

Assemblies of God: A Centennial Move of the Spirit

When the Assemblies of God (AG) holds its biennial General Council, the Pentecostal denomination invites not only top denominational officials to address the thousands who attend but also renowned speakers from outside AG circles. Three years ago in Phoenix that was Southern Baptist pastor Rick Warren.

The best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life* challenged the pastors with one of his signature messages to focus on five “purposes”: worship, fellowship, discipleship, evangelism and compassion ministry. But for this group, he added a sixth. His point, customized to the AG audience hanging on his every word, was simple yet layered with meaning:

“Be Pentecostal.”

As a Southern Baptist, Warren pinpointed a touchy subject in the Assemblies of God, a denomination founded in the aftermath of the revival fires of Azusa Street, where the message of the baptism in the Holy Spirit was reignited and spread throughout the world. While the worldwide Assemblies of God has emphasized the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the “initial physical evidence of speaking in other tongues” (based on Acts 2:4), over the past several decades observers have noticed a diminishing emphasis on it in AG churches stateside, where some pastors seem to try to be seeker-friendly to those who may not understand a “messages in tongues” with interpretation, as mentioned in the New Testament.

Warren has become friends with George O. Wood, who has led the Assemblies of God as general superintendent since 2007. In fact, Wood likes Warren’s Saddleback Church so much he’s jokingly called it the largest church in the Assemblies

because so many former AG people attend Saddleback. When I attended Warren's church, it reminded me of some AG mega-churches: a nice facility, good worship with a lively band, a carefully choreographed service—and no speaking in tongues.

It's unlikely the AG would have invited to that biennial gathering a Pentecostal firebrand like Rodney Howard-Browne, whose services have been known for "holy laughter" and other manifestations.

The truth is, as the Assemblies has moved up the social ladder in the last 100 years (as have other Pentecostal denominations), it finds itself a movement of contrasts and paradoxes. Speaking in tongues is just one of many within this denomination that still calls itself a "fellowship."

Though some AG congregations may appear to downplay the baptism in the Holy Spirit, in 2013 there was a statistical increase in Spirit baptisms among AG churches—and that doesn't include those who received the baptism in the Spirit outside the local church setting, such as camp meetings, district-sponsored men's and women's retreats, as well as children's and youth camps and conventions. (Incidentally, I received the baptism in the Holy Spirit at age 12 at an AG youth camp in Iowa.)

So while many assume the broad array of Assemblies churches—including those that don't highlight Spirit baptism as strongly as others—has led to a decline in both numbers and emphasis on the Pentecostal experience, this isn't necessarily the case. The AG is now the largest Pentecostal denomination worldwide, with almost 68 million adherents. In the U.S., the AG has experienced a remarkable 24 years of uninterrupted growth. Yet much of this development—both globally and stateside—has come only in recent years, proving that obviously what the Holy Spirit began a century ago has grown into something few in 1914 would ever have imagined.

It's a Matter of Numbers

Today the AG frequently refers to itself as the world's largest Pentecostal denomination, yet even this needs some clarification. In the U.S. the Assemblies has 3.1 million members, much less than the 6.1 million often attributed to the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). But I've talked to COGIC leaders who admit that the numbers are estimates since the denomination doesn't keep detailed statistics.

AG leaders will tell you numbers aren't as important as their overall vision for accomplishing "the greatest evangelism that the world has ever seen." That's meant that historically the Assemblies doesn't emphasize membership the way other denominations do, in part to distance itself from the countless churches with bloated numbers from "CEO" members—those who attend Christmas and Easter Only. Countless people will attend an AG church yet never become members. Because of this, the AG more frequently refers to its "adherents" both here and overseas—those who attend regularly but aren't necessarily members.

What about the adherents worldwide (there's no official term to identify them like Methodists or Catholics)? Are they all AG? Each country has its own denomination, only loosely affiliated in the World Assemblies of God Fellowship (WAGF). In Canada, for example, the largest of three WAGF-affiliated groups is known as the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. (There are also the Canadian Assemblies of God and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God.) In Korea there are the Korean Assemblies of God and the Jesus Assemblies of God, due to a denominational split.

In the U.S. people call the Assemblies of God "AG" for short. But don't use that term in Australia; there it's called AOG. In the past several decades the AOG has exploded, helping Pentecostals become the second-largest segment of Christendom in the country, surpassed only by Roman Catholics. The

Pentecostal movement has been shaped by many things in Australia, but one of the major influencers has been Hillsong Church in Sydney, where Senior Pastor Brian Houston and former worship pastor Darlene Zschech made the church known globally for its intense worship, fiery preaching, strong integrity and doctrinal purity—all while “being trendy.”

