

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION
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Moderates prevail in key state convention races

By Greg Warner

(ABP) -- The effort to extend conservative Southern Baptist control into the state conventions was less than successful during the recent round of fall state meetings.

Presidential candidates backed by conservative forces lost in at least seven large Baptist conventions -- in Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

However, conservative-backed candidates won in several other states, including South Carolina and Arkansas.

Presidential elections in Tennessee and Mississippi lacked overt political overtones, according to longtime observers. And in Georgia, site of frequently hot political battles, the president was re-elected to a customary second term without opposition. An incumbent also was re-elected without opposition in Alabama.

Conservatives have targeted the state convention presidencies, hoping to repeat the success they had in using the Southern Baptist Convention presidency to steer the national SBC onto a more conservative course. Most state presidencies carry power to appoint important committees that choose state leaders.

But Baptists in several states rejected what they called SBC-style politics on the state level.

In Louisiana, the presidential election offered messengers a choice between David Hankins, a national SBC leader who endorsed the

denomination's new conservative slant, and Mark Sutton, a Shreveport pastor who said Louisiana Baptists don't need to import the SBC controversy.

Sutton, pastor of Brookwood Baptist Church, defeated Hankins by a vote of 1,301 to 1,130. Hankins, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Lake Charles, is outgoing chairman of the powerful SBC Executive Committee.

In the weeks before the election, Hankins' supporters used a full-color brochure to tout his endorsement of the SBC's conservative movement and his desire "to help Louisiana Baptists move forward in the same direction."

Sutton's position, meanwhile, was spelled out in newsletters circulated throughout the state.

Sutton was part of a slate of candidates that won all three top Louisiana Baptist posts. Eddie Simmons, a pastor from Lake Charles, was elected first vice president. Randy Davis, a pastor from Hammond, was elected second vice president without opposition.

The elections in North Carolina also featured unabashed politicking, with four candidates backed by the moderate Friends of Missions group sweeping the elections. Flyers promoting conservative, moderate and non-aligned candidates were distributed at the meeting.

Elected president was Mt. Airy pastor Alfred Ayscue, defeating Coy Privette of Kannapolis 55 percent to 45 percent. Privette, an unsuccessful candidate for governor in the state and a former trustee of the Christian Life Commission, ran on a ticket promoted by Conservative Carolina Baptists.

Also elected was insurance executive Kathryn Hamrick of Boiling Springs, first vice president; Jack Glasgow, pastor in Zebulon, second vice president; and Marian Grant of Raleigh, recording secretary.

Ayscue told reporters the elections represent a rejection by North Carolina Baptists of the campaign of SBC leaders to repeat the so-called "conservative resurgence" in state conventions.

That campaign has been directed in part by T. C. Pinkney, a retired Virginia layman and SBC Executive Committee officer. Pinckney and others organized at least three conservative strategy sessions in the past year in preparation for the fall conventions. Pinckney could not be reached for comment Nov. 18.

The group's most recent meeting in Louisville, Ky., included retired Houston judge Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The two men are regarded as architects of the fundamental-conservative movement that won control of the SBC in the 1980s.

The activity of Pinckney's group spawned a September meeting of moderates, led by Houston groceryman John Baugh, who shared their own strategies for stopping the conservative juggernaut.

"Don't mess with Texas!" was the warning of Jerold McBride, who won the Texas Baptist presidency in late October by campaigning against SBC-style politics in the state. "We don't need that here."

At the Florida Baptist Convention, one of nine big Deep South conventions to meet during the week of Nov. 17, messengers defeated a slate of candidates nominated by the conservative leaders.

George Thomasson, a pastor from West Palm Beach, defeated Lakeland pastor Michael Hailey, who has close ties to national SBC leaders (451-382).

For first vice president, Florida messengers elected their first

Hispanic and first bivocational pastor to state office -- Rafael de Armas, a pastor/lawyer from Orlando. Tanna Dawson of Fort Lauderdale was elected second vice president unopposed.

The winning candidates were not aligned with Florida's moderate group.

In Kentucky, where conservatives surprised many by winning the presidency last year, moderates reclaimed the office. Somerset pastor Bob Browning defeated Don Short of Benton by a vote of 968 to 821. Although neither candidate identified himself politically, Browning largely was supported by Baptist moderates and Short largely was supported by Baptist conservatives.

