

COGIC church wins legal battle

A Florida appellate court rejected Presiding Bishop Chandler D. Owens' latest attempt to oust an Orlando pastor

The Church of God in Christ's (COGIC) Presiding Bishop Chandler D. Owens lost his second court battle to remove an Orlando pastor from his pulpit on grounds that the pastor refused to give up his dual position as pastor of a COGIC church in Columbia, S.C.

The Florida Fifth District Court of Appeals in May rejected Owen's appeal of a lower court's ruling that allowed Derrick Hutchins, senior pastor of Orlando Institutional COGIC, to remain in his position. "We affirm because no legal error has been identified and no record adequate to demonstrate

error [in the lower-court ruling] has been provided [by Owens]," the three-judge panel wrote in its May 5 decision to reject the presiding bishop's appeal.

Hutchins contends that Owens has only political motives in his campaign to remove him from his Orlando pastorate because Hutchins supports Los Angeles pastor Charles Blake in the upcoming November election for presiding bishop. Hutchins won a July 1999 lower-court battle against Owens when state Circuit Court Judge Belvin Perry Jr. ruled that Owens had not followed COGIC procedures for removing a pastor.

Owens wants to replace Hutchins with West Florida Jurisdictional Bishop H. Jenkins Bell, who supports Owens as presiding bishop. But both men say election politics have nothing to do with the legal issue. They contend that

Hutchins' rebellion against the authority of the presiding bishop is the core reason behind their pursuit to remove him.

Perry, however, rejected Owens' opinion that the presiding bishop has the same hierarchal authority of the pope of the Roman Catholic Church. And Perry's admission of the testimony of Charles Blake as an

expert witness on the COGIC constitution sunk Owens' case when Blake refuted Owens' opinion that he had sweeping administrative powers similar to the pope's.

The appellate court's decision pushes the matter back into the hands of COGIC officials who continue to wrangle over interpretations of the COGIC manual.

The Orlando church left the Western Florida Jurisdiction after Owens appointed Bell to the top administrative spot there, and Bell led an ecclesiastical trial against the church for walking out in rebellion against his now rescinded appointment as Hutchins' replacement. The trial board found the entire Orlando church guilty, and issued an edict dismissing Hutchins as pastor.

Hutchins then moved the church into the Central Florida Jurisdiction, headed by Bishop C.D. Kinsey. Kinsey's support of that move cost him his position as leader of COGIC's Men Of Distinction men's ministry. Meanwhile, the Orlando church appealed the Western Florida trial board's decision to COGIC's National Pastors and Elders Council, an appeal ruled appropriate by COGIC's general counsel. Kinsey sits on the council as associate justice.

After receiving notice of the appeal, Owens issued a letter that said the Elders Council has no authority to review an appeal by a jurisdictional ecclesiastical trial board. The Orlando church must first appeal the Western Florida decision to that district's pastors and elders council, Owens said.