

A Prophetic Look at the Future of the Assemblies of God

This week the Assemblies of God is celebrating its 100th anniversary in Springfield, Missouri. Today *Charisma* marks 39 years since the first issue came off the press.

On Wednesday, I'm flying to Springfield to participate in the Assemblies of God centennial. It takes on special significance to me since both *Charisma* and I have our roots in this denomination that has spawned many ministries worldwide.

The August issue of *Charisma* had several articles about the Assemblies of God. In it I tell how *Charisma* was started at Calvary Assembly of God in Orlando, Florida, when I was a 24-year-old newspaper reporter. I went to the church's leaders with an idea to start the magazine, and they hired me to edit *Charisma*. For the first six years, we were a department in what was then one of the fastest-growing churches in America. *Charisma* achieved a measure of success at that point, especially after well-known author Jamie Buckingham became a columnist. And by 1981, we had grown enough to spin off on our own. The church sold the magazine to my wife and me that year in a leveraged buyout that has allowed us to develop into the media company we are today.

Those early years at Calvary were formative for me. I am influenced even today by things I learned then. The church had a culture to try new things and to grow, which is what we continue to do. Today our corporate culture and structure is more like a large Assemblies of God church than a typical publishing house.

Beyond that, my very beginnings were in the Assemblies. My parents met at Central Bible Institute in Springfield,

Missouri—headquarters of the denomination. I was born in the “holy city” a few years later, where my father pastored Lighthouse Assembly of God until I was 6 years old.



First Charisma issue,
August 1975

My early life revolved around my family and church. The Assemblies of God subculture was all I knew. Back then, women couldn't wear makeup, and there was no TV in our home. When missionaries came through, they were revered as heroes. The greatest objective in life was to be in ministry. All these were givens in my young life.

Contrast this to the next phase of my life when my father attended a liberal Presbyterian seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, because there were no Pentecostal seminaries in those days. He then pastored a “community church” in Iowa for a couple of years before accepting a position at Southeastern Bible College in Lakeland, Florida. In hindsight, I can see God how prepared me for my life's work with a Pentecostal upbringing and an exposure to other denominational traditions. Because I was exposed to other traditions as a child, I have been comfortable working in ecumenical circles as an adult.

So when it came time to write this month's cover story for *Charisma*, I did so from the perspective of having grown up in the Assemblies of God—even though as an adult I've covered the entire Pentecostal/charismatic movement. For several decades, I had closer ties to other denominations than to the AG—possibly because the Assemblies' leadership didn't know what to do with a young journalist when they had no idea what he would write about next.

Once, a general presbyter who was a family friend asked me if I ever had AG credentials. I said no. His reply: “You never want to get any,” letting me know that I could be more independent outside the denomination than inside.

But my roots in the Assemblies go back even further. My maternal grandfather, A.R. Farley, was ordained at age 24 in 1919. I value the copy of his ministerial credentials, which the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center gave me. The same year, he married Alice Kersey, who worked with him in ministry. Together they gave birth to not only four children who each ended up in ministry, but also birthed many Assemblies of God churches all over Kansas over a span of 40 years. At one point my grandfather was a district official in Kansas. Both of their mothers also became early Pentecostals, making me fourth generation in the Assemblies of God.

Many readers don't know our AG roots, and obviously we don't broadcast them in every issue. But I believe it's important to share them here. I'm proud of my heritage and how *Charisma* was born out of Calvary Assembly of God 39 years ago this month.

I asked a friend who knows everyone who's anyone in the Assemblies to help me fact-check the cover story. He said the article was fun to read, adding, "You cover it all in a way that is engaging, while being confrontational, defending, encouraging and prodding."

That was my goal: to show how God has used this unlikely denomination full of contradictions for His glory.

I believe God has raised up the Assemblies for a purpose. As the culture becomes more ungodly and many in church compromise the Word of God, we need leaders to stand for righteousness. Historically the Assemblies has shied away from speaking out on social issues. I remember the AG being criticized in the 1950s for not having a policy on nuclear disarmament yet having a policy that playing sports on Sunday was wrong.

Perhaps a casual conversation I had with AG General Superintendent George O. Wood two years ago at the Church of God's General Assembly foreshadows the future. We each had been invited there as guests. That week Chick-fil-A was in the

news because of comments CEO Dan Cathy had made defending the biblical standard of marriage. The mayor of Chicago, who supports same-sex marriage, responded by saying Chick-fil-A wasn't welcome in his city. As Dr. Wood and I talked about the situation, he asked me if that meant Chicago also didn't want the Roman Catholic Church or Orthodox Jews or Bible-believing evangelicals.

I asked him if he'd turn his comment into a blog for us. He challenged me to write it instead, saying he didn't have time—and so on the spot I asked him to repeat his thoughts, which I recorded on my phone. We quickly transcribed it and had it online in a few hours. It was shared more than anything we'd run online to that point and was widely quoted because it was an articulate commentary on a difficult social issue.

I think he was surprised by the overwhelming reaction. To me, it was a prophetic sign that God will use Dr. Wood and other AG leaders to provide leadership when it's so badly needed.

Steve Strang *is the founder and publisher of Charisma. Follow him on Twitter @sstrang or Facebook (stephenestrang).*