

Church of God Leader to Sister Denomination: 'We Are Family'

Some might think of him as a rival. But nearly 8,000 delegates to the Church of God of Prophecy's (COGOP) biennial meeting left no doubt that they consider Williams a brother in the Lord as they gave him a rousing welcome as Saturday night's keynote speaker. And Williams was quick to return the love, calling the newly installed general overseer of the sister church, Sam Clements, "my friend."

"I pledge to serve you. I pledge to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you," Williams said at the opening of his hour-long message in a massive ballroom at the Rosen Shingle Creek hotel. "We are family. We have a wonderful heritage together, and I believe we will have a wonderful future together."

Clements said through a spokesman after the speech, "God sent Dr. Williams to bless our church tonight. And what a word that he has brought to us and to the Christian world, because we are one, and we all work together in unity. I thank God for the fellowship of that."

Pre-convention scuttlebutt in the Spirit-filled community carried rumblings that the two denominations, both of which are based in Cleveland, Tennessee, and shared the same founder, might merge. Those rumors intensified because, for the first time, the groups were meeting in the same city outside of their hometown at roughly the same time. The Church of God wrapped up its assembly earlier in the week at the Orange County Convention Center.

But COGOP insiders say a merger is not expected. The Church of God initiated such a discussion in the 1990s while apologizing to its smaller sibling for a rift between the founder and the

church's presiding elders in the 1920s that led to formation of the Church of God of Prophecy in the same Tennessee town. The Church of God has more than 7 million members worldwide, while the COGOP has about 1.3 million spread across 133 nations.

A merger typically happens between two entities of similar size, one ranking church official said on condition of anonymity. In the case of the Church of God of Prophecy, it would be more like an assimilation if it were to join with its larger sibling.

Earlier in the week, the COGOP delegates voted to accept North American Presbyter Clements as the denomination's new general overseer. The church had been without a top leader for more than a year, while a committee of presbyters from around the world ran the church. Delegates also voted to accept a revised view of sanctification—that it is not only a second definite work of grace after a person accepts Christ as Savior but also is an ongoing process in the life of a believer.

Williams focused the bulk of his remarks on how the apostle Paul handed leadership of the church at Ephesus on to his young protégé Timothy. Ephesus was a church “birthed in the fires of revival” under Paul’s leadership, Williams said. But when Paul moved on to plant more Gentile churches throughout the province of Asia, he left Timothy in charge at Ephesus.

Not only was Timothy looked down upon by the Ephesians, who compared him unfavorably to the legendary apostle, but Ephesus had become a church that was wracked by sin, division and bad doctrine. Rather than let him off the hook to move on to a more comfortable assignment, Williams said Paul told Timothy in his first epistle that in the face of hardship and persecution—essentially— “you have to suck it up.”

Williams added that Paul told Timothy, in so many words, “Take your eyes off yourself. It’s not about you. It’s all about

Jesus.”

After explaining how Paul used his two letters to Timothy to encourage him to stick it out through a difficult situation, Williams opened the altar to “pastors, evangelists, missionaries, educators” and other workers in the church who have been going through “a dry, painful time.” As hundreds of people left their seats to swarm the altar, Williams said the Holy Spirit wanted to offer a “ministry of refreshment.”

Delegates seemed to appreciate the generous gesture of Williams coming from his own convention to speak to members of the smaller church.

“This [Williams’ appearance] really speaks volumes to how both our churches are in unity of purpose,” said delegate Christopher McKay of the Bronx in New York City, whose father is a COGOP pastor. “It was a blessing to have him here. It shows that we’re all working together to do the work of the Lord.”

Editor’s Note: The Church of God membership figure has been updated since this story’s original publication.