

Charismatic, Pentecostal Influencers Talk of Friendly Revival

Converge21 (C21) recently brought together leaders, pastors, educators and next-generation thought leaders to collaborate on the future of the Spirit-empowered (. Pentecostal or charismatic) movement in the United States. In all, more than 700 **Pentecostal** and **charismatic** influencers attended the event held at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va.

“The significance of this event,” said Mark Williams, “was the convergence of leaders, thinkers and the next-geners to consider shaping the future.” Assistant General Overseer of the Church of God, a Pentecostal denomination based in Tennessee, William’s highlights of the event included the opportunity “to get history from experts such as Vinson Synan; to get statistics from Todd Johnson (director of the Center of Global Christianity); to hear the voices of students; and, to affirm the things that have been good in the Pentecostal movement.” He said, “I believe Converge21 is the beginning of an intentional conversation.”

The stated focus of the C21 event was “the future of the **Spirit-empowered** movement in the United States with all its dimensions ... including the social justice/righteousness dimension.” According to Billy Wilson, Empowered21 executive director, in an interview, one prayer for this event was that those attending would “connect together across denominational, generational and occupational lines for the purpose of God’s work in the twenty-first century.” The four-day event consisted of several general sessions, numerous scholarly presentations and inter-generational dialogue.

“It is rare to get academicians and practitioners at this

level together,” said Lois Olena, executive director of SPS. While the two co-sponsoring organizations, the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) and Empowered 21 (E21), embrace similar objectives and networks, SPS has the longer history.

Partnering Pentecostals

Three men founded SPS in 1970: William Menzies of the Assemblies of God, Vinson Synan of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and Horace Ward of the Church of God. Created with the intent “to serve the church world by providing an authoritative interpretation of the Pentecostal Movement,” the Society has focused on bringing scholarship to Pentecostalism.

Membership, now more than 600, comprises every major Christian denomination. Olena says that “SPS is a global organization. It includes representatives from North America, Asia, Africa, South America and Europe.” The general sessions at C21 included several break-out discussions designed to bring blended dialogue among the diverse groups.

The other sponsoring organization, E21, emerged from a network of leaders who facilitated and hosted the Azusa Street Centennial (celebrating the Azusa Revival, cited by most Pentecostals as the fountainhead of modern-day Pentecostalism) in Los Angeles in April of 2006. In 2008, a newly formed board of trustees at **Oral Roberts University** and the International Center for Spiritual Renewal launched the E21 movement. Since then, E21 has held numerous gatherings of Pentecostal and Charismatic influencers around the world, including one in April 2010 in Tulsa, Okla., that drew more than 10,000 people from 95 nations.

More recently (October 2011), the E21 Asia Congress was held in Jakarta, Indonesia, with more than 14,000 from 49 countries. In many cases these events represent the first time leaders of the Spirit-filled movement in these regions have networked in this way. E21 has already developed regional cabinets in eleven parts of the world, including Africa, Asia,

Latin America, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, USA and the Caribbean.

Several intentional and strategic goals were acknowledged at the Converge21 event:

An Increased Breadth of Organizational Involvement. The keynote speakers for this event included denominational leaders, youth evangelists, pastors and scholars. Among them: Anne Gimenez, senior pastor of Rock Church; Nick Hall, founder and chief communicator of PULSE, the largest student-led prayer and outreach effort in America; Jack Hayford, author and Chancellor of The King's University; Alex Hurt, pastor and community leader from Boston; Cheryl Johns, a professor at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary; Ron Luce, founder of Teen Mania Ministries; James Robison, founder and President of LIFE Outreach International; Dario Lopez Rodriguez, the president of the National Evangelical Outreach of Peru; Samuel Rodriguez, president of the NHCLC; and George Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God.

In his keynote address in the Thursday morning session, Wood cited "Seven Challenges Facing Pentecostals Today." His areas of concern included: evangelism, compassion, holiness, religious freedom, unity, civility, renewing Pentecostal identity, and the overreliance upon technology. While Pentecostals face "many challenges in the 21st century," he said, "our movement is not a setting sun, but a rising sun."