In some ways that reflects where the Assemblies is today: aiming to be relevant and accepted yet also trying to remain doctrinally pure and morally strong in a world light years removed from 1914, when its founders met in the Grand Opera House in Hot Springs, Arkansas (see “History in the Assembling” sidebar). Today’s AG churches are among the largest in the U.S., and in most metro areas the largest Pentecostal or charismatic church is AG, though it may not use the denominational name. And true to form, the Assemblies is just fine with that.

Reasons to Begin

Indeed, the story of the Assemblies is one of apparent contradiction—including theories over how and why it was started. The year 1914 marked the start of World War I. Most Pentecostals of the day were pacifists, much like Mennonites are viewed today. These early Pentecostals, as well as other pacifist evangelicals at the turn of the 20th century, opposed war because they believed they should focus on working for the heavenly King. They viewed killing people on behalf of earthly kings as moral compromise. Because of this, some have hypothesized the AG became a haven for anti-war peacekeepers, yet that sentiment had essentially left by the time World War II began.

It’s also said that the AG was formed to give covering to the many freelance missionaries spreading the gospel and Pentecostal message around the world. Indeed, the denomination has been undeniably missions-minded since its origins, and

evangelism and world missions have continued to be pillars of its organizational structure.

The father and grandparents of the late Paul Crouch, founder of Trinity Broadcasting Network, were among the earliest missionaries who helped start the Assemblies of God. Today the AG USA has more than 2,800 missionaries serving in countries around the world, and the relationship with the AG USA and other national bodies is a strong one, but without any governance or structural control from headquarters in the U.S.

“There’s never been anything like what the Assemblies of God has done through its missionaries and missions strategy of developing the indigenous church: self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating,” Wood says. “We’ve had scores of missionaries lay down their lives on foreign soil for the gospel. Our churches and pastors have prayed and sacrificed to send missionaries to the far-flung parts of this world.”

Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), recently told Wood: “If you took the Assemblies of God out of the Kingdom of God, you would blow a pretty big hole in the Kingdom of God.”

Of Race and Reconciliation

Yet another theory to the AG’s origins is that the denomination began because of racism. This is a touchy issue not only because of the general stain of racism in American history, but also because of the deep historic ties between the AG and the predominantly black COGIC, founded seven years prior to the AG’s formation. Bishop Mason ordained at least one AG founder, Howard Goss, and the COGIC founder and AG founders knew and respected each other. In fact, Mason spoke at the inaugural General Council, brought his black gospel choir from Lexington, Mississippi, and blessed the newly formed AG.

As with the Azusa Street revival, whites and blacks came together in the early days of the movement before structure had developed. When organizations emerged, however, they did so along cultural lines—under the Jim Crow laws—and the interracial fellowship of the early years dissipated.

When the civil rights movement gained traction in the 1950s and 1960s, with a few exceptions AG leaders—like most other white Pentecostals—sat it out. Once again, this was in contrast to early precedents of the movement. In 1915 the AG ordained its first black minister, Ellsworth S. Thomas of Binghamton, New York. And the Assemblies ordained a number of black men and women until 1939, when it instituted a rule against ordaining blacks. They could still be licensed at the district level, but not ordained at the national level. This racist rule was overturned in 1962, when Bob Harrison, a well-known African-American evangelist and associate of Billy Graham, was ordained.

In recent decades, Assemblies leaders have worked to bridge the racial divide. In 1989, the denomination's General Council adopted a resolution repenting of "the sin of racism in any form." The Assemblies changed its governance structure in 1997 to include representatives of ethnic fellowships on its General and Executive Presbyteries. And in 2007, Zollie Smith Jr., an African-American with COGIC roots, became the AG's executive director of U.S. missions.

Under Wood's leadership, the Assemblies has reached out to and dialogued more with COGIC—a rarity since the two denominations' early days. And in 2012, the widow of longtime COGIC presiding bishop J.O. Patterson Sr. deposited his personal papers in the Assemblies of God archives, not only to preserve them for posterity but also as a sign of reconciliation.

