The Global Impact of the Global Gathering

By Mailesi Ndao

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Lord Almighty for such a time as this. Heartfelt thanks also go to the organizers of such an important event.

I used to hear of World Forums for the Church of God and how good it was for the global church to come together and share ideas and just be together. Upon hearing that such events were a thing of the past, I was deeply saddened. It is against this background that I’m writing to acknowledge the importance of the Global Gathering. As the Word says, “How good and pleasant it is when brethren come together in unity,” (Ps 133:1, author’s paraphrase). Being a God thing, the Global Gathering gives the Church of God an opportunity to simply let God be God, and that, I believe, will be absolutely essential for the church. We can redefine our world vision. And this gathering presents the Church of God leadership with an opportunity to rekindle the passion of Christ by revealing the kingdom of God here on earth. God loves us so much, and that is why he has accorded us an opportunity to come together and seek his face once more. So many times when I read the passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14, I ask myself why God said, “Seek my face...”? Why his face and not his...
Celebrating the Message of Martin Luther King Jr.

By Carl Stagner

Martin Luther King Jr Day 2013 is observed in the United States on Monday, January 21. The civil rights activist for whom the holiday is named not only preached the gospel but also championed peace and reconciliation in a world of incredible diversity. King’s message of hope was not just for African Americans, but for all people. On the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day, and through the month of February, churches recognize the achievements of King and other African Americans who have contributed to the church and society.

Looking around the congregation in February, it is not uncommon to see some of the ladies dressed in traditional African attire. In previous years, the church has also feasted on traditional Southern soul food. But the biggest component of Solid Rock’s Black History observance is the youth activities.

On the last Saturday of February, the youth of Solid Rock Church of God participate in a competition of creativity and spirit. The youth prepare in advance to present the story of African Americans who have contributed great things to society. They conduct in-depth research, bring props, and even dress like the persons about whom they will speak. Then each presenter is judged on creativity, presentation, content, and more.

Pastor Whitfield Blenman believes that observing Black History Month is important for African Americans because it brings about a sense of self-worth among youth. “The purpose behind what we do in the youth department is to stimulate creativity and help them realize they too can positively impact society. They can see that black people have done some significant things in the lives of people around the world.” He also believes that predominantly white churches could also benefit from recognizing this important time of year. “Our Anglo brothers and sisters are benefiting from the contributions of African Americans. It opens up their mind and appreciation. There are black people who have given and continue to give, not only in America, but across the globe. It’s important for us to be reminded.”

One of the easiest ways churches can observe the achievements of Martin Luther King Jr. and other African Americans is to print brief bios of these leaders in the weekly bulletin. But Blenman, whose church is composed of multiple cultures, urges churches to be careful and to do everything in love. “We have to be careful. We don’t want to offend anyone or make them feel like they are not a part of the church. I don’t think any church should function like a ‘typical’ black church or a ‘typical’ white church. We should function as the church! With Martin Luther King, it wasn’t just a black thing. There were also Anglos who participated. Martin Luther King Day is a reminder of how he brought about a coming together of all people.”

Solid Rock youth presents the history of a notable black leader

One Church of God congregation that annually celebrates the accomplishments of African Americans in our culture is Solid Rock Church of God in Kissimmee, Florida. Each Sunday during February, a picture and biography of a notable black leader is featured in the church bulletin. Black history trivia is featured, and the choir and worship team present a special song of African American heritage. The fellowship hall is turned into what they call a museum, showcasing displays about black leaders who have shaped the culture. On the final Sunday of February, the church will present a skit titled “If There Were None,” which dramatically demonstrates how our society would be different had it not been for the contributions of African Americans.

We invite you to wonder, explore, to see for yourself – call today!

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After kicking off in 2011 with more than 700 congregations participating and countless lives being changed once again in 2012, Focus 40 is back! But this year, Focus 40 goes extreme! This year’s theme is set to inspire individuals and congregations to move beyond their comfort zones to love God and neighbor like never before. The question for Focus 40 participants this year may be, Is your love extreme?

Focus 40 begins on February 20 and concludes on March 31. The 2013 prayer and fasting focus will observe the theme Extreme Love, based on the Great Commandment of Jesus. The apostle Paul expressed it this way: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” (Eph 1:7-8 niv).

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment in all of the law, he replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:36-40 niv).

The Church of God Transformation Team has produced a wide range of resources available to you and your church to help you most effectively observe these forty days of prayer and fasting, culminating in a celebration on Easter Sunday of what the risen Christ has accomplished among us. Together we anticipate experiencing God’s Extreme Love.

