

Pentecostal Leaders Convene Near Azusa Site

A triennial conference focused attention on the growth of the Pentecostal movement since 1906

Challenging churches to uphold their passion for Pentecost in the new millennium, Pentecostal leaders in May urged the body of Christ to maintain its spiritual strength as it positions itself for worldwide evangelism.

Nearly 2,200 delegates from 42 countries gathered in the birthplace of modern-day Pentecost for the 19th Pentecostal World Conference (PWC) held in Los Angeles. Memories of the revival that shook a small, two-story building on Azusa Street in the city 105 years ago prompted attendees to renew their passion and power for Christ.

"We don't need another conference. What we need is another confrontation with the Holy Ghost," Chairman Thomas E. Trask told delegates during the opening service held at Crenshaw Christian Center.

Crossing racial, gender and denominational barriers, conferencegoers representing the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.), Church of God in Christ, Assemblies of God, Church of the Foursquare Gospel, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church and a host of independent churches attended the three-day event.

David Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church—the 730,000-member Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea—urged American churches to release women in ministry.

“God is using women for the growth of the church,” Cho said. He credits women with much of the success his church has experienced.

Challenging attendees to greater levels of commitment in ministry and community involvement, speakers focused on world evangelism and missions while emphasizing the need for prayer, worship and racial reconciliation. Bishop Barbara Amos, founding pastor of Faith Deliverance Christian Center in Norfolk, Va., urged listeners to avoid discriminating against women in ministry.

“I’ve faced racism, gender bias and generational bias, and I don’t want other women to endure what I’ve gone through,” she said.

Attendees also were reminded of the racial divide that caused Christians to separate in the early 1900s. When William J. Seymour, an African American Pentecostal pioneer introduced his followers to speaking in tongues as evidence of the Spirit-filled experience, believers quickly embraced his message. His teachings, which spread across the country, attracted attention and some negative press.

The Los Angeles Times reported on the early days of the Azusa Street Revival with harsh criticism, calling the revival a “new sect of fanatics breaking loose.” The paper reversed its stance nearly a century later and now credits Pentecostals “with reshaping global Christianity.”

Research by the University of Southern California found that 9 percent of rapidly growing churches with social ministries were Pentecostal—countering the stereotypical view that Pentecostals focus on heaven while liberal Christians provide social aid.

“We care about getting men saved and ready for heaven—but weren’t sure what to do with them on earth,” said Foursquare Church spokesman Ron Williams. “Now we’re helping them with both their spiritual needs and their physical needs.”

Although Seymour later was rejected by white Christians because of racism, today many Los Angeles megachurches have African American pastors, such as Bishop Charles Blake of the 18,000-member West Angeles Cathedral, Fred Price of the 10,000-seat Crenshaw Christian Center and Bishop Kenneth Ulmer, whose 11,000-member church recently purchased the Forum, former home of the Los Angeles Lakers.

PWC is a fellowship of Pentecostal believers from around the globe who meet triennially to map out strategies to win the masses to Christ. Trask, who is general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, was re-elected to a second term as chairman of the PWC.

The previous conference was held in Seoul, South Korea in 1998 at Cho’s church. Future PWC conferences are scheduled in South Africa (2004); Indonesia (2007); and Australia (2010).