Indeed, racial reconciliation has been a storyline for the AG since the beginning. Azusa Street unified races in

unprecedented fashion, as did the inaugural General Council gathering in Hot Springs. Yet by 1917, racism raised its ugly head within the fledgling denomination when AG leaders refused to appoint pastor Alexander Howard as a missionary to Liberia because, oddly enough, he was black. That single decision spawned yet another split among Pentecostal groups, as a few years later Howard helped to form the United Pentecostal Council of the Assemblies of God (UPCAG), which operated for decades under the radar screen of AG leadership in the headquarters city of Springfield, Missouri.

It wasn't until 2010, when UPCAG presiding elder Thomas A. Barclay reached out to Wood, that the process of reconciliation for these two entities began.

"We have now been on a four-year journey with the United Pentecostal Council of the Assemblies of God, which was birthed in 1919 because of racism in the Assemblies of God," Wood says, calling the move to unite the two bodies "a vital forward step."

A Blended Future

Adding to this racial paradox is this fact: Though the AG has been historically white, its future is anything but. Today 41 percent of the AG in the U.S. is non-white, with almost 22 percent being Hispanic and 10 percent black. The denomination now has 20 districts for U.S. members who are non-English speakers, as well as an additional 21 ethnic and language fellowships.

"The demographic shift that is under way is a game changer. To me, that is the big story," says Darrin Rodgers, the respected archivist of the Assemblies' Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center. "Anglos have plateaued numerically in the Assemblies, but every other ethnic group is growing significantly. God raised up people from other cultures to take leadership. The Assemblies of God, increasingly, is a multi-ethnic fellowship

of Spirit-empowered believers.”

Rodgers should know about demographic shifts. Reared in a largely white AG congregation in North Dakota, he’s been a member of a Slavic immigrant church in Springfield for three years.

“When revival hit Azusa Street, the ethnic divides came tumbling down,” Rodgers says. “I believe the Holy Spirit is similarly calling us to get out of our comfort zones and form relationships with people who are different than ourselves.”

Though most AG churches historically haven’t been melting pots, that is changing. In Orlando, Florida, for example, the 5,000-member Faith Assembly, the largest Pentecostal church in Central Florida, was 80 percent white and had a Sunday morning attendance of 950 when Carl Stephens became pastor in 1987. Today the church is 70 percent non-white.

As further proof, the Hispanic District in Florida is now called the Florida Multicultural District. A recent district council in June included brief messages in Arabic, English and Portuguese, in addition to Spanish. The German District is now called the International Ministry Network and is one-third black.

Another example, according to Rodgers, is the historic First Christian AG (now Peoples Church) in Cincinnati. When pastor Chris Beard joined the staff 22 years ago, the church was 98 percent white and dying. Now it’s thriving. Twenty-five percent of the members are black and 25 percent are international, representing more than 30 countries.

Parklawn AG in Milwaukee, one of the oldest AG churches in the nation, has a similar story. It was white and dying, but in 1993 the mostly white congregation asked its black youth pastor, Walter Harvey, to serve as senior pastor. The congregation has since grown significantly, is multiethnic and now has over 1,200 at Sunday services.

And in Rodgers' hometown of Grand Forks, North Dakota, the two newest AG churches—both launched in the last two years—include one started by a Cameroon AG missionary to the US and another consisting of 60 Nepalese immigrants who recently accepted Christ. The African congregation, like many new immigrant churches, is connected with the Assemblies in its homeland but not officially part of the AG USA.

Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and an AG-ordained minister, predicts that by the end of this century—if not sooner—most Pentecostals in America will be non-white. “For decades American Pentecostalism has been predominantly white and rural,” he says. “It will soon become primarily ethnic and urban.”

If the AG's largest church is any indication, the shift has already begun: That distinction, long held by Phoenix First AG, now goes to New Life Covenant AG, a Hispanic congregation in Chicago led by Wilfredo de Jesús. With many non-whites having a stronger Pentecostal identity than white adherents, Rodgers adds a key element: “As the old mainline crumbles and becomes the sideline, Pentecostals are becoming the new defenders of basic orthodoxy. If you want to understand where the AG is headed, it is essential to take into account these cultural and demographic shifts.”

These shifts will also take center stage at the AG's centennial celebration Aug. 5-10 in Springfield. An estimated 900 Africans will attend, as will almost 300 people from Korea—including a group that will join a 100-voice choir from Nam Soo Kim's church in Queens, New York.