In Missouri, messengers meeting in late October defeated a presidential candidate openly endorsed by an organization of conservative pastors in the state. Hallsville pastor Ralph Sawyer lost by a 350-vote margin to T. O. Spicer Jr., first vice president during 1993.

And in Virginia, moderate-backed candidates swept the offices. Richmond pastor Ron Crawford was elected president in a runoff. Crawford won 49.9 percent of the vote on the first ballot, while conservative-backed Vander Warner of Richmond received 27 percent and centrist Cecil Chambers of Richmond won 23 percent.

Warner then withdrew from the race and endorsed Chambers. But Crawford won the runoff anyway with 58 percent of the vote.

Bucking the trend toward moderate or non-aligned officers were Baptists in South Carolina and Arkansas.

In South Carolina, Rock Hill pastor Steve Hogg led a sweep by conservative candidates to convention offices. Hogg received 1,294 votes to 871 cast for E.C. Watson, a retired denominational employee endorsed by moderates.

In Arkansas, Hot Springs pastor Ronnie Rogers was elected president, affirming the recent "resurgence of the absolute inerrancy of scripture" in Baptist life. He defeated Eddie McCord of Independence 384 to 347.

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-- Contributing to this story were Lacy Thompson, Mark Wingfield and Bob Allen.

Moderates claim victory
at North Carolina convention

By Bob Allen

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C., (ABP) -- Moderates claimed victory in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, electing a slate of officers and overcoming challenges to an "options budget" which permits funding of ministries not endorsed by the Southern Baptist Convention.

Mt. Airy pastor Alfred Ayscue won an overtly political presidential race, defeating former gubernatorial candidate Coy Privette in a runoff 54.5 percent to 45.5 percent. Ayscue, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Mt. Airy, was backed by Friends of Missions, a moderate group. Privette, of Kannapolis, ran on a ticket promoted by Conservative Carolina Baptists.

A third candidate, long-time Bennett pastor Curtis Barbery, promoted himself as "the candidate with no political affiliation." He drew 559 votes, 12.5 percent of the total, leaving Ayscue 69 votes short of a first-ballot win.

Messengers received fliers as they walked into the convention hall promoting both moderate and conservative slates for convention offices.

The moderate-backed candidates swept the elections.

Kathryn Hamrick of Boiling Springs, an account executive for an insurance company and current chair of the convention's general board, received 62.9 percent of the vote for first vice president, defeating conservative pastor M. O. Owens of Gastonia.

Jack Glasgow, Zebulon pastor, was elected second vice president over Joe Craig, a dentist and member of Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, 56.6 percent to 43.4 percent.

Ayscue, a leader in the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, told reporters the elections represent a rejection by North Carolina Baptists of the campaign of SBC leaders to repeat the so-called "conservative resurgence" in state conventions.

"We had a choice. We could either surrender or we could try to hold on," Ayscue said. "We decided to maintain our historic Baptist traditions."

Another political hot-button was the inclusion of a line item for the moderate Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) in a portion of the state convention's Cooperative Program budget.

Three years ago the convention voted to establish an optional budget which allows churches to contribute to the state's Cooperative Program while bypassing some SBC support. Undesignated funds sent to the state convention office are divided 62 percent for North Carolina and 38 percent for the SBC.

Funds designated for the optional budget are also divided 62-38, but only 12 percent is forwarded to the SBC. The rest funds theological education in North Carolina Baptist colleges and universities, foreign and home missions partnerships, the Baptist World Alliance, Baptist Joint Committee and Associated Baptist Press.

The 1994 options budget will include a new 1 percent line item for the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. The money will be disbursed in the form of scholarships for students from North Carolina attending the non-SBC moderate seminary.

Convention officials hoped to avoid an anticipated floor fight over the seminary's funding by promoting a compromise motion by conservative pastor Mark Corts of Calvary Baptist Church, Winston-Salem. Corts asked the convention's general board to study the future inclusion in the optional budget of two conservative non-SBC schools -- Luther Rice Seminary in Atlanta and Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tenn.

Both the convention's budget committee chairman and Executive Director Roy Smith endorsed the motion. It passed on a ballot vote, 909-655.

That did not eliminate all controversy, however. During discussion of the budget, three attempts were made to alter the Richmond Seminary line item. Each was defeated by a show of hands.

One messenger, Ted Stone of Grace Baptist Church in Durham, argued it is "disloyal" for the state convention to provide funds to any school which competes with North Carolina Baptist or Southern Baptist institutions.

