

Assemblies of God posts impressive numbers

by [Mark I. Pinsky](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue

The Assemblies of God, a denomination rooted in rural and small town America, appears to have leaped into the 21st century in a dramatic way.

At its General Council meeting in Orlando, Florida, August 5–9, the denomination touted its formula for defying the downward trend affecting other religious groups: contemporary music, arts and high-tech communication and outreach to young people, immigrants and ethnic minorities.

The denomination reported a 1.8 percent increase in U.S. membership to 3 million adherents. Globally, the gain was 1.5 percent, to 66 million, making it the largest Pentecostal group in the world.

Why are the Assemblies of God defying the odds? “We have been flexible when it comes to culture—music, dress, pulpit attire—while remaining consistent on that which has not changed, which is doctrine,” said George O. Wood, the newly reelected general superintendent who is also chairman of the World Assemblies of God.

Wood, 71, an attorney as well as a minister, said other denominations have “shifted in their doctrinal focus, and softened their reliance on the authority of God’s word, especially as it relates to scripture and sexuality morality.”

For example, the denomination’s boys’ youth group, the Royal Rangers, appears to have benefited from the Boy Scouts of America’s recent decision to admit gay scouts.

“Since the May 23 BSA decision, Royal Rangers has received many inquiries from families, churches, and denominations seeking an alternate way to mentor future men,” said Doug Marsh, national Royal Rangers director. “We have helped dozens of troops make the transition or take steps for a forthcoming change.”

The denomination steadfastly opposes gay marriage and ordination. Among the 26,000 delegates and visitors thronging the cavernous halls of the Orange County Convention Center for the biennial meeting, there is a smattering of older white people and women in modest, ankle-length skirts and sensible black shoes. But they are almost lost among the young and the people of color. Fully 40 percent of those present were under 25, according to the gathering's organizers, many of them immigrants or children of immigrants and minorities.

Efraim Espinoza, director of the denomination's Office of Hispanic Relations, credited the denomination's intentional focus on Spanish-language resources and emphasis on community leaders tasked with nurturing local Hispanic congregations.

In addition to being racially integrated from its inception—as a Fuller Theological Seminary student in the 1960s, Wood marched for civil rights—the Assemblies has always ordained women. In some areas, according to Charisma magazine, 60 percent of new pastors are women.

The denomination was an early adapter of contemporary and electronic music. However, some changes can be disquieting. In the past year, the denomination reports that traditional water baptisms have nearly doubled while spirit baptisms—signaled by speaking in tongues—declined. Wood attributes this to the eclipse of regular Sunday evening services, where such conversions often took place. —RNS

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