As a denomination, the AG will not only be celebrating the centennial, but also the World AG Fellowship's 25th anniversary. “The centennial will be a huge event, with our message focused on this big idea: that the AG exists to help Spirit-empowered Christians come together for the purpose of

world evangelism,” Rodgers says. “Sessions will highlight how the Spirit is bringing unity across the racial, linguistic divides.”

Assemblies Government 101

While the AG’s current racial makeup defies its relatively recent history, there’s also a paradox in how the denomination is structured. It’s what observers see as an odd mix of congregational governance, where each congregation owns its own property as in Baptist denominations, and a form of presbyterian polity. Local church leaders do not report to headquarters. However, the credentials of ministers are held by the district councils and the General Council. Ministers are accountable in areas of doctrine, morality and ethics.

This means churches are independent but clergy answer to district-level officials who are elected. National leaders are also elected, while the entire denomination is governed by General Presbyters who meet annually in Springfield (the Executive Presbytery meets five times a year) and by a General Council that meets every other year.

Like most denominations the leadership is predominantly male. Yet paradoxically, women have been credentialed since the beginning. My own mother-in-law, Rose Ferrell, who passed away in 2011 at age 96, was an ordained AG minister who pioneered churches throughout the South and overseas with her husband. The AG initially ordained women as missionaries and evangelists, but not as elders. This changed in 1935.

The AG has a long history of female evangelists, and today there are nearly 600 women senior pastors. Of the six members of the Executive Management Team, two are women who serve as vice presidents. Beth Grant serves as the lone female on the Executive Presbytery, representing ordained female ministers and having served in that position since 2009. And Carol Taylor was president of Vanguard University before going to

Springfield to serve as president of the new consolidated Evangel University—a first in the school’s 92-year history.

These days the average AG churchgoer might not know the difference between the Springfield where the AG headquarters is and the dozens of other Springfields that dot the American landscape. But be assured, AG pastors know. They use “Springfield” to refer to headquarters the way journalists use “Washington” to refer to the federal government. Insiders jokingly refer to Springfield as “Mecca” or the “Holy City.”

AG pastors are first certified, licensed, then ordained. Though churches don’t have to tithe to the denomination as the Church of God (Cleveland) requires, pastors are required to send in a portion of their tithe to the district and can be disciplined if they don’t. (The percentage of the minister’s tithe depends on the district.) The only real control the denomination has over its clergy, however, is to “pull the papers” (withdraw their ordination, effectively kicking them out of the AG) if they stray doctrinally or have a moral or ethical failure.

In the early days AG leaders did not seem as open as today. Consider how David du Plessis was treated in the early 1960s. Originally from South Africa, he took the message of the baptism in the Holy Spirit to so many mainline churches he became known as “Mr. Pentecost.” For reasons that may be never fully known, his credentials in the Assemblies were withdrawn because, as he told me years later when I wrote about him in *Charisma*, he was hobnobbing with liberals in the National Council of Churches. AG leaders later apologized to him, and in 1980 he was reinstated as an AG minister.

Another example is Loren Cunningham, who founded Youth With A Mission while in the denomination. He had a vision to take young people overseas on trips to give them a heart for missions. The story goes that an AG leader said he would approve this as long as Cunningham limited it to about 10 per

year. Today YWAM has more than 16,000 full-time “missionaries” around the world—almost four times as many as the Assemblies itself. Of course, one AG official told me that it was a “missiological difference” that led to the parting of the ways. While YWAM may have more people on the field, the Assemblies has worked to establish the indigenous church, resulting in more than 360,000 local AG churches around the world.

“We invested heavily in raising up pastors and leaders in their own nations, founding hundreds upon hundreds of short-term and long-term Bible colleges that have now equipped tens of thousands of national workers and pastors,” Wood says. “And the AG learned from YWAM and has deployed thousands of young people over the years in short-term missions assignments.”

The narrow-mindedness that prompted duPlessis and Cunningham to leave also led to a well-known quip by the late C.M. Ward, who at the time was the voice of the denomination’s weekly radio broadcast, *Revivaltime*, making his name a household word in Assemblies circles. Ward was an iconoclast of sorts and seemed to enjoy tweaking the leaders in Springfield, despite the fact the leadership gave him the microphone for 25 years. After he said that the Assemblies leadership “must be on the pill” because they hadn’t “given birth to a new idea in years,” denominational leaders called him in to explain. At first he denied saying it. But when a tape was played of him saying it in Canada, he responded: “Well, you never know what you will say under the anointing.”