Don Taylor of Asheville, a trustee of Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary, said inclusion of the Richmond school would have a "chilling effect" on SBC schools. "If you are Southern Baptist, you can't support the funding of an alien institution," he said.

The convention's 1994 budget anticipates \$28.8 million in Cooperative Program receipts from the 3,577 affiliated North Carolina churches.

The convention acted on one resolution, protesting recent state legislation granting easier access to liquor licenses.

The convention also adopted a motion by Clay Warf of Roxboro designating May 1 as the "great American TV turnoff day" to protest "moral corruption ... sex and violence ... (and) irresponsibility under the guise of free speech" by television networks.

Another motion would have changed bylaws to remove North Carolina's members on the SBC executive committee from ex-officio representation on the state general board. The proposed bylaw change received a majority vote -- 55.65 percent -- but fell short of the required two-thirds majority.

Registration totaled 4,721 for the Nov. 15-17 meeting at Winston-Salem's Memorial Coliseum. Next year's meeting, also scheduled in Winston-Salem, will experiment with a Friday-Saturday schedule to encourage lay participation.

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California convention unseats
church with woman pastor

By Daniel Pryfogle

SANTA ROSA, Calif. (ABP) -- California Southern Baptists, meeting for their annual convention, voted Nov. 16 to unseat messengers from a San Francisco church because their pastor is a woman.

By a vote of 213-204, messengers passed a motion to deny seats to the three messengers from Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church, where Julie Pennington-Russell was ordained in 1986 and has been pastor since February.

"We can't find any place in the Bible that there were women pastors," said Bob Lewis, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Fairfield, in an interview after the vote. Lewis, who spoke in favor of the motion at the convention, said that when a church ordains a woman pastor, "we feel they have violated the Scriptures."

The motion was introduced by Dan Nelson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Camarillo, as the convention opened for business Tuesday afternoon in Santa Rosa, just north of San Francisco.

Pennington-Russell said she entered the auditorium two minutes prior to the scheduled start of the meeting and discussion of the motion was already in progress.

The parliamentarian ruled Nelson's motion unconstitutional, noting Nineteenth Avenue had met the criteria for messengers by giving to the Cooperative Program and by not developing a statement of faith in contradiction to the "Baptist Faith and Message. But the parliamentarian was overruled by the floor vote.

Lewis, who is on the state executive board, said if this year's convention were held outside the San Francisco Bay area, "the vote would have been overwhelmingly in favor of the motion."

He said he is not opposed to women serving as deacons or in other leadership positions. "I'm not anti-women in serving the Lord," he said, "but I believe biblically the Bible prohibits a woman from being an ordained pastor."

Pennington-Russell, however, said the vote had less to do with women in the ministry than autonomy of the local church. "I'm hoping that people were not duped into believing this was about women in the ministry," she said. "This year it was women. Next year it could be anyone else."

Pennington-Russell, who is a leader in the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said her congregation will have a meeting Nov. 21 to discuss its response to the convention vote. "I don't know what the outcome will be," she said, "but I don't think we're ready to jump ship at all."

The church remains a member of the San Francisco area association of Baptist churches.

Immediately following Tuesday's vote, a motion was introduced to refund offerings Nineteenth Avenue has made to the state convention in the past year. That motion was referred the following day to the executive board, which will likely take up the matter at its next meeting.

At least two messengers withdrew their credentials in support of Nineteenth Avenue. One messenger made a motion to send an apology to the church for any laughter during the discussion. That motion passed.

This was the first time in recent years that the convention voted specifically not to seat a church. Lewis, a pastor in the state for 40 years, said he only recalls two other churches in past years not being seated. Those votes were related to doctrinal differences over such matters as baptism or the Lord's Supper, he said.

In 1986, the convention voted to decline mission offerings from San Francisco's Dolores Street Baptist Church because of the congregation's affirmation of homosexuality. Consequently, the church was not allowed to send messengers to the convention.

Pennington-Russell said she was tipped off the day before this year's convention that a motion against Nineteenth Avenue would be introduced. She said she heard the action was discussed by a group of pastors which met last summer in Bakersfield.

Lewis said he was invited to the Bakersfield meeting but did not attend. Nelson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Camarillo, did attend the meeting. He said there were between 15 and 20 pastors in attendance who feel there should be more representation of "traditional beliefs" in the state.

