

AG Reports Membership Gains

For the 19th consecutive year, the Assemblies of God (AG) saw an increase in membership, with the Pentecostal denomination claiming some 2.8 million adherents in the U.S, according to its Annual Church Ministries Report.

The denomination is one of only two traditionally orthodox Christian groups that saw membership gains last year, according to the annual *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, which the National Council of Churches released in February. The other denomination was the Cleveland, Church of God.

The AG, considered the world's largest Pentecostal body with some 60 million adherents internationally, saw a 1.3 percent gain in the U.S. last year, which statistician Sherri Doty said is significant.

"The U.S. population grows by about 1 percent a year," she told the Assemblies of God News Service. "This is an indication that we are growing faster than the population. And in light of the steady declines in attendance by other religious organizations over the past years, this is encouraging news."

Last year the two largest church groups in the U.S.—the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church—experienced slight membership declines. Although the drop was less than 1 percent, the unexpected decline raised eyebrows because both denominations have typically grown over the years.

Mainline churches such as the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have been experiencing membership declines for decades.

Within the AG, the trends were not all upward. Although the denomination saw a 1.6 percent increase in Sunday morning/major worship attendance last year, Sunday evening worship attendance fell by nearly 6 percent, conversions dropped by .8 percent and Spirit baptisms fell 3.6 percent.

AG General Secretary James Bradford attributed those declines, in part, to incomplete reporting from local church leaders. He said conversions and Spirit baptisms routinely occur through the denomination's youth outreaches and family camps, but those forums are typically not included in the reported data.

He said the denomination expects to accelerate its growth rate in the coming year by focusing on five core values: a passionate proclamation of Christ, investment in younger church leaders, church planting, prayer ministry and better resourcing local churches and ministers through a Ministry Direct Web site that will launch this summer.

He noted that the AG, like other denominations, is "pretty staggered by the cultural challenges" it is facing." But the overall growth trend makes leaders optimistic about the church's future. "We're very grateful to God for what's happened, that we were able to see growth," Bradford told *Charisma*. "We do sense the Spirit of God actively moving in our fellowship. We are ally encouraged."