One Springfield insider who knows the personalities involved told me that some of the leaders Ward criticized may not have been perfect, but “if Springfield had been on the pill then, we wouldn’t be seeing the explosive growth we are having today. Obviously, some foundations were being laid in those years.”

In the past leadership also frowned upon AG pastors preaching

in non-Assemblies churches. Yet, true to the ongoing paradox of its makeup, the denomination has always been open to other groups and, unlike the United Pentecostal Church, has never said it is the “only church.” In fact, the AG was one of the founders of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1943 and for decades has been the NAE’s largest member and financial contributor.

Today things have changed so much that AG pastors frequently headline cross-denominational conferences while other leaders enjoy freedoms unheard of in previous generations. For example, Matthew Barnett, who founded the Dream Center in Los Angeles with his father, beloved AG megachurch pastor Tommy Barnett, now pastors Angelus Temple, the famous Foursquare church founded by Aimee Semple McPherson. Matthew Barnett surrendered his AG credentials but still leads the Dream Center, which remains AG. And in recent years, some exceptions have been made for pastors holding joint credentials with other denominations.

Bridges to the Evangelical World

If C.M. Ward and others thought the national headquarters leadership of a past generation were more bureaucratic than spiritual, there’s at least one underreported story of how they ministered to an evangelical journalist in a way that flamed what became the charismatic movement.

In the early 1950s, Robert Walker was the influential publisher of *Christian Life* magazine and an early supporter and confidant of Billy Graham. Walker was among the first evangelical to move his headquarters to Wheaton, Illinois, which became the “evangelical Vatican.” During those years, he developed a relationship with some Assemblies of God leaders through the NAE and was intrigued by their infectious enthusiasm, which stood in stark contrast to the stiff formality of many evangelicals of the day.

In his journalistic travels he ended up at Assemblies of God headquarters in Springfield in 1954, where several of the executive presbyters laid hands on him and prayed for him. Walker received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues. Though he remained a longtime member of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Wheaton, still he never denied this experience and loved to tell others like me about it, though he was discreet about whom he told. For the rest of his life the evangelical community considered him one of their own, even though he was one of the first denominational people in that era to receive the Pentecostal experience.

This resulted in *Christian Life* publishing an article aimed at evangelicals about the Pentecostals headlined, “Are We Missing Something?” It may have been the first article written about what was later called the charismatic movement. Though Walker was low-key about his experience, he fanned the flames of renewal whenever he could, writing in *Christian Life* the very first article about a young broadcaster named Pat Robertson when he founded CBN and later ghostwriting Pat Boone’s testimony of how he received the infilling of the Holy Spirit in *A New Song*, which sold more than 2 million copies after it was published in 1972.

Walker also embraced the Pentecostal experience so much years later he turned over his publishing enterprise to a young Pentecostal editor—me. And in 1987 *Charisma* magazine merged with *Christian Life*.

Standards That Shaped a Movement

Though today’s generation of leaders chuckle at the AG’s history of not “mingling” with other groups, this conservative approach has undoubtedly had one benefit: The Assemblies has maintained doctrinal integrity during decades in which other denominations have become increasingly liberal.

This could likely be because of the split that rocked the

fledgling denomination in only its second year of existence. That controversy began when some Pentecostals rejected a Trinitarian baptismal formula (i.e., baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, which has been the norm since the First Council of Nicaea in 325) in favor of baptizing converts "in the name of Jesus" only. Within a couple of years the "Jesus Only" (or Oneness) Pentecostals also rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, which split the AG and ultimately led to the formation of the non-Trinitarian United Pentecostal Church.

Over the years the Assemblies has been careful when dealing with matters of heresy or odd Pentecostal manifestations. Leadership would typically issue a "white paper" at General Council that let the rank and file know how to respond to new phenomena such as the "latter rain movement" in the late 1940s. The AG rejected such elements as calling ministers "apostles" or "prophets," even though other phenomena that seemed odd at the time such as spiritual warfare or "singing in the spirit" have since been widely embraced by the Spirit-filled community. Today the Assemblies actually does use "apostolic" in reference to ground-breaking efforts to plant churches where they don't exist. For example, persons such as the late Mark Buntain, the founder of Mission of Mercy in India (which *Charisma* covered in our April issue this year), functioned as apostles even though they did not call themselves that. Assemblies leaders are quick to say they are committed to apostolic doctrine, apostolic mission and apostolic practice, but not to self-appointed people running around calling themselves apostles!