Resources and promotional material are available in both English and Spanish at www.chog.org/Focus40. You’ll find downloadable materials for children, youth, adults, and pastors. To help you in your spiritual journey through Focus 40, we have prepared prayer calendars, daily devotionals, a small group study, worship resources, sample sermons, and more!

While you’re on our website, please let us know that you’re planning to participate with us by registering yourself or your congregation—it’s free! You’ll help your congregation sharpen its focus and experience the Extreme Love of our God this Easter season.

Global Impact
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hands, feet, or heart? Each morning when I wake up, my kids look at my face and know the kind of mood I’m in and know how to relate to me. I think now is the time for God’s church to seek his face. I firmly believe the Global Gathering is the best idea the leadership of the Global Church has come up with “for such a time as this.”

The Global Gathering will be beneficial to the people I serve as I will come back and share the message, knowledge, wisdom, and experiences I will learn from others. Above all, the sense of belonging as we come together as children of the Most High from the four corners of the earth is simply awesome.

Mailesi Ndao is the national leader for the Church of God in Zambia. The Global Gathering is June 22–25 in Anderson, Indiana. Visit www.chog.org/globalgathering, or call 800-848-2464 ext. 2130, to register today!
Global Gathering: “Worshiping” Together!

By Carma Wood

We will stand as one, we will stand as one, reflecting his glory!

The first line of the chorus of the Global Gathering 2013 theme song penned by Mick Gilliam and David Coplin is the strong hope of those who are in preparation for the 2013 summer event. We desire to truly recognize our unity and bond in Christ Jesus and in that recognition be a massive reflection of his glory, showing to the community of Anderson and to the communities around the world the truth that has set us free to be sons and daughters of the one living God.

This is a high goal. It cannot be reached without much prayer, preparation, intentional laying down of our own agendas, and turning to a mutual vision of real exchange of our stories, our hopes, our sorrows, and our victories. Those who are laying the groundwork for the convention invite those of you who are now making plans to come and those of you who are hesitant to be a part but open to the possibility, to pray with us, to consider with us the promise from our Lord: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32 NIV).

As for me, I imagine a gathering of God’s good creation from all tongues and tribes celebrating together in honor of what the Lord has done in our lives, finding strength in our commonalities, and finding life abundant in our diversity. I want to look in your face and you look into mine and both find a sister or a brother there whom, until that moment, had not been discovered.

The Global Gathering is June 22–25 in Anderson, Indiana. Visit www.chog.org/globalgathering, or call 800-848-2464 ext. 2130, to register today!

Carma Wood is co-worship coordinator for the Global Gathering 2013. She currently serves as associate pastor of worship and the arts at Park Place Church of God in Anderson, Indiana.
The Walmart Pastor

By Carl Stagner

It could’ve been the slogan for the church: “Save souls. Live better.” Or possibly, “Always rejoices. Always.” But the church founded by Ercides Estrada wasn’t concerned about catchy phrases or slick marketing techniques. Estrada’s eyes were focused on a single goal: go to the people, and tell them about Jesus. After all, it wasn’t that long ago that he had been wandering the byways of life in total darkness. But Estrada had found the Light, and he wanted everyone he came in contact with to find the Light. So what does a minister do when he arrives in a new town and wants to evangelize? He goes to the local Walmart and begins to preach.

In 1998, while living in Virginia, Estrada surrendered his heart to the Lord through the ministry of Pastor Ramon Romero. Luz Gonzales and James Johnman encouraged Estrada along his spiritual journey. Gonzales taught Estrada important principles of evangelism. Estrada received a call to vocational ministry and began ministry studies through Anderson University School of Theology. In 2003, James Johnman contacted Estrada about the possibility of starting a Spanish-speaking Church of God in Lexington, Kentucky.

Estrada accepted the call, packed up his belongings, and moved his family west to Kentucky. Estrada remembers the sequence of events this way: “When my wife, my two children, and I moved from Virginia, we didn’t have anyone in Lexington. We didn’t know anybody, and we didn’t have family or friends there. So one day I prayed and God told me: ‘Go to the Walmart.’ And there were many people there!”

He continues, “I started to preach in the parking lot. Three to four new people came back each day to listen.” Estrada tells of how some people ignored him or didn’t accept his message, while others were blessed by it. And so it was that Iglesia de Dios Fuente de Vida (Fountain of Life Church of God) was founded.