Pennington-Russell said she sees state leaders mimicking what's happening on the national level. "It's become very fashionable to weed out folks who are not in lock step with the leadership of the convention," she said.

In past years, denominational publications have held up Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church as a model of mission work in California. The church has an English-speaking congregation of 180 members and supports three language missions with some 200 people.

"To me that record of ministry just underlines that none of this is about furthering the kingdom of God," Pennington-Russell said. "To me this just says if it can happen to us, it can happen to anyone."

-- Pryfogle is a news writer for the San Leandro (Calif.) Times.

Oklahomans ask former exec
to cease CBF involvement

BETHANY, Okla. (ABP) -- Oklahoma Baptists have publicly chastised their retired state convention executive director for his endorsement of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Messengers to the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma roundly approved a motion asking Joe Ingram to "cease and desist" from his support of the CBF.

Ingram retired from his convention post in 1986. Now head of Baptist Healthcare in Oklahoma, he wrote letters last month encouraging Oklahoma pastors to attend a series of meetings with fellowship coordinator Cecil Sherman. The regional meetings were held Nov. 2-5, in advance of the Nov. 15-17 convention meeting at Council Road Baptist Church in Bethany.

Messengers approved by an estimated 95 percent a motion by Dennis Wright, pastor of First Baptist Church, Meeker, appointing five convention representatives to "call upon (Ingram) to express our disappointment in the action he has taken to lend support to any alternatives to the Cooperative Program and to request him to cease and desist from such actions in the future."

Wright said his motion was not an attempt to censure.

Contacted by a reporter, Ingram said he does not intend to meet with anyone nor heed the call to cease his involvement with CBF. He said the letter was written in good conscience and that money he gives to the Fellowship is over and above his tithe to Quail Springs Baptist Church.

Convention president Keith Russell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Elk City, used the forum of his president's address to blast the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. "I believe it's the uncooperative, non-Southern Baptist division," he said.

Russell told messengers he had believed until recently that Oklahoma might be spared divisiveness that has plagued the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years. Introduction of the Fellowship into the state, however, changed that view.

He compared the Fellowship to a lighted stick of dynamite tossed on the front steps of a home. "We can either ignore it and allow it to explode our convention to pieces or we can pick it up and try to throw it away," he said.

Contacted by Associated Baptist Press, CBF's Sherman said the Fellowship is not to blame for any divisiveness in Oklahoma.

"Oklahoma Baptists have been divided about the SBC just like Baptists in all other parts of the country," he said. The CBF, he said, "is a result of the intransigence of the ruling party in the SBC."

Sherman said whether a church or individual chooses to support the Fellowship "is none of the affair" of the Oklahoma state convention, which is "a free-standing convention" and not a "substation or farm team of the SBC."

"Oklahoma Baptists are free to decide," Sherman said. "I don't want anyone in Oklahoma to support the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who don't

believe like us, care for us and willingly want to participate."

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-- Information for this article was obtained from news reports in the Oklahoma City Oklahoman. Bob Allen contributed to this article.

Kentucky Baptists vote
to defund Joint Committee

By Mark Wingfield

ELIZABETHTOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- By a 39-vote margin, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs lost funding from the Kentucky Baptist Convention Nov. 17.

Messengers to this year's annual meeting narrowly reversed an action which had passed with a 63 percent favorable vote only two years earlier.

The 1991 convention had instructed the KBC executive board to "find a way to provide funds" for the Joint Committee. The vote in 1991 was 331-195 in favor of the Joint Committee.

However, the 1991 decision to fund the Washington, D.C.-based religious liberty agency stirred the ire of conservatives, who successfully fought to get the Baptist Joint Committee defunded by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1990.

Kentucky Baptists had funded the Joint Committee through the SBC's Cooperative Program unified budget until that time. The intent of the KBC's 1991 action was to give the Joint Committee an amount equal to what Kentucky had sent to the agency through the Cooperative Program in the past.

Last November, the KBC executive board acted on the 1991 motion by establishing a \$200,000 investment fund to benefit the Joint Committee. The fund was to be established with unused year-end money from the executive board over a two-year period. It would have paid the Joint Committee about \$17,000 in interest annually.

Last December, the executive board appropriated \$98,000 in year-end money to the Joint Committee fund. However, no interest payments have been made to the agency, said Barry Allen, KBC business division director.