Growing up, I remember early charismatics were looked askance by AG people I knew. When word came out that Episcopalians and Methodists were speaking in tongues, these people didn't know what to think. After all, the women from these "outside" denominations wore makeup and their members didn't see anything wrong with drinking wine! Didn't they know those

violated Pentecostal standards of holiness?

Like all Pentecostals of the day, cultural standards of holiness were not only important, but also often preached as gospel in the early decades of the denomination's existence. Sleeveless dresses were a no-no, as were fingernail polish and lipstick. So was going to the movies or even owning a TV. Most of these things had gone by the wayside by the early 1960s. (However, today the denomination still expects its clergy to abstain from alcohol.)

In a day when culturally anything goes, these have become antiquated standards from the holiness movement from which Pentecostalism spawned. Younger Pentecostals often aren't aware these were standards only a generation ago, while older generations joke about what it was like to be told you couldn't read the "funny paper" on Sunday because it was the Lord's Day.

Yet this commitment to walking in holiness shaped the Assemblies and, as the charismatic movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, an entirely new generation of Spirit-filled believers. Like those in the Assemblies, these charismatics refused to succumb to cultural trappings, while also introducing an interesting twist to the Pentecostal line: They saw no reason to leave their denominational churches. Most would attend charismatic conferences or home groups where the gifts of the Spirit were in full operation, then return to their churches aflame with a new kind of baptism.

Until the advent of what became known as the charismatic movement in mainline churches, the assumption was that if you spoke in tongues, you joined a Pentecostal church. As this began to change, however, some Pentecostal leaders were slow to recognize the shift. So when the Conference on the Charismatic Renewal in the Christian Churches took place in Kansas City in 1977, some top AG leaders drove up from Springfield and were introduced to the crowd as "observers."

Maybe they thought there might be “wildfire”—after all, the Assemblies had worked hard to become more mainstream within the evangelical community.

Upon witnessing firsthand more than 50,000 newly Spirit-filled believers flowing in a new, exciting move of the Spirit, the AG leaders went home and gave it Springfield’s stamp of approval. Yet even this support displayed the paradoxical undertones within the denomination. The AG is a grass-roots movement, and many local churches were already reaching out to charismatics and embracing them. In addition, probably every Full Gospel Businessmen’s chapter received strong AG involvement.

In time, charismatics flocked to AG churches, as well as other denominational congregations such as Jack Hayford’s Church On The Way (part of the Foursquare Church), causing churches that had struggled to grow to a few hundred at most to mushroom to thousands almost overnight. But among the Assemblies, response was mixed.

Some churches preferred the old-fashioned ways. They looked to Springfield for leadership, bought all their materials from the denomination’s Gospel Publishing House and often became critical of their more “liberal” brethren who “compromised standards.”

Other AG congregations thrived during this time as charismatics coming in enjoyed the freedom of worship, the teaching of the Word and the fact that pastors such as Karl Strader of First Assembly in Lakeland, Florida (where I attended as a teen), or Roy Harthern down the road at Calvary Assembly in Orlando (where *Charisma* started) welcomed them with open arms.

Instead of receiving the biblical “right hand of fellowship” from their original churches, many of these newly Spirit-baptized believers had been given the “left foot of

fellowship," so these Assemblies became safe houses for healing and spiritual growth. Of course, these were two among hundreds of AG congregations around the country that welcomed charismatics.

This phenomenon fueled growth for many years, as Assemblies were no longer "on the other side of the tracks" within the evangelical community and, more importantly, welcomed those hungry for a move of the Spirit. Since the late '70s the denomination has grown stateside by almost 250 percent while mainline denominations have continued to lose members.

Schools of the Spirit

At the same time the Assemblies grew in tandem with the charismatic renewal, small Bible colleges, most founded within the first two decades after 1914, became regionally accredited and added professors who not only were powerful preachers, but also had advanced degrees. This advancement has continued into the present era, during which many of these schools have become universities. The largest of these is Southeastern University in Lakeland, with more than 3,400 students. In Springfield, Central Bible College—the third oldest and, until the 1980s, the leading school in the movement—consolidated with Evangel University, the first Pentecostal liberal arts college in America, and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS) into one institution called Evangel University in 2013.

