

George O. Wood Spiritually Architects Next-Gen AG Church

Perspiring, perhaps a bit wild-eyed and breathing hard, the preacher leans against the pulpit, both for impact and to steady himself. An hour-plus spent wringing the holy tar out of the devil can take it out of a fellow. Congregants weep and wave hankies, encouraging the preacher on. It's the very picture of a Pentecostal service a generation ago.

But that was then.

Today, the Assemblies of God—the world's largest Pentecostal denomination—offers a much different scene. Swiping screens on an iPad, the lead campus “spiritual architect” extends warm words to an overflow crowd. Elegant, witty and Steve McQueen cool, he sounds like Oral Roberts channeling Norman Vincent Peale reading Charles Spurgeon.

This is now.

Dr. George O. Wood has witnessed both scenarios in his lifetime of service to the church. Today, at 71, he's become an unlikely bridge between generations, styles, systems and even ministry models—an “old school” veteran tasked with opening the door for a new generation of Pentecostal leaders. And despite the transition, as general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, USA, and chairman of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship, Wood isn't about to let this segment of the church falter.

Not on his watch.

Fearless in the Face of Change

Wood, who has spent more than four decades in Christian service, discovered early on that fearlessness is an important

part of ministry. It's a quality he learned from his father, who stood undaunted in the face of opposition when those he pastored at a church in Oklahoma during the peak of the Latter Rain movement challenged his leadership.

"Dad was accused of not being spiritual enough—he preached with notes! He didn't do some of the excesses," Wood remembers. "One Sunday night at the altar service, two of the deacons accosted my dad. One of them put his fist on Dad's chin—didn't hit him, but put his fist on his chin. Told him he needed to resign because he was keeping the church from being spiritual.

"I remember one night during that time looking up at my mother. I was so impressed with my dad's fidelity to what he understood to be the Scripture and the working of the Holy Spirit. So I told my mother, 'I know what I want to be when I grow up. I'm going to be a preacher.' And in 10-year-old language, I said, 'And I'm going to tell it like it is!'"

Wood's eyes light up at the memories, and he puts an exclamation point on them: "From the age of 10, I knew where I was heading."

There's also the impact that childhood years spent as a missionary kid in China—a land fraught with danger during that era—had on him. After three years, his family was forced to flee as the Communist Revolution swept China in 1949. They left on a flatbed truck, bumping for two days over a dirt road that wound up and around an ominous gorge until they arrived at a landing strip.

"We got on a Flying Tiger plane and flew out over Communist lines," Wood remembers.

Experiences like these shaped Wood into a leader that can bring bold initiatives to a denomination in need of change. For him, the real danger point is doing nothing—and perhaps dying.

What kind of changes does Wood foresee for the AG fellowship that represents 3 million stateside members and almost 65 million globally? Not changes in doctrine or in reliance upon the Holy Spirit. No, the changes Wood has already begun to implement involve, among other things, technology and an increased effort to reach youth. To accomplish these goals, Wood is mentoring a new generation of pastors and leaders who also catch this vision and are primed to help bring it about.

“Dr. Wood has been fearlessly determined to make the changes needed in order for our fellowship to become an ecclesiastical leader in this next century,” says Scott Wilson, pastor of The Oaks Fellowship in Dallas. “Many church historians say that a denomination cannot thrive after 100 years in existence. That’s absolutely true if you don’t change. Dr. Wood’s leadership has given our movement a chance to prove the historians wrong. Time alone doesn’t make an organization obsolete ... stubborn pride and a love for the status quo is what takes you down.”

And so Wood is blazing the trail of change. This includes a massive digital initiative for children and youth, as more and more churches drop their Sunday school offerings and leave a vacuum of support for youth in their wake. And an annual fine arts competition, featuring tens of thousands of young people participating in drama, dance, preaching and music categories, showcases the ongoing interest of youth in the church.

“I tell our churches, ‘If you don’t have a person working with youth, take a step of faith and add one,’” Wood says. “Almost all our districts have annual conventions for youth. One-third of the AG—1.1 million—is under the age of 25. So we have a huge and growing youth population. Getting them involved in church planting and missions is key.”

Along with increased outreach to youth, the denomination is also noting and responding to the needs of other demographics—particularly women called to ministry. Jodi

Detrick, a columnist for the *Seattle Times* who also serves as the national chairperson for Network for Women in Ministry, is one of the important voices headquarters is heeding in this area.

“God’s call to ministry and leadership at all levels is for both genders and all ethnicities who answer that call and prepare themselves accordingly,” Detrick says. “The number of women looking for ways to grow and use the leadership gifts God gave them is on the upswing. This is reflected in the increased percentage of females enrolled in seminaries and those pursuing ministry credentials, as well as those moving forward into leadership roles in a number of fields and professions that were previously held primarily by men. This past year in my own Assemblies of God fellowship, six out of every 10 newly credentialed ministers have been women.”

In other words, this is a time ripe with opportunity for outreach, support and change in the denomination—and the fearlessness Wood brings to the table is meeting these opportunities head-on.

“I think under the leadership of Dr. Wood, the Assemblies has begun to realize so many things we avoided for years are actually great ministry opportunities,” says Rob Ketterling, pastor of River Valley Church in the Twin Cities metro area of Minnesota. “We’re making great strides in music, technology, media and leadership. I believe Dr. Wood is the right leader for right now to lead us to the right way of doing things to impact future generations—not to just to be thankful for what God did in the past.”

