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Prayer, president overshadow
discord at SBC meeting

By Marv Knox and Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Prayer, the president, politics and Presbyterians overshadowed denominational discord during the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting June 4-6 in Atlanta.

A Wednesday night prayer service for spiritual awakening and a Thursday morning address by President George Bush provided focal points for the SBC's 134th session.

But the national spotlight stayed on Southern Baptists a day after the meeting adjourned. An SBC official appeared on Friday's "Today" show to discuss an SBC resolution at least partly aimed at a report on sexuality being debated by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) June 10 in Baltimore.

The three-hour prayer-for-spiritual-awakening service captured the attention and emotions of more than 20,000 messengers, as well as thousands of Southern Baptists across the country who watched it live on the ACTS television network.

"We desperately need a fresh encounter with God," insisted Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, whose sermon opened the prayer service. "We desperately need spiritual awakening."

The service bombarded participants' senses with calls to spiritual renewal. They saw banners. They sang songs. They heard sermons and personal testimonies.

Mostly, they prayed. They prayed for forgiveness of sins of not loving God, not loving others and living unholy lives. As they prayed, they focused on a large wooden cross, where nails symbolized their sins.

The next morning, they focused on President Bush and his social/moral agenda.

An estimated 20,000 people stayed to the end of the meeting to hear Bush speak about school prayer, parental choice in education and child care, crime and abortion.

"It's clear that America is a nation that no longer lacks a moral vocabulary," Bush told the messengers, who repeatedly jumped to their feet in applause.

Messengers previously adopted resolutions on several of the social/political issues raised by the president (see separate story).

The resolution that received the most national attention focused on the Presbyterians, not the president. Titled "On Human Sexuality," it called upon Christians to "uphold the biblical standard of human sexuality against all onslaughts."

Most close observers saw the sexuality statement as a slap at a broader report on sexuality being considered by the Presbyterians, which is expected to condone homosexuality and some sex outside of marriage. SBC resolutions committee chairman David Hankins of Lake Charles, La., appeared on the "Today" show to defend the resolution.

The prayer-president-politics-Presbyterian package

offered a break from theological/political controversy that has dogged the SBC for a dozen years. Absent this year was the open rancor between SBC factions fighting for control of the denomination.

President Morris Chapman ran unopposed and was elected to a second one-year term at the convention's helm. His victory last year seemingly wrapped up the SBC political battle for the fundamental-conservatives.

Moderate-conservatives held their own meeting a month earlier and across the street at the Omni arena, where they formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and eschewed further political battles with the ruling fundamental-conservatives.

Left with a free hand to conduct SBC business, fundamental-conservatives acted decisively on almost all issues. Most matters of business generated little debate. And, for the most part, fundamental-conservatives avoided gloating over their denominational domination.

In a news conference after his re-election, Chapman said he hopes the struggle between Baptists is over, but, he added, "It's difficult to predict."

In his presidential address to SBC messengers, Chapman criticized organizers of the the Fellowship for suggesting "the Bible neither claims nor reveals inerrancy as a Christian teaching."

"When you refuse to believe the Bible to be God's perfect Word, you have stripped away God's authority," said Chapman, pastor of First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls, Texas. "All you have left is human interpretation."

Echoing the theme of other recent SBC presidents, Chapman said inerrancy is "foundational in Southern Baptist life, and can only remain so if we teach it in the classrooms of our educational institutions, preach it in the pulpits of our churches and print it in the published pages of our literature."

In his news conference, however, he later suggested the voting margin between Baptist factions -- consistently about 55 percent to 45 percent during SBC meetings in the past decade -- does not reflect theological division among them. He declined to say what besides theology has driven Baptist voting patterns. Previous SBC presidents have said theology is the central issue.

As fundamental-conservatives solidified their grip on the denomination, SBC watchers predicted moderates-conservatives would stay away from the Atlanta convention in droves, perhaps never to return to an annual meeting.

Three factors suggested otherwise:

-- Messenger registration reached 23,564, well beyond the 20,000 or less many observers had predicted.

-- A vote to defund the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs passed by less than 800 votes. The BJCPA is a Washington-based religious-liberty organization that has been criticized as being too liberal by fundamental-conservatives.

After losing 83 percent of its SBC funding last year, the BJCPA was stripped of its final \$50,000 in SBC money this year, even though the fundamental-conservative leaders who drafted the budget argued against tampering with the convention's \$140.7 million budget from the meeting floor.

Still, some longtime observers expressed surprise that the committee came within 772 votes of retaining its money.

