

Memphis 1994: Miracle and Mandate

Dr. Vinson Synan

It was a day never to be forgotten in the annals of American Pentecostalism, October 18, 1994, when the Spirit moved in Memphis to end decades of racial separation and open doors to a new era of cooperation and fellowship between African American and white Pentecostals. At the time, it was called the Memphis Miracle by those gathered in Memphis and the national press, which hailed the historic importance of the event.

This was called a miracle because it ended decades of formal separation between the predominantly black and white Pentecostal churches in America. In its beginnings, the Pentecostal movement inherited the interracial ethos of the Holiness Movement at the turn of the century. One of the miracles of the Azusa Street revival was the testimony that the color line was washed away in the blood. In this worldwide cradle of the movement, a black man, William J. Seymour, served as pastor of a small black church in Los Angeles, where from 1906 to 1909, thousands of people of all races gathered to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the accompanying evidence of speaking in tongues. Often black hands were laid upon white heads to pray down the power of Pentecost. From Azusa Street, the movement spread to the nations and continents of the world.

In the beginning, practically all the Pentecostal movements and churches in America were interracial with many having thriving black leaders and churches. Yet from 1908 to 1924, one by one, most churches bowed to the American system of segregation by separating into racially segregated fellowships. In Jim Crow America, segregation in all areas of life ruled the day. Gradually Seymour's Azusa Street dream of openness and equality faded into historical memory.

The PFNA

The separation of black and white Pentecostals was formalized in 1948 with the creation of the all-white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA) in Des Moines, Iowa. As incredible as it seems today, no black churches were invited. The races continued to drift further and further apart.

By the 1990s, the climate had changed drastically in the United States. The civil rights movements and legislation of the 1950s and 1960s swept away the last vestiges of legal Jim Crow segregation in American life. Schools were integrated. Many doors were opened for all to enter American public life. Most churches, however, remained segregated and out of touch with these currents. The year 1948 also saw the beginnings of the salvation-healing crusades of Oral Roberts and other Pentecostal evangelists. Both blacks and whites flocked together to the big tent services. Along with Billy Graham and Oral Roberts, other Pentecostal evangelists refused to seat the races in separate areas. Although the churches remained separate, there was more interracial worship among blacks and whites who flocked together to the big tent services.

The advent of the charismatic movement in 1960 and the creation of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) in 1970 brought more contacts between black and white Pentecostals. The congresses sponsored by the North American Renewal Service Committee (NARSC) in the 1980s and 1990s also brought many black and white Pentecostal leaders together for the first time, while serving on the steering committee to plan the massive charismatic rallies in New Orleans, Indianapolis, and Orlando.

The Architects Of Unity

The leaders, who above all brought the races together in Memphis in 1994, were bishop Ithiel Clemmons of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and bishop Bernard E. Underwood of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. These men had met while serving on the NARSC board and planning the New Orleans

Congress of 1987. With great trust and mutual dedication, these two men were able to lay the groundwork for the 1994 meeting in Memphis.

The process began when Underwood was elected to head the PFNA in 1991. At that time, he purposed in his heart to use his term to end the racial divide between the Pentecostal churches. On March 6, 1992, the board of administration voted unanimously to pursue the possibility of reconciliation with our African American brethren. After this, four important meetings transpired on the road to Memphis.

The first meeting was on July 31, 1992 in Dallas, Texas, in the DFW Hyatt Regency Hotel where COGIC bishop O. T. Jones captivated the PFNA leaders with his wit and wisdom. The second meeting was held in Phoenix, Arizona, on January 4-5, 1993, where COGIC pastor Reuben Anderson (who represented bishop Charles Blake) from Compton, California, played a key role in bringing understanding of the challenges of urban ministries in America. The third session convened at the PFNA annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, on October 25-27, 1993. Here, Jack Hayford of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel and bishop Gilbert Patterson of the Church of God in Christ strongly affirmed the plans for reconciliation. A fourth meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, in January 1994 became known as the 20/20 Meeting because 20 whites and 20 blacks joined to plan the climactic conference that was scheduled for October 1994 in Memphis. The hope was that the old PFNA could be laid to rest there in order to birth a new fellowship without racial or ethnic boundaries.

The Memphis Miracle

When the delegates arrived in Memphis on October 17, 1994, an electric air of expectation that something wonderful was about to happen permeated the atmosphere. The conference theme was *Pentecostal Partners: A Reconciliation Strategy for Twenty-first Century Ministry*. More than 3,000 persons attended the evening sessions in the Dixon-Meyers Hall of the Cook Convention Center in downtown Memphis. Everyone was aware of the racial strife in Memphis where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Here, the hope was a great racial healing would take place. The night services reflected the tremendous work done by the local committee in the months before the gathering. Bishop Gilbert Patterson of the Temple of Deliverance Church of God in Christ and J.D. Middlebrook, pastor of the Raleigh Assembly of God in Memphis, co-chaired the committee. Although both men had pastored in the same city for 29 years, they had never met. The Memphis project brought them together.

The morning sessions were remarkable for the honesty and candor of the papers that were presented by a team of leading Pentecostal scholars. These included Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. of Fuller Theological Seminary and the Assemblies of God, Dr. Leonard Lovett of the Church of God in Christ, Dr. William Turner of Duke University and the United Holy Church, and Dr. Vinson Synan of Regent University and the Pentecostal Holiness Church. In these sessions, the sad history of separation, racism, and neglect was laid bare before the 1,000 or more leaders assembled. These sometimes-chilling confessions brought a stark sense of past injustice and the absolute need of repentance and reconciliation. The evening worship sessions were full of Pentecostal fire and fervor as bishop Patterson, Billy Joe Daugherty, and Jack Hayford preached rousing sermons to the receptive crowds.

