

# Presiding Bishop Election Could Be Landmark for Church of God in Christ

**Two respected bishops in the denomination are campaigning to unseat Bishop Chandler D. Owens in November**

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the largest Pentecostal denomination in the United States, is at a pivotal crossroads in its 103-year history. As the second four-year term of Presiding Bishop Chandler D. Owens winds down to a November election, uncharacteristic campaigning by candidates who are seeking to unseat Owens reveals that COGIC faces an important juncture.

Those challenging Owens' leadership include top COGIC bishops who say his incessant battle for political power through threats, firings and other intimidating actions has damaged his ability to act in the best interests of the denomination and its 5.5 million members.

Traditionally, COGIC's presiding bishop is re-elected on a first ballot with no opposition at the denomination's Holy Convocation. The election is held every four years. No sitting presiding bishop has ever been unseated in an election.

Months prior to the upcoming November election, two key leaders in COGIC already had stepped forward to declare their desire to take over Owens' post. One of the candidates—Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson of Memphis, lost an election bid against Owens in 1996.

Patterson, who was some 500 votes ahead of Owens on the 1996 election's first ballot, lost by one vote on a rare and controversial

second ballot. Patterson said he refused a call for a vote recount in order to preserve unity. He is seeking the post again because the people who supported him four years ago still support him today.

"It seems to be a mandate from the people who want me to run," Patterson told Charisma. "This time we're hoping the victory will be so broad that there will be no need for a recount."

Bishop Charles E. Blake, pastor of West Angeles COGIC in Los Angeles, also believes he can lead COGIC to the "next level" in the new millennium. West Angeles is COGIC's largest church, and Blake serves as bishop over COGIC's largest jurisdiction.

Blake nominated Patterson for the post in 1996. He says he's not campaigning for the job to oppose Patterson, but to make sure Owens' bullying style of leadership is stopped so that COGIC can succeed in meeting the spiritual challenges of the new millennium.

"I believe if we can eliminate the atmosphere of fear and intimidation, and rise to a new level of unity, then the Church of God in Christ can be revolutionary in its impact on modern society," Blake said. "COGIC is uniquely positioned in the urban centers of the world to exert unprecedented influence for Jesus Christ."

Blake was not pleased when Owens sued the entire congregation of a church in Orlando, Fla., for misconduct because the

church would not accept Owens' appointment of a political ally as replacement for pastor Derrick Hutchins.

Hutchins said he had committed no offense, immoral or unethical, that would warrant his removal from the Orlando church. However, Owens sought his removal about the time he learned that Hutchins supported Blake for the presiding bishop position.

Owens said his grounds for removing Hutchins were that Hutchins failed to keep a verbal agreement to give up his pastorate at one of two other churches upon accepting the Orlando job. However, in COGIC's policy manual there is no prohibition against ministers pastoring more than one church.

There is a provision that allows a pastor to be removed when a congregation is found guilty of misconduct. Owens used political allies to try the Orlando church on those grounds, and succeeded in convincing a local judge to permit Hutchins' ousting, despite a pending appeal of the misconduct finding to COGIC's national pastors and elders council.

Today, only a handful of parishioners meet in facilities that once were packed under Hutchins' leadership.

Patterson and Blake have made donations of \$15,000 and \$20,000, respectively, to Hutchins' church to help build or buy new facilities. The church is now called New Life Church of Orlando COGIC.

Patterson said if he is elected he will work to remove the provision for trying an entire congregation on misconduct

charges.

“That provision is like a nuclear weapon in the arsenal of terrorists,” he said. “It enables the national church an option of dismissing a local pastor and taking a church from the people who bought and paid for it. They should not be allowed to take the property from the people.”

Owens has stated that his authority is as unchallengeable as the authority of the pope of the Roman Catholic Church. That assessment was not only dismissed by a civil judge, but it apparently triggered a rallying cry for change in COGIC.

“Where you have abusive leadership, there are almost no provisions that can be legislated that will control that leadership,” Blake said. “Where there is wise and compassionate leadership, an imperfect constitution will still work.”

–Billy Bruce