A Uniting Focus

For Wood, the building blocks for developing a healthy—and long-term—church began decades ago, as he expanded his borders beyond local church experience and decided to tackle seminary at what was then the flagship institution within

evangelicalism, Fuller Theological Seminary.

“Very few Assemblies of God people went to seminary in those days, for several reasons,” he recalls. “One, we were told, ‘The Lord is coming soon, and you’re going to waste your time in more school.’ I thought, ‘Well, if Jesus could wait to start His ministry at 33, I can wait until I’m 24.’ A second reason was, ‘You’re going to have your Pentecostal faith washed out of you.’ And third, ‘It’s a cemetery.’”

Despite such denominational resistance from well-intentioned people, Wood crossed the path into seminary, and it was a decision that would change the course of his ministry. Wood says he didn’t know when he enrolled that Fuller housed the evangelical luminaries of the day or that he’d be around people like Charles E. Fuller, Carl F.H. Henry or Edward John Carnell. George Eldon Ladd, who wrote the book *Jesus and the Kingdom* and moved evangelicals into a different stance than they had previously held, was one of his professors.

It was in seminary that, as Wood puts it, he saw the kingdom as “so much bigger than [he] thought it was.” A Presbyterian roommate wasn’t the “frigid, ice-cold image” Wood had of Presbyterians—and even had better piety than Wood saw in himself. As an added bonus, Wood emerged from seminary with his Pentecostal faith intact—proof there was life in the “cemetery” after all.

Wood’s unfolding understanding of the diverse population of the kingdom helped him work easily with other denominations once he found himself on the other side of his education. Indeed, his eclectic background, which includes a law degree from Western State University College of Law in Fullerton, Calif., and 14 years as the AG’s general secretary, further expanded his view that working with people of different backgrounds, well, works.

“I have great appreciation for believers in other

denominations or the nondenominational,” he says. “The kingdom of God is bigger than any one group. We’re grateful to be in our part.”

A Growth That Gains

Perhaps the most astonishing goal Wood has directed AG leadership to work to achieve is in the area of sheer growth. At a time when many denominations and church structures are losing members—or as some put it, “market share”—Wood sees things differently for the body he’s called to lead.

“We are vigorously involved in church planting,” he says. “In the last five years, we’ve seen 1,597 new churches open, and our goal is to get to where we can consistently see 500 new churches open a year. We trust that by the year 2020, we’ll be somewhere over 4.1 million people in the U.S. and 100 million worldwide. We are really projecting growth. We’re going to believe God for great growth!”

How does he believe that growth happens? An encounter he had with his family’s former pastor in China in 1988 provides the answer.

Wood had been gone from the country 40 years at the time of his return to China and was anxious to see what had transpired since. “Our old pastor was still there,” he says. “He’d preached the last Sunday we attended in 1949. He was the same age as my dad, 39, at the time.”

But much had happened in the intervening time. Soon after the Wood family left China, the persecution came. At the time, the pastor’s church had about 500 members. The Communists seized the church property and put the pastor in prison for nine years. Upon release, he was placed on probation for 16 years. Finally, at age 72, he was called in by the authorities and was told that after having reviewed his case, the authorities came to the conclusion the pastor had been dealt with unjustly.

Wood retells the pastor's story: "He said, 'They wanted to give me papers of exoneration and apologize to me, but I said that wasn't enough. I then told them I wanted the property back. I wanted to preach again. I wanted my granddaughter to have a travel visa in order to reach other provinces. And I wanted a pension!'"

The rattled authorities agreed to the man's requests, and when Wood arrived back in his old stomping grounds, the aged pastor smiled and had a twinkle in his eye. Wood was secretly chagrined to learn that only 30 people had been in attendance when the pastor resumed preaching a few years before.

"My heart sank," Wood recalls. When the pastor's wife brought out the notebook listing the church's members, Wood watched her unlace the yarn that held the cardboard cover in place.

"I looked at the first page, which listed baptisms, names, addresses," he says. "There were about 15 or 20 names, and I thought, 'Well, that's good.' Then the same thing on page two. Then page three. Then, page after page!"

The pastor told Wood that the church now had 1,500 baptized believers. When Wood asked how they had done it, the pastor replied, "Well, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. And we pray a lot!" By the time that pastor passed away at age 97, the church had baptized more than 15,000 new, adult believers.

The tale impacted Wood, and obviously still does today. When he looks into the future ahead for the AG, he sees nothing but a chance for growth upon growth.

Cleaning the Face of Jesus

For the man tasked with bringing Pentecostalism into the 21st century, the changes taking place in the church add up to only one thing: Jesus. By way of example, Wood remembers visiting the Sistine Chapel more than 30 years ago.

“When I was there in 1982, I saw the famous frescos of the last judgment, the creation, et cetera, and I thought, ‘Why does everyone come to see this?’ So many centuries of candle smoke had laid a grimy film over it,” he says. “But when I returned recently, the image was the same, yet so different. A wonderful restoration project had produced dazzling results, and it was all so clear!”

It was a moment of clarity for the leader, who realized the task of the church is to clean the face of Jesus.

“We must remove the grime of tradition, even Pentecostal tradition, liturgical tradition—all the kinds of stuff that gets layered in that prevents Jesus from being seen as He really is,” he says. “The task of the Spirit-filled church is to get as close as possible to what the early church believed and practiced. If we don’t get there, then we’ve got a grimy Jesus and a grimy church.”

For Dr. George O. Wood, the task is continually worth the effort.

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