

To Remain The Same You Must Change

By Dr. Gregory Wiens

This last week Patrick Nachtigall and I talked about the state of the Church of God here in Florida, the nation and around the world. Patrick might have interviewed some of you as well for his upcoming book on the past, present and future of our movement. I found his assessment challenging and his thinking stimulating. I would advocate each of you to buy his book when it is published. Read it, think about it and change accordingly.

I love this time of the year, as it is a time to reflect on where we have been in the past twelve months and look for ways to be more effective in the year to come. In light of that, let me share some of my thoughts, which I shared with Patrick.

Many of us have been concerned for years about the trajectory of the Church of God movement. But rather than throw stones and give in the entropy, we believe the best days are truly yet to come. However, if we are going to survive the next twenty years, it will be because we make some very strategic concrete changes. And, if we do make these changes and survive, we will look different than we have the last fifty years.

Our movement started out as a rural Midwestern movement and, for the first fifty years of our existence we grew rapidly with the values that formed our early culture. The Church of God, Anderson was identified as one of the fastest growing denominations in 1920 by a national magazine. Ironically, in that same year the census for the United States showed there were more people living in cities than in rural areas. That trend has continued for the last 90 years! Fewer and fewer people now live in rural areas. This is very true of Florida, less than 10% of our population lives in rural areas.

As our nation's population centers continue to grow, people begin to change their values. People in rural areas value stability, slow change and a high trust on their neighbors. People in dense population centers experience radical change; rapid living and they don't trust those who live right next door. Every year, I am reminded that the mobility rate in Orlando is over twenty percent, meaning that one in five of your neighbors will move this year. Every five years, the entire neighborhood experiences what amounts to a complete transfusion of the population.

Obviously, ministry in these two contexts (rural/cities) must take on two very different methods to reach people with these very different values. I was in a Church of God congregation recently where an individual was insulted because the congregation wanted to change their name to be more appealing to un-churched urban people. He couldn't conceive that in this city of a half a million people, individuals wouldn't drive by, see the name First Church of God on the building and want to come in. For him, these words expressed something warm, as he grew up in a small Church of God in rural Missouri where he learned to trust this name. Ironically, there are fewer and fewer people like him.

The point here is not to argue about what names should grace our buildings (or even if our churches should have buildings.) The point I am trying to make is that, as the values of those we are trying to reach change, so must our methods. Any good missionary knows that. Jesus tells us in *Matthew 9.37* that the fields are ripe and ready for harvesting. Then why do we have such a tough time seeing new conversions and disciples made in many of our churches? It would seem there is nothing wrong with the harvest, but with the harvesting equipment. I was raised in rural Michigan and I learned that you can't harvest soybeans with corn harvesting equipment. If you try, you will ruin the soybeans and get very frustrated!

The values that existed in our nation when our movement's culture was formed have been going through seismic changes these past fifty years. If our message is to remain the same, it must change. The implications of this are radical for our national and state structures as well as local congregations. Much of the stress we are experiencing within our movement is related to these changing values and how we chose to respond to them.

Some of us refuse to change our harvesting equipment. To you, I simply say go for it! There still is corn out there, go find it and harvest it for the Kingdom of God. Be careful you don't ruin soybeans because you are using corn-harvesting equipment. Look for corn (those who share your values) and harvest the corn well. Also, realize that there will be less and less corn in the future. Oh yes, and don't criticize those who are out harvesting soybeans.

For those who are embracing new kinds of harvesting equipment, my advice would be to immerse yourself in soybean harvesting. Don't just talk about reaping soybeans, DO IT! Also remember our identity as a movement of God. We value a personal experience that identifies one with God's church. We also believe that diversity brings strength to our unity. Oh yes, ensure that you don't condemn those who still want to harvest corn.

I am not sure what our movement will look like twenty or thirty years from now, but I do believe that the Kingdom of God will continue to expand around the world as a result of men and women from the Church of God, Anderson who have a heart for harvesting people and helping them grow complete in Christ. By then I am sure soybeans will be decreasing and then we will have to figure out to harvest wheat!

Remember: to keep our message the same, we must change...and change radically.