

Church of God in Christ's New Bishop Plans for Future of 103-Year-Old Group

Financial reform, evangelism and improvements in voter representation are part of G.E. Patterson's agenda

Now that one of the most contentious elections in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) is over, newly elected Presiding Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson, pastor of Temple of Deliverance COGIC in Memphis, Tenn., can get down to the business of running the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination.

With all the drama of the national presidential election in the air, delegates to COGIC's general assembly made history when they voted Bishop Chandler D. Owens of Atlanta out of office and selected Patterson for the denomination's top spot. Owens was re-elected to COGIC's 12-member general (governing) board in the mid-November election.

Headquartered in Memphis, COGIC has never in its 103-year history unseated a presiding bishop, but with a final vote of 2,619-1,786, Patterson won.

Patterson, 61, will lead COGIC's 5.5 million members into the 21st century. "The Church of God in Christ will not only continue to impact this country with the gospel of Jesus Christ, nations will be touched by

COGIC's influence," he said.

In an effort to heal gaping wounds left from a 1996 election, in which

Owens managed a controversial one-vote win over Patterson, Owens said he would work with the new administration. "I will do nothing to hinder Patterson," Owens said during his

concession speech. "I will pray for his success," he added.

Owens, pastor of Greater Community COGIC in Atlanta, suffered a number of setbacks during COGIC's annual Holy Convocation. The denomination's Pastors and Elders Council, an appellate body designed to hear grievances filed by COGIC pastors, overturned Owens' 1999 decision to remove Derrick Hutchins from the pastorate of Orlando (Fla.) Institutional COGIC. Owens replaced him with H. Jenkins Bell, a political ally of Owens'.

Owens removed Hutchins because the 42-year-old pastor allegedly failed to keep a verbal agreement to give up a 1,000-member congregation in Columbia, S.C. Hutchins contends that Owens removed him because Hutchins supported a different candidate for presiding bishop.

The pastors and elders council ruled that the 1,500-seat Orlando church was to be returned to Hutchins. Council members then voted Hutchins to be chairman of their council. Delegates to the general assembly voted H. Jenkins Bell off the general board.

One of Patterson's top priorities as presiding bishop is to give financial accountability to members of COGIC. "We will give an account to the general assembly for all the money in COGIC during annual meetings," Patterson told Charisma. Other plans include a retirement fund for COGIC pastors, missionaries and other workers.

Patterson soon hopes to devise a plan that will afford most members an opportunity to vote in COGIC's national elections, held every four years immediately after the presidential election. Currently, only credential holders that include elders, bishops, pastors and a considerably small number of women can vote.

"I want every active member in the Church of God in Christ from around the country to be able to vote through modern

technology,” Patterson said.

With evangelism as a major thrust of his ministry, the presiding bishop said reaching the unsaved is a top priority for him. “Every ministry in COGIC must focus on soul-winning,” he noted.

Better known as “G.E.” Patterson to millions of viewers who watch his nationally televised program, Bountiful Blessings, on Black Entertainment Television and Trinity Broadcasting Network, Patterson plans to expand COGIC’s presence by launching an international media ministry that will include radio and television.

—Valerie G. Lowe and Billy Bruce