

Pentecostal Groups Unite After an 'Awful Schism' That Lasted 70 Years

The Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy are linking for a three-year effort of cooperative evangelism

The announcement of a joint evangelistic effort by two long-estranged denominations is being welcomed as not only a major step in the healing of one of Pentecostalism's deepest divisions, but also the foretaste of a new level of unity in the wider movement.

The agreement between the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) and the Church of God of Prophecy (COGOP)—which between them claim 7 million members worldwide—was unveiled at the end of April. It sees the two groups linking for a three-year effort of cooperative evangelism, which is viewed as a significant attempt to repair the breach—officially described by COGOP as an “awful schism”—that stems back 70 years.

Though the two churches have their international headquarters on the same street in Cleveland, they have relationally been worlds apart since COGOP was founded in 1923 after A.J. Tomlinson was ousted as leader of the Church of God in a dispute over church government.

In their statement, Church of God general overseer R. Lamar Vest and COGOP general overseer Fred Fisher Sr., described the initiative as “a practical demonstration of the common purposes and spiritual heritage” of their two groups. “Because of the evangelistic opportunities presented by a global spiritual harvest, [we recognize] the value of a cooperative

use of available human and financial resources.”

The program launches this month and will be led by a six-member committee. COGOP evangelist William Wilson was appointed international minister of outreach of the initiative, which will involve joint services and evangelistic meetings in the United States and abroad.

The seeds of the joint effort were sown a year ago at a historic meeting in Washington, D.C., that assembled around 30 leaders of the country’s major Pentecostal and charismatic movements for a first-of-its-kind roundtable.

The group—including senior figures from Word-Faith, charismatic, and traditional and Oneness Pentecostal streams—met for three days with no agenda other than to get to know one another better and pray together.

Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan, dean of the School of Divinity at Regent University in Virginia, called the Together 2002 meeting “truly a first,” adding that the recent Church of God-COGOP announcement was very significant.

“It’s a step in the right direction for everybody and serves as a concrete example of what can be done, because they were not even on speaking terms for decades,” he told Charisma.

Fisher said that although Together 2002 was important, relations between COGOP and the Church of God had been improving in recent years. Vest could not be reached for comment.

Together 2002 was convened by the Center for Spiritual Renewal (CSR) in Cleveland, whose director Robert Fisher was “very excited” about the joint agreement. “It is an indicator of what the Lord is doing in general in terms of bringing down denominational walls,” he said.

Many of those who attended Together 2002, joined by other key figures who had not been able to attend last year, regrouped in May for Together 2003, which followed a similar format.

Jeff Farmer, president of Open Bible Churches, said he came away “even more encouraged” than last year. “Clearly, one of the future elements is cooperative ventures and ministry initiatives,” he said, adding that he had been “exchanging ideas with another Pentecostal group on how we can work together.”

Billy Joe Daugherty of Victory Christian Center in Tulsa, Okla., who attended for the second time, said he believed Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17 was being fulfilled. “Friendships are being established that cross denominational lines,” he said. “Out of relationship comes communication and cooperation.”

The informal Together network is expected to play a key role in the worldwide gathering being planned in Los Angeles in April 2006 to mark the centennial of the Azusa Street Revival.

CSR is spearheading the event, which will include both a celebration of the birth of the modern Pentecostal movement and an assessment of where it has come since.

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