The ripples of Estrada’s work in the Walmart parking lot continue to expand. Estrada now pastors a Hispanic congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio, that has grown from about 70 persons to 125. Iglesia de Dios Nueva Esperanza (New Hope Church of God) currently worships at Dayspring Church of God. Meanwhile, a Church of God congregation has been planted in Veracruz, Mexico; Iglesia de Dios Árbol de Vida (Tree of Life Church of God) already sees 90 individuals come to worship on a regular basis. Estrada praises the Lord for the unique way God began his ministry and is amazed at the way God brings the puzzle pieces of life together to form a one-of-a-kind masterpiece. The pastor of the new Veracruz congregation was one of many souls won to Christ through Estrada’s ministry to shoppers in the Walmart parking lot.
**Bible Belt Basics**

*By Carl Stagner*

Nestled in the heart of the Ozarks, about a hundred miles southwest of Saint Louis, Missouri, you’ll find the sprawling heartland community of Rolla. The culture oozes traditional values, country kindness, and down-home hospitality. So when Daniel Phillips was called there to pastor, the question on his mind wasn’t whether or not the church’s nativity would be vandalized, but whether people who are familiar with church would move beyond rote religion to revival. To grasp the ministry behind the man, you have to understand the journey that led him to Central Community Church of God.

As a graduate of Olivet Nazarene University, Phillips was off and ready to enter the ministry. With his wife, the two moved to Tucson, Arizona, where Phillips found an interim source of income at Cracker Barrel. While there he heard from a customer that a church nearby was searching for a children’s pastor. Pastor Bob Siebels of First Church brought Phillips on board, introducing him to the Church of God. Following a subsequent period of ministry in West Virginia, Bob Siebels, who by then was serving as interim pastor at Rolla, got in touch with Phillips about the possibilities at Central Community. And so it was that Siebels, who mentored Phillips years before, reunited with him to witness seeds bear fruit at Central Community. Thinking back, there is much that Phillips values about his affiliation Church of God, besides the theme of holiness. “I appreciate the support network that I have as a pastor. Howard Megill is the state pastor here, and along with Don Carson, they have been fantastic support. Though they don’t attend our church, they really feel a burden for it. SHAPE has become very important to me. I am thankful that the Church of God invests in their pastors. My own church family even treats me like I’m their favorite nephew!”

Central Community Church of God, a congregation established in 1892, was experiencing decline and the weight of massive debt when Phillips came along. Under Siebels’s transitional leadership, the church—which had dwindled down to thirty persons—grew back to sixty. God also orchestrated a new emphasis on stewardship, which put a dent in the debt. Since 2005, when Phillips assumed ministerial leadership, the church has grown to a hundred worshipers on Sundays.

Perhaps it’s no wonder that God is moving through their ministry. Phillips’ chief areas of focus are evangelism, and youth and children’s ministry. The church supports an onsite daycare in which Phillips is actively involved. The last three families that have made Central Community their home were influenced by the daycare program.

The church also delivers more than a hundred meals to shut-ins and the local police station at Thanksgiving. Concerted effort is put into the children’s program, Sunday school, and discipleship groups.

The Central Community youth group, named “Strange Youth,” regularly hosts parties that show a side of Christianity not always visible to the culture. “We do skeet shooting and have a barbecue. The chief of police lets us hang out at his quarry, where we jump off an eighteen-foot cliff into the turquoise water below. We have mule rides and hold church in a barn. We do pumpkin chucking and fish fries. In all we do with the youth and children, we’re deliberate. They’re parties with a purpose, which is to reach out. We want people see that the church is just real people who love the Lord.”

Considering the size of the church, Central Community sustains many ministries. Phillips believes these are vitally important to the church and community. Even in the Bible Belt, a lot of people just need to get back to the basics. “The greatest need we have here is helping people reconnect with God,” Phillips explains. “We’re helping people understand why they believe what they believe and where the values they hold actually come from.”
When you stop to think about the biblical account of Christ’s birth, there are some incredible details that leave you pondering its validity, yet you recognize God’s amazing orchestration: the idea of angels singing to shepherds, a virgin birth, and a dream instructing Joseph to take Mary and hide out in Egypt. We are not struggling in our faith but merely relooking at the amazing story and how it relates to us today! Thinking of the King of Kings being born in a lowly stable seems a bit unreal. Yet it would appear that God used this lowly place of birth to convey his desire to be in relationship with each one of us.