What to do with the \$98,000 and any accrued interest will be decided by the executive board when it meets Dec. 13-14, Allen said.

Opponents of the Joint Committee attempted to stop the KBC funding last year but failed. A motion to rescind the 1991 decision to provide funds barely garnered a simple majority vote but not the two-thirds vote required for passage.

A two-thirds vote was required last year because the motion to rescind had not been announced in advance of the meeting. This year's successful vote to rescind the funding required only a simple majority vote because the intent to present the motion was announced during last year's meeting.

The motion to rescind funding was brought by Mike Routt, pastor of Eastern Gate Baptist Church in Shepherdsville and a conservative activist in the state.

Conservatives who oppose the Joint Committee do not oppose the

separation of church and state, Routt said, but oppose the strict separation espoused by the BJC.

He said the Joint Committee's executive director, James Dunn, espouses a strict view of separation which is "the most extreme and dangerous view."

Routt quoted Dunn as saying he favors a secular state which will be neutral toward religion. But Routt questioned whether a secular state could be neutral.

"A secular state is not neutral to religion. It is hostile," he said, citing a list of examples to support his point.

Routt also criticized the Joint Committee for its position on the Supreme Court decision in Lee vs. Weisman. The Joint Committee sided with the court's ruling that school-sponsored prayers at public school commencement ceremonies are unconstitutional.

"It is absolutely unbelievable" that Kentucky Baptists would support an organization opposed to commencement prayers and other forms of school prayer, Routt said.

But Bill Crosby, pastor of Erlanger Baptist Church in Erlanger, told messengers he's not worried about school prayer.

"I'm more concerned that they not stop giving tests," he said. "For as long as they give tests, there will be prayer in public schools."

Crosby, who serves on the Joint Committee's board, rebuffed criticisms that the Joint Committee's philosophies are linked to a moral decline in America.

America's problem is not the Joint Committee, he said, but sin.

Crosby cited a list of ways the Joint Committee has helped Baptists, including saving the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board "\$1 million a year" and leading the coalition which gained Congressional approval of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Messengers should not amend the funding plan, Crosby said, because the convention already has acted to create a middle road between friends and foes of the Joint Committee. "We've already compromised. Let's leave it alone."

Jeff Wise, a member of Buechel Park Baptist Church in Louisville, said he spoke as a supporter of the Joint Committee but as one who favored rescinding the funding.

"Every church and every individual in the Kentucky Baptist Convention has the right and opportunity to support the Baptist Joint Committee," he said. "However, because it has become such a divisive issue in our convention, it would be better to rescind the action to support the committee with convention funds."

The same sentiment was expressed by Bill Messer, pastor of First Baptist Church in Ashland. Messer noted that he was the one who made the motion to fund the Joint Committee in 1991.

"The intention of my motion was to promote fellowship, to provide healing," he said. "But the very opposite has happened."

Messer said he was convinced the best option was to "lay it to rest and get on" with the convention's business.

KBC President Charles Stewart called for a standing vote to be taken. The vote was 477 in favor of rescinding funding and 438 against rescinding funding.

Two messengers immediately challenged the accuracy of the standing count on such a close vote. One called for a ballot vote to confirm the

results, but Stewart ruled the request out of order.

Kentucky Baptist conservatives savored their victory on one of the key issues for which they had rallied support in advance of the annual meeting.

Some moderates, on the other hand, said a wedge had been driven between those who voted against Routt's motion and those who sided with the conservatives on the basis of keeping unity. "What limb will we be asked to sacrifice next year for the sake of unity?" a moderate pastor was overheard to ask.

Brent Walker, general counsel with the Joint Committee, said it was an "ironic twist of fate" that the KBC voted to defund the agency only one day after President Bill Clinton signed into law the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

"The Baptist Joint Committee was at the forefront of the 68-member coalition that secured (RFRA's) passage," Walker said. "It was a happy day for all lovers of liberty.

"Our celebration was interrupted by disappointment when we learned the next day that the Kentucky Baptist Convention had voted narrowly to defund the Baptist Joint Committee. ... On the heels of victory came rebuke, not praise."

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Mississippi convention
adopts static budget

By Tim Nicholas

JACKSON, Miss., (ABP) -- Mississippi Baptists, meeting Nov. 16-17 at First Baptist Church, Jackson, approved a static budget, elected a Pascagoula pastor as president, and stuck to positive statements in their resolutions.

