

1979-2008 — The Last

In the previous installment, the BA interviewed Elder Robert Coulter about the years he served as General Conference president, 1963-1987. Perhaps no single event captured the spirit and progress of those years as did the convention of August 1979 — a milestone event.

Gathering in a family-friendly convention facility called Glorieta in New Mexico, the Church manifested how it had matured in thirty years since the merger of 1949. It also caught a glimpse of how great would be the challenge of the next thirty. Memories of the conference at Glorieta include the lovely natural setting and facilities there, the excellent work of the program planning committee, the participation of fraternal guests Garner Ted Armstrong and Samuele Bacchiocchi, and the impact of the program on many within and without the Church. “Run With the Vision” served as our theme for that inspiring week.

Truth and mission

In three decades since '79, the Church has run with its task of worldwide mission. It has solidified its grasp on Bible truth through intentional and insistent grappling with issues that go to the heart of the written and living Word. “What is the gospel?” — the issue of law and grace — was the chief topic at a Glorieta ministerial council ('86). “Who is Jesus?” — the question of Christ’s

deity — appeared on the agenda of the Boise, Idaho, ministers’ meeting ('82) and remained central in council discussion until resolved in Beaver Creek, Colorado ('96), and confirmed in Tulsa, Oklahoma ('04). A third and closely related issue — “What is the Church and its mission?” — found increasing clarity as answers to the first two issues came into sharper focus.

To the Church’s credit, the same generation that twice re-evaluated and restated its doctrine, while conserving most of its historic positions, also dared to engage in new efforts to share the gospel it claimed to embrace. These thirty years show increase in projects like MISSION POSSIBLE (teenage camps given over to service projects); Pioneer Missionary Training (young adults on short-term missions abroad); medical mission trips (professional medical-dental assistance to places in Mexico, Guatemala, and other areas); and the missionary projects that sprouted from various sources (Cristo Virene, Disaster Relief, and others).

The gospel’s constant impact also produced the fruit of fresh service and mission efforts by the Church at home, in dozens of congregations across the continent. Although the goal to double membership in North America in the eighties was not reached, new momentum did develop within the CoG7’s international community. Mem-

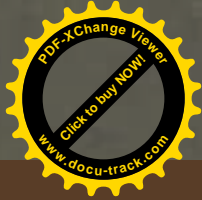
bership in the International Ministerial Congress rose from a dozen charter members in 1978 to nearly forty in 2008, and the number of souls participating with the Church grew from approximately 60,000 to five times that figure during the same period.

Diverse membership

In the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the Church has seen an unprecedented ethnic diversification of its membership. Fueled by immigration from Latin America and the zeal of those who came, Hispanic congregations have cropped up in many parts of the country, especially from Texas to California and around major cities like Chicago and Washington D.C. So that the new wave of members would be fully served and incorporated into the body, the Church added Spanish language products and services to its efforts.

A similar phenomenon occurred along the eastern coasts of Canada and the U.S. with the influx of immigrants from the West Indies, especially Jamaica and Trinidad. This trend did not require the same language services as Latin immigrants, but it did present the need to recognize and adapt to traditional differences in Caribbean culture and faith.

Both Latin and West Indian im-



Thirty Years

migrants brought fresh faith and needed vitality to the Church in Canada and the United States, far outweighing any inconvenience that may have been associated with the trends.

Combating culture

Alongside the positive developments of this generation, CoG7 found it necessary to combat the same social and cultural changes that have shaken the stability and mission of all churches in our day. Materialism, secularism, hedonism, relativism, post-modernism, personal egotism (narcissism), anti-institutionalism, and new theologies are among the acids that have dangerously corroded the faith of many. This 150-year old Sabbatarian movement among God's people has not been exempt from these erosive forces in modern times.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for the Church of this generation has been the aging and depletion of its vocational ministry. The number of men ordained by CoG7 has risen to around 140, but the percentage of these ministers in vocational ministry today has fallen to just over 30 percent. Less than a third of the 210 congregations are served by an ordained pastor in 2008, and the median age of the Church's ministry is above 60 years.