A lowly stable offers some lofty thoughts about the birth and mission of our Savior. Our English word manger comes from the French verb manger, which means “to eat.” The manger was a place for animals to eat. How fitting that he who claimed to be the bread of life should be laid in a place of feeding. The stable was also a place of shelter and protection for those in need of rest and refuge. Jesus found refuge in that stable in his first hours of life. Years later he said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28 niv). He still offers us rest and refuge from the storms of life. While a stable is not normally a place of worship, Jesus’ presence there turned that stable into a holy place of worship where God and man met in sacred union.

Here where we live, many homes are surrounded by high walls to keep unwanted visitors out. But the stable was a place of full access where all could come to find room to worship the newborn King. Though the homes and inns of Bethlehem were not accessible to Jesus, the stable opened wide its doors to him and all who would take the time to come and see this thing which had come to pass. The stable is a place where there is always room. Jesus established a kingdom where there is always room for rich and poor, foreign and homegrown, young and old, laborer and professional. The question is not, Does Jesus have room for me? but, Do I have room for Jesus?!

The people of Côte d’Ivoire are learning to make room for Jesus in their lives, homes, and villages. The first Sunday in December, we were invited to the dedication of a new church out in a village. The people worked hard to get everything ready before Christmas to worship in their new church. They are striving to make room for Jesus in their village. They have built a new place of worship, which looks something like a stable, where everyone is welcome. It is a place of refuge for those in need of rest, a place of feeding on God’s Word for hungry souls, and a place of worship for those who experience a new birth of their own. Before the service, we followed the crowd down to a small pond where twenty-one believers testified of their new birth through baptism.

Then about four hundred people from several villages gathered to sing, dance, and celebrate the coming of Christ to this village. We ended by laying hands on their new building to dedicate it as a place of feeding, shelter, worship, and access for all who come and see the Christ—born anew in this village, not unlike the Bethlehem of two thousand years ago—a stable and all!

Larry and LeAnn Sellers are your career missionaries serving in Côte d’Ivoire.
Ministries Council Succession Committee Update

January 7, 2013

Dear Friends,

The Succession Committee has been working diligently the last few months since the close of the applications for the position of General Director, and I want to start 2013 off by sending you an update. We thank you for your prayers during this process and want you to be informed so you can pray more specifically these next few months.

The period for recommendations and applications closed on November 1, 2012. More than 90 recommendations were sent to the designated website. Additionally, Church of God Ministries and I received another 12-15 recommendations. Forty-seven different people were recommended, and three people also chose to send in applications without recommendations. Males and females, Caucasian and African American persons, ordained ministers and lay leaders were recommended. As we had planned, each person that was recommended received an e-mail from me with an invitation to apply for the position. I personally called many of those who did not respond to an invitation. We made every effort to assure each recommended person that we were eager to receive his or her application and resume.

We looked at each application, and after a designated time of prayer and review of each application, we met to determine the persons we would invite to proceed further in this process. We conducted our conference-call interviews with each potential candidate, and after another week of prayer, the Succession Committee met to decide the ones with whom we wanted to continue.

These persons are now in the evaluation process. Our consultants at Sima International have conducted a battery of assessments. The procedure specifically dictates that they use the results of the survey and focus group research done within the Church of God during this last spring and summer as they help us to understand each candidate. We are looking for a person that most positively correlates with our determined needs for the future General Director in light of the research that was done with the Church of God.

In late January, the Succession Committee will continue the process with face-to-face interviews with the finalists. Our consultant will be present, helping us see the benefits and challenges of each candidate. If God is willing, at the March Ministries Council meeting, we will present a candidate for the Council’s approval for presentation to the General Assembly in June 2013.

In accordance with the action of the Ministries Council in September 2012, a transition team was also created to facilitate a smooth and orderly transition. Dr. Ronald Fowler is the chairperson of this team, which will be working with the Succession Committee. The other members of this committee are Rev. David Winn, Dr. Donald Johnson, Ms. Loretta Cooper, and Rev. Robert Dulin.

The Succession Committee has strongly felt the prayerful support of the Church of God. We ask that you continue to pray with us that God will give us wisdom in this next phase of the search. We truly want God’s designated person to be identified.

I hope this information has been helpful in giving you direction as you pray. It is our goal to keep you informed even as we closely guard the confidentiality of the process, for the sake of all involved. God bless each one of you. I am excited about God’s plans for the Church of God as we step into this year! God’s plans for us are bigger than anything we can imagine!

