

Global, Diverse and Growing: The Assemblies of God at 100

The Assemblies of God is 100 years young!

When approximately 300 ministers came together in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in April 1914 and organized the **Assemblies of God**, they could not have envisioned what the next 100 years would bring.

The Assemblies of God (AG) was formed by a broad coalition of ministers who desired to work together to fulfill common objectives, such as sending missionaries, establishing schools, and providing fellowship and accountability. Formed in the midst of the emerging worldwide **Pentecostal revival**, the AG quickly took root in other countries and formed indigenous national organizations.

A Global Body

The Assemblies of God USA is a constituent member of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship (WAGF)—one of the largest families of **Christian churches** in the world. However, an international headquarters for the AG does not exist. The WAGF is not a legislative body. The 140-plus member bodies from around the world are all equal and relate to each other fraternally. This year also marks the 25th anniversary of the WAGF, which was formed just days after the 1989 General Council in Indianapolis.

In 1989, the AG counted 2,137,890 adherents in 11,192 U.S. churches and 18,552,282 adherents in 128,307 churches around the world. These numbers have increased significantly. In 2013, the AG counted 3,127,857 adherents in 12,792 U.S. churches and 67,512,302 adherents in more than 366,000 churches worldwide. Since 1989, that is a 46 percent increase in the number of U.S. followers and a 264 percent increase in

the number of adherents worldwide.

The AG is a global body of believers because, from its beginning, deep spirituality and missions have been central to its DNA. In 1964, on the 50th anniversary of the AG, then-general superintendent Thomas F. Zimmerman wrote in *Pentecostal Evangel* that two common concerns united participants at the first general council: “matters of spiritual interest and a desire to reach the world with the gospel.”

People and programs come and go. But attention to these dual transcendent concerns—a deep spirituality anchored in the Word of God and a consecration to carry out the mission of God—will keep the AG from straying from its founding ideals.

Assembling the Numbers

The AG has shown growth in the number of U.S. adherents each year since 1990. That’s 24 straight years of growth at a time when most major denominations in the United States are shrinking.

In 2013, the AG grew by 1 percent, while the U.S. population only increased by 0.7 percent. The number of U.S. adherents has been increasing at a relatively steady pace—an average of percent per year from 1989 to 2000 and percent per year since 2001.

Assemblies of God growth stands in marked contrast to the decline of many other denominations. In recent decades, most mainline **Protestant denominations** in the United States have witnessed significant numerical declines. From 1960 to 2011, the United Church of Christ lost 48 percent of adherents; The Episcopal Church lost 43 percent; the Presbyterian Church (USA) lost 35 percent; the United Methodist Church lost 29 percent; and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lost 19 percent. Others showed increases, including the Southern Baptist Convention (66 percent) and the Roman Catholic Church

(62 percent). During the same period, the AG grew by 498 percent, from 508,602 members in 1960.

While mainline Protestant denominations have been declining for decades, in the past few years some evangelical groups, such as the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), have also begun to decline. SBC leaders recently have shown alarm over decreasing numbers of baptisms and conversions. The number of SBC baptisms has declined for seven straight years. This demographic decline has caused some pundits to predict the slow death of evangelicalism.

Robust growth of **Pentecostal churches**, including the AG, shows a different story. AG statistics increased last year for water baptisms, Spirit baptisms, membership, attendance, conversions and numbers of adherents, churches and ministers. Other categories, however, including attendance at Sunday evening and midweek services, declined.

An AG press release attributed much of the overall growth to increases in ethnic-minority churches and young people: "The impact is especially evident among Latino adherents, who now make up 20 percent of the Fellowship (more than 40 percent of total adherents are ethnic minorities), and Millennials (ages 18-34), who contributed 21 percent of the growth from 2001 to 2013."

Ethnic Diversity

The 2013 statistics reveal significant ethnic diversity in the AG: Asian/Pacific Islander (4.4 percent); black (9.6 percent); Hispanic (21.7 percent); Native American (1.5 percent); white (58.7 percent); and other/mixed (4.0 percent). These numbers suggest that the AG closely mirrors the ethnic makeup of the U.S. population as a whole. The 2010 U.S. census revealed the following racial breakdown of the U.S. population: Asian/Pacific Islander (5 percent); black (12.6 percent); Hispanic (16.3 percent); Native American (0.9 percent); white

(63.7 percent); and other/mixed (6.2 percent).

Much of the numerical growth in the AG in recent decades has been among ethnic minorities. From 2003 to 2013, the number of U.S. adherents increased by 14.6 percent, from 2,729,562 to 3,127,857. During this period, the number of white adherents decreased by 1.9 percent (-34,922), while the number of non-white adherents increased by 50.5 percent (+433,217).

The AG's growth in America is partly due to immigration. The AG is a global church. About 1 percent of the world's population identifies with the AG. Only 4.6 percent of AG adherents worldwide live in the United States. Pentecostals who move to America from other regions of the world often bring with them a faith, burnished by persecution and deprivation, that is an important part of their identity.

Pentecostals who move to America are often like pollen scattered by a strong wind—they plant churches wherever they happen to land. Strong African, Slavic, Asian, Pacific Islander and Hispanic AG churches are taking root in American soil, and their congregations sing, preach and testify in the tongues of their native countries.

Interestingly, this demographic shift is also helping to usher in a global realignment of Christianity. Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America are generally **evangelical** in belief, if not Pentecostal in worship, and often have much more in common with their brothers and sisters in the AG than they do with liberal members of their own denominations in the West.

The Coming Revival

This demographic shift carries enormous implications for the future of the church. Certain segments of the AG are in spiritual and numerical decline, mirroring the general decline of Western culture and its rejection of biblical values. Non-whites and immigrants, often embracing a strong Pentecostal

identity, are on the ascendancy.

Carl Brumback, in his 1961 book, *Suddenly from Heaven: A History of the Assemblies of God*, anticipated this moment. He lamented the decline in spirituality that he witnessed among American Pentecostals over 50 years ago. He wrote that “it would be easy to become defeatists.” However, he foresaw a coming revival, which he believed would fulfill prophecy in Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17: “In the last days ... I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”

Brumback’s prediction is coming true before our eyes. He identified two trends, then in their infancy, which gave him great optimism about the future of the AG. First, he saw a Pentecostal outpouring on “representatives of practically every branch of Christendom in these United States.” Second, he believed that “The Revival That Is” in foreign lands will bring “The Revival That Is to Come” in America. “The simplicity, zeal and spiritual power of our brethren around the world,” he forecast, will ultimately lead to “a new visitation upon the homeland.”

The Assemblies of God is growing in America. But the real story is the ethnic transformation of the AG. It is becoming less white and more reflective of the ethnic, linguistic and social diversity that exists in the global church. The founding fathers and mothers of the AG laid the foundation for this ethnic shift when they committed the Fellowship in November 1914 to “the greatest evangelism that the world has ever seen.”

In 1921 the AG adopted the indigenous church principle as its official missions strategy in order to better carry out world evangelism. The implementation of this strategy—which recognizes that each national church is autonomous and not controlled by Western interests—resulted in the development of strong national churches and leaders. And now, in a fitting turn of events, those churches may be bringing renewal to

America.

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