The defunding of the BJCPA apparently leaves the SBC Christian Life Commission as the only Southern Baptist voice on religious-liberty issues. By vote of the messengers, the CLC, traditionally a moral-concerns agency, was merged with the SBC Public Affairs Committee, which also had been authorized to speak for the SBC on religious liberty.

-- Longtime registration secretary Lee Porter won re-election to his post. Porter received rebuke from fundamental-conservatives and lost favor from his employer, the SBC Sunday School Board, after a newspaper attributed to him remarks critical of convention fundamental-conservatives.

Porter's supervisors at the board had told him he must resign if he chose to run for the SBC post again this year. Without the aid of a large moderate-conservative contingent, most convention watchers predicted Porter would lose.

Instead, he gained 4,523 votes (50.09 percent), 17 votes more than the 4,506 votes for James W. Richards, a Baton Rouge, La., pastor who had been nominated by the president of the SBC Pastors' Conference.

"This just shows that the messengers still believe in the integrity of their ballots," Porter said later.

Fundamental-conservatives were successful in electing the SBC's first vice president by acclamation -- Nelson Price, pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., and former president of the Pastors' Conference.

For second vice president, Ed Harrison Jr., pastor of Dollarway Baptist Church in Pine Bluff, Ark., defeated Vander Warner Jr., pastor of Grove Avenue Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., 2,633 to 1,900.

David Atchison was re-elected recording secretary without opposition.

The fundamental-conservative objective of reshaping the SBC also got a boost with the announcement by Harold Bennett, president and treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee, that he will retire in October 1992.

The committee is the most powerful SBC agency, determining how the Southern Baptist Convention spends its annual missions-and-ministry budget of \$140 million. The selection of Bennett's successor will be a vital factor in the future direction of the SBC.

For that task, the Executive Committee named a 10-member search group chaired by Julian Motley of North Carolina.

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Bush finds Baptist allies
for his social agenda

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- During his first visit to the Southern Baptist Convention since being elected president, George Bush found the nation's largest Protestant denomination a ready ally for his social agenda.

Bush and the Baptists found common ground on such key social issues as abortion, school prayer, the traditional family and federal funding for educational alternatives -- including Christian schools.

In a 17-minute speech that closed the three-day annual convention in Atlanta June 6, Bush urged Southern Baptists to "hold fast" to their historic commitments to freedom, faith and the family.

"You've held to faith where others may have lost it, gained in numbers when others haven't, and made a difference where others couldn't," said Bush, an Episcopalian.

Convention messengers were well primed for the president's visit, having previously adopted several resolutions supportive of Bush's positions. The three-day meeting also included two patriotic concerts and a salute to the armed services, with special recognition given to those who served in the Persian Gulf war.

A resolution commended the war-time leadership of Bush and others and thanked God for "His blessing on our nation in Operation Desert Storm."

Earlier in the week, 15,000 Southern Baptists attending the annual pre-convention Pastors' Conference gave a hero's welcome to retired Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, who urged Southern Baptists to seek social reform through the political process.

The week-long emphasis on patriotism and right-wing political issues prompted some critics to accuse SBC leaders of turning the denomination into a tool of Bush and the Republican Party.

But, as if to show their independence of the popular president, convention messengers adopted two resolutions critical of Bush for allowing federal funds to support "immorality."

The specific targets were the National Endowment for the Arts, which reportedly finances "obscene, offensive, morally repugnant and sacrilegious 'art'," and the Centers for Disease Control, which reportedly is providing \$25,000 for a national conference for lesbians and gays.

The resolutions ask Bush to fire NEA chairman John Frohnmayer and to prohibit the CDC and other government agencies from supporting groups "which encourage sexual immorality in any form."

Despite those concerns, the Baptist messengers welcomed the president with open arms. In introducing Bush to the audience, SBC president Morris Chapman of Wichita Falls, Texas, praised the president for "standing up" for family values, "the unborn," school prayer and "parental choice in education and child care."

Listeners applauded as Bush described the family and faith as "the two fundamental pillars supporting our society."

Early into his speech, Bush was interrupted by a handful of chanting gay-rights protesters, who were quickly ejected from the World Congress Center.

More often, however, he was interrupted by applause from the estimated 23,000 people present. The most enthusiastic response came when the president registered his opposition to federal funding of abortions, a practice he said has been in force since 1981.

-- Abortion. Bush acknowledged "honest people of goodwill" differ on the issue of abortion but said the government should fund abortions "only in the most narrow of circumstances," namely to save the life of the mother.