The 1994 Cooperative Program budget remained at \$22,452,000 with 37 percent (or \$8,307,240) going to SBC causes outside the state, the same amount and percentage as for 1993. This was in the face of an expected 1993 budget shortfall of \$750,000 and despite a floor attempt to increase the SBC portion an additional half percent.

Elected president was Rex Yancey, pastor of First Baptist Church, Pascagoula, and a former chairman of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board's Executive Committee. He defeated Malcolm Lewis, pastor of Northcrest Baptist Church, Meridian, in a ballot vote, 735 to 598. Voting numbers fell off after that. Ballots cast for the second vice president a few hours later totaled 626.

First vice president is Kara Blackard, pastor of Wheeler Grove Baptist Church, near Corinth. And second vice president is Richard Johnson, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church, Greenville.

Resolutions ranged from appreciating decisions of some Mississippi television stations to commending Mississippi College trustees.

Messengers commended the five American Broadcasting Company television affiliates in Mississippi for choosing not to broadcast "NYPD Blue," a network program "which features gratuitous sex and dehumanizing violence," said the resolution.

Another resolution expressed "strong opposition to the availability

and continued use of violence and sexually explicit material" in public media.

A resolution applauded actions of a Jackson high school that conducted "voluntary, student-initiated, and student-led prayers." The resolution pledged "our full support to ... those administrators who support and encourage such activity." The principal, Bishop Knox, has been placed on indefinite administrative leave after prayers were broadcast over the school's intercom in mid-November.

Noting this week's U.S. Supreme Court's upholding of a Mississippi law requiring parental consent for a minor child to have an abortion, the convention passed a resolution commending members of the 1986 state legislature for writing that notion into law.

A resolution noted the conclusion of a missions partnership with Illinois Baptists and another concerned convention-owned Mississippi College. It commended trustees for their announced intention of releasing a comprehensive report concerning the troubles at that institution and promised prayer for current and former college officials.

Earlier this year, Mississippi College President Lewis Nobles resigned in the face of an investigation of misuse of funds. Federal prosecutors are looking into charges Nobles converted college monies to personal use.

In other business, a move to study the feasibility of moving future conventions to other sites in Mississippi failed. Messengers apparently were satisfied to continue holding the convention in Jackson, where sessions have been held for more than 40 years.

A motion from the floor failed in an attempt to bypass a committee which is determining future use of the property of now-defunct Clark College in Newton. The motion would have had the convention accepting a proposal from a group wanting to open a Bible institute. The rejection of the motion kept the recommendation in the hands of the committee.

The 1994 convention will take place at First Baptist Church, Jackson, Nov. 1-2, with Gordon Sansing, pastor of First Baptist Church, Vicksburg, preaching the annual sermon.

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Senate approves protections
for abortion clinics, churches

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill designed to curb escalating violence, vandalism and intimidation aimed at abortion clinics by making such acts federal crimes received overwhelming U.S. Senate approval Nov. 16.

Recognizing also a rise in acts of intimidation directed at houses of worship, the Senate added an amendment extending the bill's protections to Americans exercising their faith.

The Senate voted 69-30 to approve the Freedom of Access to Medical Clinic Entrances (S. 636). If enacted it would prohibit destruction of clinic property, as well as the use of force, threats or physical obstruction to interfere with women seeking abortion-related services.

Persons convicted under the law could face up to a year in prison and

finer up to \$15,000 for a first offense and three years and \$25,000 for subsequent offenses. An offense resulting in bodily injury could carry up to 10 years in prison. Life imprisonment would be the penalty for a violation resulting in death. Non-violent obstructors would receive lesser penalties. The bill also provides for civil suits.

Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., led the floor debate for the bill. More than 1,000 acts of violence against abortion providers have been documented in the United States in the last 15 years, he said. More than 100 clinics have been bombed or burned to the ground. Hundreds more have been vandalized.

At least two doctors, Kennedy said, have been shot by "anti-abortion extremists."

Physician David Gunn was murdered outside a clinic in Pensacola, Fla., last March. At a Wichita, Kan., clinic, another doctor, George Tiller, was wounded in both arms.

In December 1991, a man wearing a ski mask opened fire with a sawed-off shotgun at a Springfield, Mo., clinic, and two workers were seriously injured, Kennedy said.

