

COGIC Leader Orders Merchants Out of Church Convention

At the denomination's annual convention, Bishop G.E. Patterson called for less vendor privileges and more prayer

When Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson, presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), banned hundreds of nonreligious vendors from selling their wares at the denomination's annual convention last November, some participants responded like the priests and scribes of Jesus' day—"they were sore displeased."

But that didn't stop Patterson from making changes that reflect his new vision for the 5.5 million-member denomination. "The Lord told me to take the church back to fasting and prayer," he told Charisma, summarizing his thoughts behind the move.

From Nov. 8-12 some 45,000 delegates attended COGIC's 94th Holy Convocation in Memphis, Tenn. Thousands of them arrived early to participate in a 30-hour consecration led by denomination officials.

"I kept hearing the Lord say, 'My house is to be called a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves,'" said Patterson during his official address to a jam-packed crowd at the city's Pyramid Arena.

Attendees who agreed with the bishop's decision said some of the selling was condemned because under previous administrations, vendors were permitted to sell everything from custom jewelry and clothes to hats and ties in the

convention center while services were in progress. Others who disagreed said his decision was unfair.

Instituting new policies for merchants wasn't the only change COGIC members experienced. For the first time, overflow crowds were able to worship with delegates at the 22,000-seat Pyramid through interactive videoconferencing.

Some attendees shouted "Hallelujah!" and "Thank You, Jesus," as they watched large-screen broadcasts in Cook Convention Center or in the denomination's headquarters—the historic Mason Temple.

Most attendees agreed the new technology was God-sent. "For years I would leave my hotel at 3 a.m. to rush to Cook Convention Center just to get a seat for a service that didn't start until 10 a.m.," said a delegate from Queens, N.Y.

Patterson used the technology to caution pastors about aligning themselves with Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church. "I'm concerned when I see men who claim to be men of Jesus Christ lining up with Mr. Farrakhan to go to Washington, D.C., for a Million Man March," he told the audience.

Patterson went on to rebuke preachers who pray ecumenically correct prayers in order to be accepted. "It's time to know who you believe in and what you stand for," he told the delegates. "Our nation is up against a nation who's got the wrong religion, and they are willing to die for it. Are you willing to die for what you believe?" he asked.

The presiding bishop told Charisma that Moon is the "greatest

threat” because he uses his money to “buy” preachers.

Patterson’s rise to COGIC’s top spot came on the heels of a heated election in which Patterson prevailed over then-Presiding Bishop Chandler D. Owens of Atlanta. This year, Patterson praised Owens, who later during the week preached delegates to their feet during communion service.

“Bishop Owens is the greatest evangelist this church has ever known,” Patterson told convocation attendees. During a dedication service, a new 80-unit housing complex was named Chandler D. Owens Place in honor of the former presiding bishop.

Mother Willie Mae Rivers, general supervisor to several million COGIC women, challenged the women to “recruit younger women for the army of the Lord” as they impact communities across the nation with ministries such as purity programs and Bible bands.

During the weeklong event, Darryl Hines, pastor of Christian Faith Fellowship COGIC in Milwaukee and director of the denomination’s men’s conference, encouraged thousands of men attending the event to take advantage of free prostate screenings conducted by area volunteer nurses and doctors.

“We don’t want the saints to be afraid,” he told delegates. “We want them to pray and take precautionary measures that God has given us access to.”

-Valerie G. Lowe in Memphis, Tenn.