Southern Baptists, however, didn't limit their criticism

to federally funded abortions. Their anti-abortion resolution, passed a day earlier, also spoke against scientific research on aborted fetal tissue and against development and use of new abortion technologies, such as the RU-486 "abortion pill."

-- School prayer. Bush renewed his call for a constitutional amendment putting "voluntary prayer back into our nation's schools," a position endorsed by the SBC in recent years.

Bush told of a fifth-grade student -- Monette Rethford of Norman, Okla. -- who Bush said was prevented from reading the Bible and praying with her friends during recess because school officials labeled the gathering "an unlawful assembly."

School officials "forgot the First Amendment was written to protect people against religious intrusions by the state, not to protect the state from voluntary religious activities by the people," Bush said to thunderous applause.

Southern Baptists, who have addressed the school-prayer issue in past resolutions, chose this year to focus their concern for religious liberty on a Supreme Court ruling they say has the effect of relegating the First Amendment's freedom of religion "to an inferior status."

The court's ruling in *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith* permits states to restrict religious practices without first proving the state has a "compelling interest."

The SBC resolution asks for legislation to restore the endangered freedoms but which does not protect abortion as a religious liberty.

-- Education. Bush touted his America 2000 plan for education reform, which he said "puts power in parents' hands" by letting them choose which schools their children attend.

Rather than draining public schools of money and talent, Bush said, "I am confident that choice will make even the bad schools better."

Southern Baptists adopted a resolution that endorses the president's plan, noting it "provides real hope that all children can receive excellent instruction which also honors the values of their parents." According to the resolution, some Southern Baptists view public schools as "increasingly hostile to Christian convictions."

Since the president's "choice" plan would allow parents to channel federal funds to Christian schools, the resolution noted, the plan must be crafted in a way that does not constitute "direct aid to churches," since that would violate the First Amendment.

Members of the Committee on Resolutions said the statement intentionally avoided endorsement of any specific governmental proposals, such as tuition vouchers. But former congressman Albert Lee Smith of Birmingham, Ala., who submitted one of the two resolutions on which the final version was based, said the resolution as adopted would permit a voucher system similar to the G.I. bill.

Other resolutions urged Bush and the Congress to restrict advertising of alcoholic beverages and eliminate tax "discrimination" against one-income families and stay-at-home mothers.

In his speech, Bush told the Baptists he "found guidance

and comfort in prayer" during the Persian Gulf war.

He told of praying with his wife, Barbara, as he prepared to launch the air war against Iraq. The normally reserved Bush said he cried. "I no longer worried how it looked to others," he said, as tears again formed in his eyes and he paused.

"And I think that, like a lot of others who had positions or responsibility in sending someone else's kid to war, we realize that in prayer what mattered is how it might have seemed to God," he said.

Bush was obviously glad to address the convention, saying it had been "too long" since he had spoken to Southern Baptists. He was invited to speak to the SBC last year, but the invitation was either refused by Bush or withdrawn by the Baptists in a dispute over the president's recognition of gay-rights groups.

Bush's last appearance before Southern Baptists was in 1982, when as vice president he addressed the Pastors' Conference.

This year North was the headliner for the pastors' meeting. A 60-foot American flag formed the backdrop for the former Marine, who was greeted by cheering Baptists waving their own miniature flags.

The presence of North, who was convicted of three charges in the Iran-Contra scandal, drew a small contingent of protesters and a critical editorial in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Pastors' Conference president Richard Lee of Atlanta conceded North remains a controversial figure in America but added, "To the vast majority of us he's an American hero."

North spoke on the "desperate need for revival" in America and urged Southern Baptists to seek reform through the political process.

The right to vote and participate in government "is a precious privilege and ought to be regarded as a sacred trust," North said. But he warned that many Christians have "abdicated on our responsibility" to influence government by withdrawing from the political process.

North said the First Amendment is intended "to protect godly people from the government, not the government from godly people."

Despite the cozy relationship between Baptists and the political right, Baptist sociologist Nancy Ammerman said she sees no "conspiracy" by Baptist leaders to turn the SBC into an arm of the Republican Party.

Instead, the linkage is quite natural, she told Associated Baptist Press. The shared political and denominational agenda grows out of "a general concern for the way society has changed in the last decades," said Ammerman, a professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

However, she added, Baptists aren't making any distinctions between the role of government and the role of the church. "It is a classic example of blurring the lines between what government does and what the church does," she said.