

Five Minutes With ... Randall E. Howard

The Church of God of Prophecy's general overseer addresses the denomination's leadership transition, future growth—and how to distinguish between COGOP and COG



CHARISMA: Last year the Church of God of Prophecy (COGOP) celebrated its 125th anniversary. That's quite a milestone. What have been some key turning points along the way?

Howard: COGOP was family-led for many years through the Tomlinson family—we appreciate A.J. and his son, M.A. Tomlinson. The translation of leadership away from the family was a clear transition of this church's ministry, vision and focus. It went to the core of our identity and really began to refocus our ministry's identity toward gospel spreading, kingdom building, church planting and outreach. It was probably the healthiest thing that has happened to this organization in the last 50 years.

CHARISMA: What do you see for the denomination going forward?

Howard: We're five times larger now than we were 20 years ago. Two things factor into that: one is our transition of vision of ministry through Bishop Billy Murray, and the second is the worldwide work of God. God has completely opened the doors to nations, and the hearts of people have opened wide in the nations. God is pouring out His Spirit all over the earth.

We are now in our new day. Over the last 30 years we have been deeply committed to evangelization. We're a ministry that's out there fishing—that's the way I say it. We are not large, and we are not the largest in the world. But we're committed to fishing and missions and world global outreach and church planting. And with those strong commitments in our hearts and

these days in which God is moving, if you're genuinely fishing, then you're catching and attempting to plant churches all over the world.

We're in 130 nations, and that will continue to increase. We are a saturation church-planting ministry, which means once we are in a nation or we begin to plant around a church through mothering and institutional outreach, we will continue to fish as long as God continues to work on the hearts of lost people all over the world. That brings us to our third challenge for the future: developing more leaders. We've saturated our leadership core with the body we have and now we have to develop more new leaders to continue reaching in the harvest and growing. We see that as being the greatest need because it will compliment and establish the evangelism foundation that we have.

CHARISMA: That makes perfect sense, given the leadership crisis around the world and particularly in the church.

Howard: I'm treasurer of the Pentecostal Charismatic Leaders of North America, and every time that group gets together we are crying for new young leaders. This isn't something that is unique; evangelical leaders are doing the same.

CHARISMA: Speaking of evangelical leaders, many of them have established a voice to speak out on various social issues. Do you think that Pentecostal denominations have a strong enough voice in this area?

Howard: I think the voice of spiritual ministries is not so much in a social presence as it is in the many who are statistically validating that millions are receiving the Holy Spirit around the world—and their presence is then being built more and more in the communities and nations where they are. Take Brazil, for instance. It's the largest Catholic nation in the world, but the rise of the Spirit-filled church within the nation cannot be ignored. Its influence is being seen in the

social and political realm as well. That is the voice that will rise—not so much the intentional voice of social and political presence, but the voice of presence in a mass. We are seeing that in Africa and Asia and all around the world. The voice of presence is going to create more and more avenues to be heard.

CHARISMA: Even charismatics get confused with the differences between the Church of God and the COGOP. Doctrinally is there a way for people to easily distinguish between the two?

Howard: Today there is very little doctrinal difference between these two churches—it's probably more policy that would mark any differences. We're both about the common believers coming to church seeking salvation and grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. We are close friends, and we feel like we're brothers and sisters—we have the same baby pictures, the same foundations, the same founder out of the same callings out of the holiness revival out of North Carolina. Doctrinally it would be hard to find the small differences that we have, which are more oriented to our structure and government and aren't obvious to Sunday churchgoers. We aren't interested so much in the differences. God is bringing unity around the world among those who stand together for the gospel of Christ.