

Church of God in Christ convenes away from home

by [Tim Townsend](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

When is a church convention more than just another church convention? When 40,000 saints from the Church of God in Christ come marching in and relocate the year's largest convention from one cash-strapped city to another.

For the first time in more than a century, the Church of God in Christ—the nation's largest African-American Pentecostal denomination—held its annual Holy Convocation outside of its hometown of Memphis, Tennessee.

Last year, church officials announced that St. Louis had offered them \$1 million more in incentives than Memphis to move the convocation. Leaders agreed to a three-year deal that will move the conference to St. Louis through 2012.

For nine days through November 16, COGIC delegates were expected to occupy 25,000 hotel rooms and bring upward of \$30 million to the city, according to the St. Louis Convention and Visitors Commission.

The commission was aggressive last year in its pursuit of the event, offering meal discounts, free hotel parking and use of all 502,000 square feet at the America's Center Convention Center and Edward Jones Dome.

Presiding Bishop Charles Blake said the decision to move the convocation out of Memphis—where the COGIC has its headquarters—after 102 years was both financial and logistical. "St. Louis is a tremendous city in terms of its capacity to accommodate us—from the hotels . . . to transportation options," said Blake, who is also the senior pastor of a Los Angeles megachurch and a leading figure among Pentecostalist Christians.

The move was bad news for businesses in Memphis, where the \$25 million brought in by the convocation constituted the city's largest convention of the year. "From a historical standpoint, this was a pretty significant blow to Memphis," said Otis Sanford, opinion editor at the *Commercial Appeal*, the city's daily newspaper.

The Church of God in Christ says it has 6.5 million members and more than 12,000 congregations, making it one of the largest Christian denominations in the country.

A former Baptist pastor, Charles H. Mason, founded the Church of God in Christ in 1907 in Memphis after he witnessed the early stages of the 1906-09 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles that sparked the modern Pentecostal movement—best known for its emphasis on "gifts of the Spirit," including prophecy, healing and speaking in tongues.

During World War II, the church built Mason Temple—at the time the largest convention hall in the country owned by African Americans—as its headquarters, worship and meeting space. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "Mountaintop" speech, in support of Memphis's striking sanitation workers, at Mason Temple the night before he was assassinated.

In recent years, church officials had to seat convention participants in four venues around downtown simultaneously, and some people were still denied access to the convocation's larger events.

"The fact is—and everyone knows it—our convention facilities were too small for such a large convention," said Sanford of the *Commercial Appeal*. "The former mayor was pushing for a new convention center, but from a financial standpoint, it's not feasible, certainly not right now in the economic reality of Memphis."

Blake said the church wasn't getting a fair deal in Memphis, when nightly hotel rates would rise \$40 to \$50 during the COGIC convention. "We were taken for granted," Blake said. "Memphis felt we had no option but to hold our event there, so there was no incentive for them to give us the kind of benefits we felt we needed."

John Oros, chief operating officer of the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau, disputed that assessment as inaccurate. "When we offered a proposal, rates were deeply discounted from previous years, and there was a good-faith effort on behalf of the hotel community to keep the church here," he said.

Despite moving its annual convocation, Blake said the church would never relocate its headquarters out of Memphis. "The city has had a powerful relationship with our denomination over 100 years," the bishop said. "But we will determine the location of our Holy Convocation by competitive bidding, and we'll go to the cities that can best accommodate us and that appreciate our coming."

—*St. Louis Dispatch* via RNS