Another tactic widely used by abortion protesters is to inject toxic chemicals into the clinic during the night so that the facility must be closed for days or weeks for cleanup, he added.

Kennedy said the bill does not hinder peaceful pro-life protests. "Those who are picketing peacefully outside clinics, praying or singing, or engaging in sidewalk counseling and similar activities that do not block the entrances have nothing to fear from this law," he said.

But some opponents of the bill disagreed, saying that the bill's language is too broad and will impede civil disobedience.

Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., said, "This bill goes far beyond discouraging and punishing the reprehensible acts of a few violent extremists in the pro-life movement. This legislation seeks to silence the entire pro-life movement by forbidding, in effect, the willingness of individual pro-lifers to speak out, even peacefully, for fear of being selectively and aggressively prosecuted and/or sued."

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, offered the religious liberty amendment that was approved on a voice vote.

Hatch's amendment, offered on the same day President Clinton signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, would make it a federal crime to interfere with persons lawfully exercising their religion or to intentionally damage or destroy the property of a place of religious worship.

"Make no mistake about it: the right of Americans of various religions to attend their places of worship in peace is under attack throughout the country," said Hatch, who along with Kennedy co-sponsored RFRA.

He offered some examples:

-- protesters recently disrupted Scripture reading at Village Seven Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., and pelted the congregation with condoms;

-- an arsonist burned St. Jude's United Holiness Church in St. Petersburg, Fla., to the ground, and another arsonist has set fire to at least 17 other churches in Florida, Tennessee and Colorado;

-- other activists exposed church-goers at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York to a pornographically altered portrait of Jesus, invaded the

cathedral, screamed and waved their fists and tossed condoms into the air. "Simply put," Hatch said, "anyone who votes against this amendment or who attempts to dilute it values religious freedom far less than abortion. Religious liberty is the first liberty guaranteed in the Bill of Rights."

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Court lets consent law
stand in Mississippi

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court Nov. 15 let stand a Mississippi law that requires an unmarried minor to obtain consent from both parents before having an abortion.

The high court declined to review an appeals-court decision that Mississippi's parental-consent law is constitutional.

In recent years, the Supreme Court has given more flexibility for states to regulate abortion. However, this is the first time the court has allowed a state to require the consent of both parents.

The Mississippi statute provides some exceptions. If the minor's parents are divorced or living apart, the consent of the primary care giver is enough. Minors also may have an abortion with the consent of only one parent if one parent is not available "in a reasonable time and manner" or if the pregnancy is the result of incest.

The law also provides for a judicial bypass in which the minor may petition the court to waive the consent requirement. The court can waive the requirement if the minor is "mature and well-informed enough to make the abortion decision on her own; or that performance of the abortion would be in the best interests of the minor."

The law also provides an exemption for medical emergencies -- a doctor may perform an abortion without consent if the physician deems the case to require an immediate abortion.

A group of doctors and medical clinics filed suit, claiming the law was unconstitutional. They argued that the law does not serve an important state interest and unduly restricts a minor's access to abortions.

The case was Barnes vs. Mississippi.

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-- By Pam Parry

Religion's role welcome,
Clinton says at RFRA signing

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious Americans should be welcomed as political players, President Clinton declared Nov. 16 before signing into law a bill that protects religious liberty.

"It is high time we had an open and honest reaffirmation of the role of American citizens of faith -- not so that we can agree, but so that we

can argue and discourse and seek the truth and seek to heal this troubled land," Clinton told a diverse gathering of U.S. religious groups at the signing ceremony.

The president's signing of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act capped three-and-a-half years of effort by a unique alliance of religious and civil-liberties groups who worked together in an unprecedented fashion to restore a high level of protection for religious practice.

The Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion was formed in 1990 after the Supreme Court virtually abandoned its long-held view that government needs a compelling reason to interfere with religious activities.

RFRA restores the legal standard that requires government to show a compelling reason, such as important health or safety concerns, before restricting the religious practice of Americans.

Both Clinton and Vice President Al Gore cited the need for RFRA in the wake of the 1990 high court decision.

"More than 50 cases have been decided against individuals making religious claims against government action since that decision was handed down," Clinton said. "This act will help to reverse that trend -- by honoring the principle that our laws and institutions should not impede or hinder, but rather should protect and preserve fundamental religious liberties."

RFRA, Gore said, restores freedom of religion.