Next issue: The Journey Ahead

Major Events

- 1979 - Landmark conference in Glorieta, NM
- 1980 - Unity committee begins work with Meridian, ID, Council; new Media Outreach Agency supports growth goals
- 1981 - *Afterglow* first published by Women's Association
- 1982 - Spring Vale Academy enrollment peaks around 100
- 1983 - General Conference marks its 100th year in Manhattan, KS
- 1985 - Convention in Logan, UT, postpones unification vote
- 1987 - Unity vote approved at Denver convention, defeated in Idaho; Calvin Burrell selected as G. C. president
- 1989 - Leadership conference precedes Denver, CO, convention; Summit School of Theology enrolls high of 12 students
- 1990 - New York City Pastor Whaid Rose founds Church Renewal Ministries, urging spiritual life and evangelism
- 1991 - Little Rock, AR, conference approves major new financial option for local churches
- 1993 - Conference in Bloomington, MN, receives Worldwide Church of God leaders as convention guests
- 1994 - International Ministerial Congress meeting in Corpus Christi, TX, endorses full deity of Jesus Christ
- 1995 - San Diego, CA, convention amends bylaws to separate the G. C. president from its board chairman
- 1996 - Nearly twenty Hispanic congregations, with key leaders, exit the Church over political concerns
- 1997 - Whaid Rose selected G. C. president in Knoxville, TN
- 1998 - Disaster Relief Fund and SWORD (young adults) are born
- 1999 - National Leadership Conference in Glorieta; first Pioneer Missionary Training held in Monterrey, Mexico
- 2000 - Missions Abroad expands program under Bill Hicks
- 2001 - Faculty resigns; Summit School of Theology closes after 25 years and is replaced by Ministries Training System ('02)
- 2002 - First Medical Missions Project (Mexico City)
- 2004 - National Leadership Conference near Tacoma, WA
- 2005 - Issachar Forum, vision planning efforts launched
- 2006 - Restyled Statement of Faith adopted by Ministerial Council in Overland Park, KS
- 2007 - Sesquicentennial CoG7 event and International Ministerial Congress come to Kansas
- 2008 - Medical Missions to Nicaragua; Ministries Training reaches high of 58 summer students



Given to the

*P*astor Carl Palmer and his wife, Rowena, have served the Church in Spokane, Washington, for twenty-three years. We recently asked him these questions.

BA: In a congregation with many backgrounds and doctrinal perspectives, how do you manage differences and maintain harmony?

At conversion, everyone starts as a babe in Christ. At that point we begin our growth – spiritual and theological. It is unfair and illogical to expect everybody to be at the same level.

We ask each member to be open to growth and committed to unity in the body. With this in place, we can welcome people from differing backgrounds and lifestyles. Those with opinions that differ from official doctrine are expected to refrain from promoting their views in church settings or among members.

Given time, people of goodwill tend to grow closer emotionally as well as doctrinally. On issues where we can't agree, tolerance, love, and acceptance bind us together.

The Holy Spirit's role includes convicting and directing. I choose to allow time for this to be accomplished before intervening.

BA: What is your understanding of servant leadership in the church?

Though David was a good shepherd, Jesus is the ultimate Good Shepherd. A good shepherd, or pastor, cares for the sheep. Like David, he will defend the sheep from lions and bears. Like Jesus, he will search for lost sheep and even give his life for the sheep.

Those of us who represent Christ in leadership should strive to follow His example. When there is a dirty or distasteful job, do we excuse ourselves or do we jump in with the rest to get it done? This is one way we earn the right to lead. I can't picture Jesus sitting in the shade while His disciples set up camp and prepared the meal.

To be effective pastors, we must develop a servant's heart. Without a right heart, acts of service may be perceived as shallow and artificial. In his book *Leadership in Christian Ministry*, James Means says it so well: "The heart of spiritual leadership is service, not headship. . . . Spiritual leaders were never intended to be authority figures to followers, but fellow workers, servants, and colleagues in the work of the ministry" (pp. 46, 47).