A Broadening Dialog. In addition to discussing the future of the Spirit-Empowered movement in the USA, C21 delved into more controversial areas. One general session was devoted to the issue of the Palestinian community in Israel and the challenges for obtaining peace in the region. Sami Awad, a Palestinian Christian and executive director of Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem, was the keynote speaker on Thursday night. The Trust is an organization that "seeks to strengthen the Palestinian community and build a future in which the Holy

Land is a model of understanding, respect, justice, equality and peaceful coexistence." In the scholarly sessions at C21, papers were also presented on a wide-range of subjects including: "Pentecostalism in the Hispanic World," "Pentecostal Spirituality," "The Pentecostal as Activist," "Pentecostals and Justice," "Gender Justice" and "Creationism in Pentecostal Thought."

A Focus on Social Justice. Paul Alexander, a Pentecostal scholar and organizational leader for SPS, was responsible for selecting the theme for this year's SPS event: "Pentecostals, Peacemaking, and Social Justice/Righteousness." Alexander noted in an interview that "to actually think about peacemaking and social justice intentionally is new territory for [Pentecostals]. Perhaps the most newsworthy part of this event was that a Palestinian Christian from an evangelical background actually had the opportunity to share his story and received a standing ovation from a diverse audience including denominational leaders, scholars, and others."

One New Big Sweeping Goal. In his opening welcome to the E21 attendees, Wilson presented what he called the "21 Vision." The goal is: "That every person on earth would have an authentic encounter with Jesus Christ through the power and presence of the **Holy Spirit** by Pentecost 2033." This date is significant as it arguably represents the two-thousandth anniversary of the original outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 2. Wilson added that all eleven E21 Regional Cabinets had already endorsed the "21 Vision." When asked about the enormous scope of the vision, Wilson said, "We asked, 'What is something big enough that it could only happen if we truly work and pray together?' The promise of Joel 2 is that God will pour his Spirit upon 'all flesh.' We truly believe that every person needs a Spirit-empowered moment in order to bring the knowledge of his glory into their lives. We see this as an opportunity to mobilize the church so

that every person has a chance.”

An Unusual Sense of Growth & Collaboration. The rapid growth of the E21 movement is clear, measurable and remarkable. Hayford noted that “the need of the hour is for an outpouring of the Spirit, or of the love of God in the lives of people. Our world desperately needs this. E21 has a definition, a plan and a dynamism of the Holy Spirit in it.” The opening speaker at C21, Robert Morris, popular author and pastor of Gateway Church, said, “There is no way all of this could have happened so quickly unless it was a God thing.”

The **Pentecostal movement** itself continues to grow at a rapid rate. It is arguably the fastest-growing component of Christendom today. Johnson, Director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, gave a new report on the status of Spirit-Empowered churches. The Center has recently adopted the term “Renewalists” to represent the three key sectors of this movement, including Classical Pentecostals, mainline denominational charismatics and independent charismatics. At present, it is estimated that these groups combined make up 584 million worldwide, or 26 percent of all Christians.

A “Friendly” Revival

C21 drew together influencers and communicators from all generations. Luis Miranda, a noted elder statesman among Hispanic Pentecostals and Chairman of the NHCLC, said in an interview, “I am encouraged that this was a meeting of the academics and the clergy. The significance [of C21] is the converging of the theological and the ecclesial.”

Nick Hall, a young leader and keynote speaker at the popular Winterjam events across the nation, said, “God is really speaking to the church today about the **Holy Spirit**. Students have such a hunger to understand the fullness of being a follower of Jesus. The Spirit has extreme relevance to where

kids are today.” Several leaders at the event expressed concern that many Pentecostal churches and leaders in the U.S. have pulled back from teaching and preaching on the Holy Spirit.

“C21 was a strategic event,” said Wilson. “There has been a void of networks among Pentecostals and charismatics worldwide. We decided to invite a select group of leaders to this USA event. The 21st Century is all about relational networks and that is what we are seeking to establish. There are no ‘big dogs’ in this group. In fact, we don’t even pay our speakers honorariums or even travel expenses. They come and serve simply out of their commitment to the fellowship, to the network, and to the mission.”

Hayford said, “The need of the hour is not for more privatized religion, but for dynamic society-changing love. We live in a day when the love of God is overflowing in all kinds of dimensions.” E21 presently focuses on creating resources for Spirit-empowered leaders and churches. It also challenges pastors and churches to preach sermons on the person and power of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday this year (May 27, 2012) and every year.

Perhaps the distinguishing aspect of the Converge event, and the movement it represents, is not only the spirit of collaboration, but the speed at which it has developed. Wilson said, “Trust is an essential factor. The greatest revivals in history were led by friends.”