

Pentecostals in Missouri marked the anniversary of a historic lynching with a three-day unity event

Black, White Believers Break Racial Divide

Leaders from the Assemblies of God (AG) and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) crossed racial divides in April to mark the anniversary of an infamous Springfield, Mo., lynching that occurred the same day the Azusa Street revival began in Los Angeles.

Dubbed “A House No Longer Divided,” the April 13-15 event was designed to foster unity among Pentecostal churches in Springfield, where three African-American men were murdered by a white lynch mob

God,” said Darrin Rodgers, director of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, the official research center for the AG and a co-sponsor of the event. “It is important that we not only remember, but also overcome, our painful history of racial disunity.”

Also sponsored by Timmons Temple COGIC, Kingdom Movement Ministries and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, the unity meetings featured speakers from both denominations. Among the attendees was veteran AG Bible scholar Stanley Horton, who is 93.

“I thought it was a very good thing because people came together,” said Horton, who encouraged the first black student at the AG’s Central Bible College to remain at the school despite the discrimination he faced. The student, Spencer Jones, is now a leader in the AG.

“I grew up feeling that all Christians are fellow members of the body of Christ and that God doesn’t look at the color of the skin He looks at their heart,” Horton said.

John Wheeler, who came up with the idea for the services as a way to build bridges, said the city needed the event. “Walls

have been set up,” said Wheeler, who is a student at Central Bible College and the great-grandson of COGIC founder Charles H. Mason. “I just believe that this can be the beginning of breaking down those walls.”

Although Rodgers disputes the claim

that the AG split from COGIC in 1914, he said racist practices were at work within the denomination. Rodgers noted that from 1939 until 1962, the AG had a policy against ordaining African-Americans.

Elder T.J. Appleby, pastor of Timmons Temple, said even in recent years there was little interracial fellowship among Pentecostals in Springfield, where the AG is headquartered. “Even if we’re not thinking that there are negative racial divides, where people are having negative feelings about a different race, we aren’t coming across the racial line to fellowship and ... do things together in this community,” Appleby said.

COGIC Bishop Frank Douglas Jr., believes A House No Longer Divided was an important first step. “I believe really positive steps were taken toward healing,” said Douglas, who oversees COGIC’s Missouri Western First Jurisdiction, which includes Springfield. “I think so much of the time we’ve worked harder to bring people into our churches of diverse races as oppose to just appreciating each other and creating friendships.”

Douglas is hopeful that COGIC and the AG can form partnerships around educational and missions programs, among other activities. “When the Assemblies and the Church of God in Christ are on point together, moving forward in places like Darfur and other places where there are injustices ... it allows us to have a greater strength for the cause of Christ,” he said.

Rodgers said though A House No Longer Divided was a grassroots event, many believe God was doing something bigger than one service. He believes Pentecostals are “on a trajectory” toward overcoming past racial division. “It’s almost like long-lost siblings are coming together and experiencing each other for the first time,” he said. “We’ve known of each other, but we didn’t know each other, and it’s so important to have that kind of bond formed at the grassroots level.”

Horton said working together is the key. “As they work together,” he said, “they’ll learn to appreciate and love each other.”

—ADRIENNE S. GAINES



KEN HORN

» Pentecostals crossed racial lines in April to participate in A House No Longer divided in Springfield, Mo.

on April 14, 1906. The same day, William J. Seymour, who was African-American, began holding revival services in a mission at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, sparking the modern Pentecostal movement.

“April 14, 1906, was witness to both the darkness of humanity and the light of