BA: Reflect on what you've learned by serving in CoG7 for forty-four years and from your switch to the General Conference in 1987.

I began pastoring in Portland, Oregon (1965), and returned to my home area of Meridian, Idaho, seven years later. There I taught at Maranatha College and worked as general secretary for the General Council. God blessed our campmeetings in Meridian, and many friendships I developed then still remain. My family was Church of God before the 1933 split, when our family remained with Stanberry, but many relatives went with Salem. My father dreamed of the time when the Church would again be united.

Dad attended the unity meeting in 1949. I heard him say on several occasions that he voted for unity because he believed in a united church. But even while voting "yes," he knew he was voting himself out.

As other ministers and laymen found they could not remain in the united church, the need for a branch in which they could function became apparent. The General Council was formed at Meridian to accommodate that need. But the desire for a united church remained.

I served on two unity committees covering twelve years. When the 1987 unity vote was taken, the Conference approved, but the Council fell just short of the required two-thirds majority. I was among several ministers and members who moved their membership to the Conference at that time. We had spent too many years working toward that



Gospel

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goal to walk away from it. If the Conference had been as tolerant in 1949 as it was in 1987, I don't believe there would have been a General Council.

As general secretary of the Council, my task had been to pay the bills. Raising funds was a constant struggle. To no longer have to worry whether or not the bills would be paid was a relief. But the greatest change was the increased potential in resources and personnel. During my time with the Council, I often felt like a fisherman in a leaky boat, and I spent most of my time bailing water to keep the boat afloat. Now I don't worry so much about the boat, and I have time to "fish."

Those of us who transferred our memberships in '87 are grateful for the warm and immediate acceptance we received. Over the years I had found that there was little difference between the Conference and the Council. For me, both groups were part of the Church of God (Seventh Day), so I felt right at home.

BA: Tell us about your birth family, and your present family.

I am the fifth of thirteen children born to Luvelt and Bernice (Sheffield) Palmer. My father was converted in his teens, with no church background. My mother was granddaughter of Elisha S. Sheffield, an early Church of God minister. My siblings all married in the Church and remain active in it.

My parents left a spiritual heritage by instilling in us a love for God, the Bible, the family, and the Church. Those remain my priorities today, in that order. Rowena and I have three children (David, Carla [Decker], and Karen [Edwards]) and nine grandchildren, all who are active in the Church.

BA: Carl and Rowena, our thanks to you — and to all pastors and their families — during Pastor Appreciation Month.

I feel honored to be in the Church's ministry and for the privilege of working alongside my fellow pastors. We have the greatest calling in the world.

To my colleagues who may not feel appreciated, I say, "Don't be discouraged. Most of the Bible prophets were not appreciated in their generation. Elijah felt alone. Jeremiah complained that nobody took him seriously, that everybody mocked him. He told God that he no longer wished to be His messenger. But time has shown him to be one of God's greatest spokesmen. God will be the ultimate judge as to whether we've been faithful to our calling. Stay true, and time will vindicate you. Never give up!"

In my years of ministry, there have been difficult times with pain and loss. The satisfaction comes from being part of what God is doing. I would not trade vocations with anyone I know.

BA: A word to those who sense God's call to prepare for ministry?

One lone boy had a unique part in Jesus' feeding of the multitude in John 6: He furnished the loaves and fishes. This event was not about him. The other Gospels record this miracle but don't even mention the lad. I can hear him arriving home: "Mamma, Jesus used my lunch to feed five thousand people!" He carried that memory the rest of his life.

To be used by Jesus: No other experience can compare! To be present when God works is great; to be a part of His work is even better. Our contribution may not be noticed, but that's OK. It's not about us; it's about Him. He watches, and He will give the final credits.

If you hear God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" just say, "Here am I! Send me." **BA**