The climactic moment, however, came in the scholar's session on the afternoon of October 18, after bishop Blake tearfully told the delegates, "Brothers and sisters, I commit my love to you. There are problems down the road, but a strong commitment to love will overcome them all." Suddenly there was a sweeping move of the Holy Spirit over the entire assembly. A young black brother uttered a spirited message in tongues after which Jack Hayford hurried to the microphone to give the interpretation. He began by saying:

"For the Lord would speak to you this day, by the tongue, by the quickening of the Spirit, and He would say, 'My sons and my daughters, look if you will from the heavenward side of things, and see where you have been, two, separate streams, that is, streams as at flood tide. For I have poured out of My Spirit upon you and flooded you with grace in both your circles of gathering and fellowship. But as streams at flood

tide, nonetheless, the waters have been muddied to some degree. Those of desperate thirst have come, nonetheless, for muddy water is better than none at all.

My sons and my daughters, if you will look and see that there are some not come to drink because of what they have seen. You have not been aware of it, for only heaven has seen those who would doubt what flowed in your midst, because of the waters muddied having been soiled by the clay of your humanness, not by your crudity, lucidity, or intentionality, but by the clay of your humanness, the river has been made impure.

But look. Look, for I, by My Spirit, am flowing the two streams into one. And the two becoming one, if you can see from the heaven side of things, are being purified, and not only is there a new purity coming in your midst, but there will be multitudes more who will gather at this one mighty river because they will see the purity of the reality of my love manifest in you. And so, know that as heaven observes and tells us what is taking place, there is reason for you to rejoice and prepare yourself for here shall be multitudes more than ever before come to this joint surging of my grace among you, says the Lord."

Immediately, a white pastor appeared in the wings of the backstage with a towel and basin of water. His name was Donald Evans, an Assemblies of God pastor from Tampa, Florida. When he explained that the Lord had called him to wash the feet of a black leader as a sign of repentance, he was given access to the platform. In a moment of tearful contrition, he washed the feet of bishop Clemmons while begging forgiveness for the sins of the whites against their black brothers and sisters. A wave of weeping swept over the auditorium. Then, bishop Blake approached Thomas Trask, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, and tearfully washed his feet as a sign of repentance for any animosity blacks had harbored against their white brothers and sisters. This was the climactic moment of the conference. Everyone sensed that this was the final seal of Holy Spirit approval from the heart of God over the proceedings. In an emotional speech the next day, Dr. Paul Walker of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) called this event, the "Miracle in Memphis," a name that struck and made headlines around the world.

That afternoon, the members of the old PFNA gathered for the final session of its history. In a very short session, a motion was carried to dissolve the former, all-white organization in favor of a new entity that would be birthed the next day. More reconciliation was yet to come!

When the new constitution was read to the delegates on October 19, a new name was proposed for the group-Pentecostal Churches of North America (PCNA). It was suggested that the governing board of the new group have equal numbers of blacks and whites and that denominational, charter memberships would be welcomed that very day. Before the constitution came before the assembly for a vote, pastor Billy Joe Daugherty of Tulsa's Victory Christian Center asked the delegates to include the word Charismatic in the new name. Over a hastily-called luncheon meeting of the restructuring committee, it was agreed that those Christians who thought of themselves as Charismatics would also be invited to join. When the vote was taken, the body unanimously voted to call the new organization the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America (PCCNA). Thus, the Memphis Miracle included the beginning of healing between Pentecostals and Charismatics as well as between blacks and whites.

Another milestone of the day was the unanimous adoption of a Racial Reconciliation Manifesto that was drafted by bishop Ithiel Clemmons, Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., Dr. Leonard Lovett, and Dr. Harold D. Hunter. In this historic document, the new PCCNA pledged to oppose racism prophetically in all its various manifestations and to be vigilant in the struggle. They further agreed to confess that racism is a sin and as a blight must be condemned, while they promised to seek partnerships and exchange pulpits with persons of a different hue in the spirit of our Blessed Lord-who prayed that we might be one.

After this, the election of officers took place with bishop Clemmons chosen as chairman and bishop Underwood as vice-chairman. Also elected to the board was bishop Barbara Amos, whose election

demonstrated the resolve of the new organization to bridge the gender gap as well. The other officers represented a balance of blacks and whites from the constituent membership.

The Memphis Mandate

The subsequent meetings of the PCCNA in Memphis in 1996 and Washington, D.C., in 1997 showed that the road to racial reconciliation in America would not be short or easy. Everyone agreed much more was to be done and much to overcome. The incredible Memphis Miracle had now become the Memphis Mandate. All Spirit-filled believers must join in a crusade of love and good will to show the world that when the Spirit moves, those who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit will move forward to bring the lost to Christ and to full ministry and fellowship, in churches that have no racial, ethnic, or gender barriers.

Dr. Vinson Synan, former Dean of Regent University School of Divinity, served as an advisor to the PCCNA executive committee. Author of the widely read Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition, Dr. Synan served as chair of the North American Renewal Service Committee (NARSC) and an ordained minister with the International Pentecostal Holiness Church.