

Church of God in Christ, Assemblies of God Launch Bible College

Organizers say the School of Urban Missions continues the healing that began in 1994 at the Memphis Miracle

In what organizers describe as an historic show of racial unity in the Christian community, the Assemblies of God and Church of God in Christ have joined forces to operate the School of Urban Missions (SUM), an inner-city Bible college that combines theological education with practical hands-on training. The undertaking marks the first time ever the two Pentecostal denominations have embarked on a joint corporate venture.

“I began to realize that there were so many potential leaders in the urban community, but they didn’t have the ability to pursue the dreams that God laid in their hearts,” said George Neau, founder of SUM and school chancellor.

Neau’s dream to build a school that would provide opportunity to low-income, inner-city students became a reality in 1993 with the purchase of a building near downtown New Orleans. In 1999, SUM purchased a second site in Sobrante Park—a notoriously poor and drug-infested area of east Oakland, Calif.

Robert Cowan, a Church of God in Christ (COGIC) board member, describes the Oakland campus as an oasis in the midst of the inner city. “It gives hope to a community blighted by poverty, drugs and violence,” Cowan said. “The general church community is also benefited. Christian education is typically expensive.

This fee is low enough and the education good enough that many churches are able and willing to support.”

SUM offers an Associate of Arts degree in biblical studies at a cost of \$400 per quarter, allowing students of all economic backgrounds to graduate debt free. Through fund-raisers and donations, the school sponsors the remaining tuition, which can reach \$10,000 a year per student.

SUM opened its doors with an enrollment of just four students. Today, more than 130 students attend, 65 percent of whom are African American.

“The school is based on going out there and making a difference,” said Alexander Largaespada, an SUM graduate. A gang member by age 17, Largaespada is now assistant director of When Warriors Dream, an SUM ministry in Oakland whose goal is to reach inner-city youth. “I want to give them what I never had by telling them that there is hope,” Largaespada said.

SUM has changed one of Oakland’s toughest neighborhoods, said Lt. Paul Figueroa of the Oakland Police Department “Their presence has certainly made an impact,” Figueroa said. “[Crime] activity has slowed down significantly. They took a rundown facility and made it into a top-notch school.”

Neau describes SUM as a Bible college with passion, one that connects the intellect and the heart. “I want to raise up an army of radicals who will help shape the nation for Christ,” Neau said. “Our goal is to put an SUM in every major city in America.”

As students worked feverishly to reach crime-riddled communities with a message of salvation, Neau says he recognized an urgent need to unite the denominations.

Previously owned solely by the Assemblies of God (AG), SUM petitioned COGIC to become a corporate partner. On Aug. 21, representatives from the two denominations signed a partnership agreement at a dedication service of the Oakland campus.

The event was also meant to expand resources, increase educators and enhance established campuses with opportunities for growth. "Racial tension is still very much alive in the church," SUM President Anthony Freeman said. "If we can just get together, what a powerful statement we can make."

Charles Crabtree, AG general superintendent, said the partnership is a continuation of the healing that began at the 1994 "Memphis Miracle," where COGIC and AG leaders asked for forgiveness for racist attitudes that had kept the two groups apart. Ten years later, the dream of reconciliation is becoming a reality—thanks to SUM, Crabtree said. "SUM represents one of the very first clear indications of a change toward an interracial movement. This is our testimony to the world. What a blight if we can't work together."

Suzy Richardson