

Pentecostals Stage 50-Hour Vigil in Atlanta to End Racial Divisions

Blacks and whites from dozens of denominations met in March to remove stubborn obstacles to unity

Thousands of black and white Pentecostals met in March in a 10,000-seat Baptist church in suburban Atlanta to repent for the racism and denominational exclusivity that has fractured their movement for decades.

White Christians swayed to the rhythms of a black gospel choir. Blacks cheered for white preachers. And blacks and whites knelt together in front of a huge stage where they shouted praises and wept over their historic divisions.

“The Lord loves diversity. He created black, white and brown,” one white pastor from Tennessee declared during the 50-hour prayer vigil. “It’s time to say that this racism has got to stop. We come against division in our land. Lord, tear these strongholds down.”

The unique vigil, called Solemn Assembly 2001, was held at one of the nation’s most prominent black megachurches, 25,000-member New Birth Cathedral, pastored by Bishop Eddie L. Long. But while Long was a co-host of the event, organizers downplayed celebrity preachers and instead made prayer and repentance their focus.

On opening night the audience was reminded that the 1906 Azusa

Street Revival—which spread Pentecostalism worldwide—began as a multiracial movement led by a black pastor but later became segregated because of cultural prejudice.

“What would happen if there was a reviving of Azusa Street, where the bloodline washed away the color line?” asked revivalist Tommy Tenney. After begging God to “break our egos,” Tenney knelt in front of two of Atlanta’s most prominent Pentecostal patriarchs, Long and Church of God leader Paul Walker, and wiped their shoes with a cloth.

That public display of humility thrilled Robert Fisher, 69, a Church of God minister from Cleveland, Tenn., who envisioned Solemn Assembly more than a year ago and raised the money to fund it. A descendant of Azusa Street preachers, Fisher has long dreamed of organizing a meeting where all streams of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements would put their differences behind them.

Early in his planning, Fisher decided that he would not showcase famous ministers or pay speakers’ fees. Even though the roster included names like Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson and Assemblies of God general superintendent Thomas Trask, nationally-known leaders were not given preferential treatment. In fact, the speakers’ time slots were determined by drawing names out of a hat.

Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan, author of the just-released book *A Century of the Holy Spirit*, said the Azusa Revival did not focus on personalities, and it’s leader, William Seymour, was a soft-spoken man who believed the Holy Spirit could use anyone. “Nobody knew who was going to speak each night at Azusa. It was whoever Seymour handed the Bible to—that’s who spoke,” Synan said.

The 7,000 participants at Solemn Assembly were encouraged to fast, as well as to linger at late-night prayer sessions. Those who led in prayer addressed racism, gender prejudice and generational divisions. But leaders acknowledged that the most serious differences are denominational, especially the breach that exists between Oneness and Trinitarian Pentecostals. The two camps split in 1916 and rarely associate with each other today because of differences over baptism and the triune nature of God.

At one point Synan asked for a show of hands to see if anyone from a Oneness Pentecostal church was attending the meeting. No one in the huge auditorium responded. Synan then prayed: "Lord we repent of the divisions. We've fallen short of your glory. Heal us."

Synan told Charisma that healing the Oneness division is a matter of "unfinished business," but he said there is willingness on the part of leaders in the Church of God, the Assemblies of God and other Trinitarian groups to reach out to Oneness leaders. Fisher also noted that he invited the general superintendent of the largest Oneness denomination in the United States to speak at Solemn Assembly. But Nathaniel Urshan of the United Pentecostal Church did not attend.

Other denominational differences were addressed at Solemn Assembly, especially the chasm that exists between Pentecostals and the nation's largest Protestant group, the Southern Baptist Convention. On the second night of the conference, members of Southern Baptist congregations came to the altar to pray for their denomination—which opposes Pentecostal doctrines.

After spontaneous prayers that erupted into shouting and dancing, Southern Baptist pastor Ron Phillips of Chattanooga, Tenn., prophesied that God was about to pour out revival on Baptists.

“Release the baptism of the Holy Spirit right now. Let the river of God loose now,” Phillips prayed. He then laid hands on Long and declared: “You will lead black Baptists and Anglo Baptists. I have called you and raised you up as a miracle church, and I will call my Baptist children back to the power of the Holy Spirit.”

As people in the audience cheered, Long fell to the floor and lay there for more than 15 minutes before a group of men helped him to his feet. The following night he told the congregation that he proudly wears the label of “Bapticostal,” noting that he was baptized in the Holy Spirit in the 1980s at a crusade led by evangelist Jimmy Swaggart.