Seminary—even the word itself hit a nerve for many years in AG circles. Many early Pentecostals didn't believe in seminary, arguing that a preacher needed the power of the Holy Spirit, not a degree. Besides, they said, seminaries usually hastened a denomination going liberal such as Emory University, the Methodist school in Atlanta that spawned the "God is dead" controversy in the 1960s. (One more paradox, however: The first AG general superintendent, E.N. Bell, had a seminary

education.)

These same Pentecostals called seminaries “cemeteries.” And for the first six decades they got by without them. Then in the 1970s AGTS was formed in a wing of the turquoise-colored headquarters building in Springfield—which in itself was questioned, as some speculated this was so the Executive Presbytery could keep a watchful eye. Theory or not, AGTS was launched in part so military chaplains could gain their necessary seminary degree. The feeling within the denomination was that they needed to have these Assemblies chaplains “trained here, rather than ‘there.’”

Fast-forward years later and numerous AG chaplains have risen to positions of prominence. Principal among those is Major General Cecil Richardson, who recently retired as Chief of Chaplains for the entire U.S. Air Force and was a 1973 graduate of Evangel. And recently AGTS alum Delana Ingram Small became not only the first female chaplain in the nation to report to an Army combat arms unit, she was also the first female chaplain assigned to the 101st Airborne Division (aka, “The Screaming Eagles”).

The “Black Eye” Years

With the charismatic movement in full swing, the era of parachurch media ministries was also emerging. Once again another paradox within the AG arose: While the headquarters kept a strong grip on the gospel message coming out of Springfield through its *Revivaltime* radio show or the officially approved Gospel Publishing House content, an entrepreneurial spirit sprung up—the same bent that launched Bible colleges years before, sent missionaries around the world to birth indigenous AG denominations or fired up a young man like Loren Cunningham to thrust thousands of young people into missions.

This time it was with evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart, whose

fiery Louisiana brand of Pentecostal preaching not only gained him a huge following, but also helped spark the Pentecostal revival in Latin America, according to Rodriguez.

Paul Crouch, who attended Central Bible College and worked at the AG's headquarters in the media department at one time, launched Trinity Broadcasting Network in 1973. Shortly thereafter Jim Bakker, who attended North Central Bible College in Minneapolis and grew up in the AG, started the PTL network, which took off like a rocket.

In 1987 Bakker became the personification of the unscrupulous televangelist when he admitted to a moral failure that threw PTL into bankruptcy and landed him in prison for five years. Along the way Swaggart became increasingly critical of Bakker until his own moral failures were exposed in the following years. His solicitations of prostitutes effectively ruined what was a massive, global ministry at the time, and ever since he has carried on at only a tiny fraction of the size.

Though secular media predictably enjoyed taking shots at the televangelists, the Bakker/Swaggart scandals were also a huge black eye to the Assemblies—as it was to the entire cause of Christ around the world. Both men had been ordained in the Assemblies, though their ministries were totally independent with separate boards. And while Christian commentators waxed eloquent about the televangelists' lack of accountability, the truth is they were accountable to the denomination—which disciplined them in the only way it could: it withdrew their ordination as a result of their wrongs.

Unlike nondenominational churches where leaders such as Bishop Eddie Long or the now-deceased Zachery Tims remained in their pulpits through allegations of sexual immorality, the Assemblies held a strong line insisting on moral purity. But while they did so, they also offered a way to rehabilitate the erring ministers, unlike some conservative evangelical groups where one moral strike against you disqualifies you from the

ministry for life.

Rehabilitation for moral failure is never less than two years, and countless AG ministers have submitted to this discipline and re-entered the ministry. However, Bakker and Swaggart chose not to. Today each operates independently. Bakker, who wrote a "tell-all" account of his transgressions in *I Was Wrong*, has ironically started over only a few miles south of Springfield and has quietly built a smaller, albeit debt-free, version of the former Heritage USA. Those who know him well say he's a changed man. Swaggart's ministry has continued to dwindle, though he's still on the air blasting any preacher he doesn't agree with.

Facing an Uncertain Future With Faith

Most observers laud the Assemblies with its handling of these extremely difficult and public scandals. Still, it was embarrassing and cast a certain pall over the denomination. No longer was it seen as the widely successful, growing church; instead, it showed that it was uncertain of itself and its future.

Indeed, anyone attending a large AG conference has sensed the unique energy; they're upbeat, powerful and filled with believers claiming the Spirit's power and blessing. Look out, devil! Yet behind the scenes there's been serious second-guessing and tension. The leadership knows the rank and file don't look to them the way COGIC looks to its presiding bishop. The successful churches sometimes have little denominational loyalty (with exceptions, of course). Add to this the changing morality of society and how is a denomination to respond?

