, Martin said it is too late for a change to be considered before 2002. He would prefer to see enforcement suspended and the denomination relax the restriction.

According to Martin, the policy tells Baptists, Methodists and others who may be hungry for teaching on the Pentecostal experience that the COG won't meet their needs unless they leave their denominational heritage behind. "There are members who don't want to do that because they want to reach other Southern Baptists and tell them you can be filled with the Holy Spirit and still be Baptist. The policy tells them no."

There won't be a mass exodus of pastors over the issue, Martin said. However, he knows many credentialed Baptist pastors who struggle to find COG pulpits.

Changing the policy would allow such persons to fulfill their ministry and expand the denomination's influence, he said. "I would think the Church of God would consider it a feather in their cap to have a church of another denomination ask one of theirs to come in."