

Pentecostal Church Defies Trend, Reports Growth

✖ As many denominations experience membership declines, the Church of God of Prophecy (COGOP) is reporting growth in the last two years that nearly outpaces the previous eight.

The denomination, whose biennial international assembly ended Saturday in Greensboro, N.C., estimates that 10,000 people joined the church each month last year.

Photo by John Disbrow/Creative Touch Studios

General Overseer Randall E. Howard said the church currently has roughly 1.5 million members, up from 1.3 million in 2008. Most of the growth is occurring in Africa, but he said the upward trend also is evident in the U.S.

Since 2008, the U.S. churches gained 11,000 members compared to 14,000 between 2000 and 2008. "That is a great indication of a surge," Howard said. "That is very exciting to me."

The COGOP was founded in 1886 as a small group known as the Christian Union. The union formed a denomination in 1903, and Indiana pastor A.J. Tomlinson became their pastor. The group adopted the name Church of God in 1907.

In 1923, a dispute over finances and leadership led to a split in the church. The larger group became known as the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) and the smaller segment, which Tomlinson led until his death in 1943, eventually adopted the name Church of God of Prophecy. Both groups are headquartered in Cleveland, Tenn.

The COGOP now reportedly has 12,500 churches and missions outreaches in 130 nations. Howard attributes much of the recent growth to the denomination's push toward "the harvest,"

which it implemented in 1994. That evangelism priority is also a component of a new 2020 VISION program unveiled at the conference that also includes prayer and leadership training.

“When we heard the call in 1994, we put harvest as the No. 1 priority of our church,” Howard said. “From that call, all the things that have happened since then are a reflection of that.”

Roughly 8,500 people attended last week’s conference from around the world, including Ukraine, Kenya, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Ivory Coast, India and Botswana. Several thousand more watched the meetings online. Speakers included Jack W. Hayford, former president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and Steven Land, president of the Church of God’s Pentecostal Theological Seminary.

Youth attendance was surprisingly high, with more than 1,000 participating in special meetings featuring popular youth speaker Reggie Dabbs and recording artist Ricardo Sanchez.

Among its business, the COGOP officially affirmed the works of the Holy Spirit, which includes speaking in tongues, and revised an earlier teaching about the King James Version of the Bible. It decided to continue to use the translation for doctrinal purposes but church leaders also will recommend other versions that cater to different cultures, languages and age groups.

The church also appointed three new general presbyters to oversee the churches in the Caribbean, Central America and South America. Bishop Ben Feliz, director of Finance and Publications at the International Offices, was selected to serve Central America. Bishop Gabriel Vidal, director of World Language at the International Offices, will serve South America. And Bishop Clayton Martin, National Overseer of Jamaica, was selected to serve oversee churches in the Caribbean and Atlantic Islands.

In addition, church leaders used the conference to announce plans to start an on-campus training school in 2014. Its previous Tomlinson College closed in 1993. It currently offers online training through the Tomlinson Center through a partnership with Lee University.

Howard said the church's future strength depends on a return to its roots. During a general session meeting Saturday morning, he challenged pastors to not be afraid of the church's Pentecostal distinctives, including speaking in tongues and praying for healing.

"Why is it that we are prone to try everything except the ministry of the Spirit?" he asked. "If the West is going to join the rest of the world in great harvesting for God in these last days they are going to have to return to the person, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit."

At the close of his address, Howard announced an initiative to form 1,000 Upper Room prayer ministries across the denomination. A special healing service was held Saturday afternoon featuring Dr. Tom Renfro, a physician and evangelist who testifies that he was healed of lymphoma in 1997.