Sincerely with God’s love,

Rev. Rebecca New-Edson
Chairperson, Succession Committee for the Church of God
Leaders of eighteen faith groups convened for meetings of the Global Wesleyan Alliance (GWA) on Friday, November 30, 2012, and Saturday, December 1, 2012, at the headquarters of the Churches of Christ in Christian Union in Circleville, Ohio. The GWA partnership was formed in December 2011 to amplify the prophetic voice of Wesleyan-Arminian holiness ministries and to increase their effectiveness in spreading scriptural holiness throughout the world.

Members of the GWA Board of Directors are President Dr. Tom Hermiz (Churches of Christ in Christian Union), Vice President Dr. JoAnne Lyon (The Wesleyan Church), Secretary Dr. David Graves (Church of the Nazarene), and Treasurer Dr. Ronald Duncan (Church of God Anderson).

Other leaders involved in organizing the GWA are from Church of Christ Holiness USA, Church of God Holiness, Congregational Methodist Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, Free Methodist Church USA, International Fellowship of Bible Churches, Missionary Church, The Evangelical Church of North America, The Methodist Protestant Church, and The Salvation Army.

A “Covenant of the Global Wesleyan Alliance” was created last December and further revised by the GWA Board of Directors later that month. It includes a Statement of Faith and a plan for organization and governance. Prospective members of the Global Wesleyan Alliance have been gaining approval from their faith groups to support this covenant and participate as official members. The most recent meeting approved the covenant in principle and initiated a plan for financing the organization. The board of directors will be making assignments to GWA members to convene meetings in order to discuss specific possibilities for collaboration, such as a facilitated transfer of credentials between member faith groups, promotion of prayer participation and input from young people, missions collaboration, urban mission collaboration, and a gathering of judiciary leaders. Ongoing efforts include the planning of holiness summits, creating forums for prayer, and making classic holiness literature available.

The next annual meeting of the Global Wesleyan Alliance is planned for December 6–7, 2013, at The Salvation Army headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia.
A Conduit for Grace

By Sam Collins

Compared to involvement in ministry, it is ridiculously easy to play Chopin on the piano while wearing pillow-sized oven mitts. In ministry, difficulties arise in innumerable guises that include all sorts of people, forces, and circumstances. Issues surrounding sin, alienation, evil, forgiveness, reconciliation, life, death, and other spiritual matters are fraught with enough tripwires to make a warzone minefield seem relatively risk free.

In addition, those who labor in the Lord’s vineyards frequently must duck missiles launched by nonbelieving antagonists and so-called friendly fire in the form of figurative bazooka blasts launched from congregational pews and multipurpose stacking chairs. Little wonder that pastors and other clergy often feel like the barely ambulatory wounded.

It is also true, however, that ministers suffer numerous wounds that are self-inflicted. In fact many of the scars that pock my own inner self have been caused or exacerbated by my own hand.

Many of our ministry-related hurts and sorrows have their origins in unhealthy preoccupations with what we have accomplished and how our efforts are perceived. Ironically, these fixations are a recipe for accomplishing far less than we otherwise might and for nearing the end of life feeling that our efforts have had all the impact of a canary feather hurled against a granite wall.

I am increasingly convinced that my primary call as a minister is to be a conduit for God’s grace. More than leading a congregation that has more attendees than an NFL playoff game, more than being an authoritative leader who elicits accolades reserved for a haloed version of Churchill or Lincoln, more than having people suggest that my writing and sermons seem to have been authored by a troika consisting of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and the archangel Gabriel, what I am called to do is live, act, and speak in ways that give people a tiny glimpse of what God’s grace looks like in the life of a fallible, forgiven follower of Jesus Christ.

Within that context, all of my frantic, insecure, defensive, obsessive, hyper, overworked, Sabbath-abusing, non-trusting, people-shaming, over-controlling, self-reliant, self-righteous efforts only serve to plug up the channel intended to flow freely with the Spirit of God’s restorative love and mercy. What I end up projecting is little different from the demeanor of a hard-driving secular professional working to send corporate and personal career growth graphs shooting upward into the rarefied stratosphere. No matter how one might view that approach applied to business and commerce, it almost certainly runs counter to the call and ethos of ministry.

Among the questions we ministers need to ask ourselves, one of the most important is this: Am I an open conduit for God’s grace? If not, we are likely wounding ourselves and a host of others.

The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of Church of God Ministries or, at points, even the writer, but are written with tongue firmly planted in cheek to hopefully provoke a leavening bit of laughter and a smidgen of thought.