

Pentecostal Pastor Defrocked For Siding With Southern Baptists

Jim Martin lost his credentials with the Church of God

Though both sides describe it as an amicable parting, a Pentecostal pastor now leading a Southern Baptist church has lost his ministerial credentials with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.)

The dispute centered over Jim Martin's refusal to bring Harvest Church into the Church of God (COG). That decision followed a unanimous vote by the suburban Dayton, Ohio, congregation to remain in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

Martin learned of the ruling recently after meeting with Tim Hill, administrative bishop for Southern Ohio. He had been previously notified of the possibility, but hoped the denomination wouldn't press the matter further.

"I am perfectly willing to keep my credentials with the Church of God and never desired to leave," said Martin, who has been at Harvest for two years. "I'm being forced out."

However, in a written statement, Hill said that during initial discussions about the Baptist congregation, Martin had indicated there was a possibility the church would join the COG. Because of that, he said he granted permission for Martin to take the pulpit for a year, later extending that six months.

However, the COG's state overseer decided it was necessary to address the situation after receiving letters from Martin and

a church leader stating they wished to remain Southern Baptist.

"We honor their good standing with a fraternal, evangelical denomination and want the Harvest Church to know our prayers and best wishes are with them as they fulfill God's commission," he said.

Martin believes the policy is misguided, saying it tells people seeking Pentecostal teaching that they have to leave their background behind to receive that blessing. Mike Baker, the COG's communications director, said numerous options are available for Christians seeking instruction about Pentecostalism. He said the policy evolved through due process of the COG's governing councils and members of its general assembly.

"We believe this for equitable representation and the provision of checks and balances," he said. "Without accountability and equitable implementation of our approved polity, there is no integrity."

Though saddened by the decision, Martin has no plans to challenge it. He says the only way the situation will change is if the 18-member general overseers council takes action.

"Somebody at that level is going to have to stand up and say, 'This needs to be changed.' Somebody like me won't have any effect," he said.

Since going to the SBC church, the pastor has taught extensively on the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Sunday attendance lingers around 50, and he said the church's spiritual climate has risen dramatically. All but one of the adults who attend regularly have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, a higher percentage than in many Pentecostal churches, he added.

During a week of meetings last fall led by charismatic pastor-

teacher Dave Roberson of Tulsa, Okla., many members witnessed miracles for the first time. A large lump disappeared from one woman's leg. Several other people bent over by back injuries or birth defects were able to stand straight after prayer.

"It has been awesome. The spiritual change in the church has been absolutely incredible. I've been so impressed. The people have been like sponges," Martin said.

Martin intends to remain in the Southern Baptist church until the Lord directs him elsewhere. "At this point I know I'm to stay where I am," he said. "I have to stay where God has put me and do what He's called me to do."