Enter two dynamic leaders.

Tom Trask, a likable former pastor and district superintendent from Michigan, inherited a tough job as he became general

superintendent five years after the Bakker/Swaggart scandals. Known for giving friends and strangers alike a hearty European-style kiss on the cheeks, Trask's passion was infectious. He encouraged entrepreneurs like Hal Donaldson and his brothers to build Convoy of Hope (see story on p. 38). Today Convoy distributes almost \$80 million worth of goods and supplies each year to those in need around the world.

Trask also was willing to jettison Assemblies programs and surrounded himself with leaders who brought in younger people and encouraged church growth, particularly among Hispanics and African-Americans. During Trask's tenure came the emergence of leaders such as Rodriguez, who has become influential through his National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which represents millions of Hispanic believers and more than 40,000 U.S. churches.

Trask abruptly resigned in 2007 before his term ended, which would normally leave a gaping hole. Yet the man who followed him had served on the Executive Presbytery as general secretary for 14 years: George O. Wood. Trained as a lawyer, Wood had been a pastor in California for 17 years, then assistant superintendent in the Southern California district for five years before becoming general secretary.

Here's another paradox: At age 72, Wood is embraced by the younger generation, who seem to understand his larger-than-life task of retooling a denomination for the future. To accomplish that, he's brought in leaders with experience at LifeWay (owned by the Southern Baptists) whom he found working at The Oaks Fellowship, an AG megachurch in Dallas. He tasked them with revitalizing the AG publishing program, including servicing churches more effectively with the My Healthy Church brand of ministry resources. With support of the Executive Presbytery and General Presbytery, he reorganized the many departments that were independent kingdoms and installed COO Sol Arledge, an independently wealthy Pentecostal businessman who had retired to serve full-time as a volunteer youth pastor

but eventually wound up at headquarters in Springfield.

Like Trask, Wood understands the importance of fanning already-fueled fires, and for today's Assemblies that means tending to the denomination's largest areas of growth: ethnic minorities and millennials. In addition to the aforementioned surge among non-whites, one-third of the AG (1.1 million) is now 25 years old or younger, and 52 percent are under age 35. Currently there are 12,800 AG churches in the U.S., 2,000 of which have been added in just the past six years. Recently released statistics show the AG's growth percentage continues to outpace that of the American population.

"Dr. Wood's leadership has given our movement a chance to prove the historians wrong," says Scott Wilson, pastor of The Oaks Fellowship. "Time alone doesn't make an organization obsolete ... stubborn pride and a love for the status quo is what takes you down."

If Wood has any say—and he's had plenty thus far in shaping a "new AG"—those two deterrents won't factor into what is obviously a bright future for the denomination. What looms instead are the massive questions of cultural relevancy amid increasingly hostile opposition. How will AG churches and believers respond when they're targeted by such forces as the gay agenda or an anti-Christian government?

Though most AG adherents are politically conservative, politics is rarely discussed and Assemblies leaders of past generations have been curiously quiet in the cultural wars, unlike other Christians leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson or attorney Jay Sekulow.

Wood sees it differently, however: "We have been anything but quiet. In regard to homosexuality, I have taken strong public stands on homosexual issues related to the Boy Scouts [and] World Vision, as well as an active role in the Springfield community when the city council was poised to enact

legislation favorable to homosexuals. Pastors all across the country have spoken up for life (against abortion) and for marriage as between a man and a woman. We have given strong public support for the Hobby Lobby case before the Supreme Court. I've also worked behind the scenes with the National Association of Evangelicals on these issues as they have a bigger megaphone than any one of their member denominations or churches."

Indeed, Wood has spoken out on issues of life and sexuality, but will other AG leaders follow suit? Will the Assemblies be content to let others lead in the culture wars, or will its voice be as pronounced as its global growth?

These questions must be answered, and certainly will if our nation continues on its current course. But for now, as the Assemblies of God marks its centennial, we can look back and marvel over what the Holy Spirit has accomplished through this denomination for 100 years. Because the truth is that, just as it was with an assembling of faith-filled yet assorted Pentecostals in 1914, the good that comes out of this movement is not *despite* its unique paradoxes and contrasts but *because* of them.

Steve Strang *is the founder and publisher of Charisma. If you haven't already, read about his personal connection with the Assemblies of God.*