

Blake formally elected head of Church of God in Christ: Pastor of West Angeles Church of God in Christ

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While members of the 6.5-million-member Church of God in Christ looked ahead to the denomination's 100th annual convocation in November, the bishop and megachurch pastor who serves as the de facto interim presiding bishop of the historically black Pentecostal denomination issued a timely message: "If we are to remain a constructive influence in society, we must be guided by godly principles that penetrate the culture and bring glory to our God," said Charles E. Blake.

"We must take the high road of integrity and authentic leadership around the world," added Blake, pastor of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ.

It was not known if Blake was thinking specifically of recent accusations and scandals involving both white and black preachers—all in the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition— whose success in ministry has resulted in enormous personal wealth. The Senate Finance Committee has asked for financial records from six ministry organizations. Charismatic leaders also have expressed concern over other, less-known moral lapses and misuses of power.

When the longtime Church of God in Christ presiding bishop Gilbert E. Patterson died last March, Blake moved up from assistant presiding bishop in the COGIC chain of command to replace Patterson.

The next regular election of COGIC officers is scheduled for 2008, but some leaders, including J. Neaul Haynes of Dallas and at least two others, questioned the process and wanted an election at the November 5-12 annual meeting—at which they ran against Blake.

Haynes said he isn't "anti-Blake," but wanted to ensure that the denomination's constitution is followed.

Blake, for his part, said he did not object to the call for a special election. "I fully understand, and have never sought to proclaim otherwise, that the general assembly has full authority to either call a special election or to, by some other parliamentary action, deal with the matter of succession."

On November 12, Blake got a resounding 2,986 votes from delegates meeting in the church headquarters city of Memphis. Bishop Chandler David Owens, a former presiding bishop, finished second with 482 votes, followed by Haynes, who received 241 votes.

Blake said he plans to run for reelection next November. He named Bishop Phillip A. Brooks of Detroit as the first assistant presiding bishop.

The delegates held their sessions at Mason Temple, named after COGIC's first leader, Charles H. Mason. A onetime Baptist active in the holiness movement in the late 19th century, Mason joined a stream of many others who went in 1906 to the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles and became "baptized in the Holy Spirit." He founded the Church of God in Christ in Memphis the next year.

"Mason was just a poor kind of dirt farmer who dropped out of college, but [he] was a man of the people and . . . his church became the biggest Pentecostal church in the United States," said Vinson Synan, a church history professor at Regent University and an expert on Pentecostalism.

In the early 1950s, when Blake was a boy, Mason visited the church of Blake's father and laid hands on the youngster. He never dreamed that he would become the seventh successor to Mason, but Blake now presides over a denomination with churches and missions in 58 countries.

Blake's 24,000-member church attracts about 10,000 worshipers each Sunday. While adopting modern technology and sophisticated communications, the pastor also espouses practices such as speaking in tongues and fasting, which have always been hallmarks of his denomination.

"We are now in the midst of a 21-day fast," Blake said in an interview with Religion News Service before the annual meeting. "That is something that the Bible asks for . . . to discipline our bodies and to focus our emotions and our aspirations and to move away from things physical, toward things spiritual."

West Angeles attracts celebrities such as actor Denzel Washington and singer-composer Stevie Wonder. “When you’re in a city like Los Angeles . . . the film capital of the world, then it is likely that your congregation, if it is large, will have individuals from that community as a part of that church,” Blake said.

Many inside and outside the denomination look to Blake’s church—with its 80 ministries that range from helping those on Skid Row to creating 400 new and remodeled housing units—as a model. The church also houses the separate nonprofit organization Save Africa’s Children, which Blake founded to help children in Africa who are affected by AIDS.

“It is a diocese within itself, it is so large,” said Bishop J. Delano Ellis II, who was formerly affiliated with COGIC and is now the leader of the Cleveland-based independent network called Pentecostal Churches of Christ.

Loran E. Mann, pastor of Pentecostal Temple Church of God in Christ in Pittsburgh, said Blake’s focus on administration and his business expertise, which have already helped his Los Angeles congregation, will also help the denomination. *—based on stories by Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*