"We want Americans free to practice their religion not as government sees fit but as they see fit," he said.

Clinton said the power to reverse by legislation the effect of a Supreme Court decision is hesitantly and infrequently exercised.

"But this is an issue in which that extraordinary measure was clearly called for," he said.

The importance the administration attached to RFRA is reflected both in the remarks of the president and vice president and in their scheduling of the signing ceremony during the hectic final hours before the House of Representatives vote on the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Bill signings, Clinton noted, frequently are routine. But the president said the Nov. 16 event "assumes a more majestic quality because of our ability together to affirm the historic role that people of faith have played in the history of this country and the constitutional protections those who profess and express their faith have always demanded and cherished."

After the signing, Clinton and Gore, both Southern Baptists, waded into the crowd of about 200 guests that included fellow Baptists, Jews, evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Muslims, Sikhs, Roman Catholics, Scientologists, Lutherans, Native Americans and others.

"There are lots of reasons to celebrate today's ceremony," Gore said. "In fact, if you look at the letterhead of the coalition of groups supporting it, you'll see 68 good ones: groups that usually don't agree on much but (which) have come together to support religious freedom."

Gore highlighted the diversity of the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion by noting the membership of liberal groups such as People for the American Way and the American Civil Liberties Union and conservative organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the

Traditional Values Coalition.

"The fact is," he said, "that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is something all Americans can support."

Clinton credited the coalition, chaired by former Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Oliver Thomas, for its central role "in drafting this legislation and working so hard for its passage."

Clinton said the unique coalition led to broad support for the bill in Congress.

"I'm told that, as many of the people in the coalition worked together across ideological and religious lines, some new friendships were formed and some new trust was established, which shows, I suppose, that the power of God is such that even in the legislative process miracles can happen," Clinton said.

The nation's founders, Clinton said, understood that both government and religion could be perverted without the First Amendment's twin guarantees of separation of church and state and the free exercise of religion.

The founders "knew that religion helps to give our people the character without which a democracy cannot survive," Clinton said. "They knew that there needed to be a space of freedom between government and people of faith that otherwise government might usurp."

Clinton credited the positive role of religion for making the United States the oldest democracy in history and probably the most truly multi-ethnic society on earth.

"I am convinced that neither of those things would be true today had it not been for the importance of the First Amendment and the fact that we have kept faith with it for 200 years."

Clinton said the nation is involved in a debate about the "extent to which people of faith can seek to do God's will as political actors."

"I would like to come down on the side of encouraging everybody to act on what they believe is the right thing to do."

He lamented a climate in which Americans are embarrassed to advocate positions and actions based on religious beliefs.

"I submit to you today, my fellow Americans, that we can stand that kind of debate in this country."

"We are living in a country where the most central institution of our society, the family, has been under assault for 30 years," he continued.

"We are living in a country in which 160,000 school children don't go to school every day because they're afraid someone will shoot them, or beat them up, or knife them, ... where gun shots are the single leading cause of death among teenage boys, ... where people can find themselves shot in the cross fire of teenagers who are often better armed than the police who are trying to protect other people from illegal conduct."

Among Baptists who attended the signing ceremony on the White House south lawn were the president's pastor, Rex Horne of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark.; Everett Goodwin, pastor of First Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., a church frequently attended by Clinton; and Wallace Charles Smith, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

Also attending were representatives of two Baptist members of the coalition -- the Baptist Joint Committee and the Christian Life Commission -- as well as representatives of the Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., National Baptist Convention of America, National

Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc., Progressive National Baptist Convention.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Photos of Clinton with Baptist leaders at the RFRA signing are available upon request from the Baptist Joint Committee, (202) 544-4226.

Diverse RFRA coalition
united by principle

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A common goal for the common good -- religious freedom for all Americans -- united and sustained an unprecedented coalition working for a historic piece of legislation on Capitol Hill.

The Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion labored for passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, landmark legislation that restores a high level of protection for religious practice. After a three-and-a-half-year struggle, the coalition realized its dream Nov. 16 when President Clinton signed the bill into law at a White House ceremony.

The president and vice-president, both Southern Baptists, pointed to the diverse coalition's central role in drafting and enacting the bill.

Gore noted: "You know when you have the National Association of Evangelicals and the American Civil Liberties Union ... the Traditional Values Coalition and People for the American Way ... that we're doing something right."

Two Baptist organizations, the Baptist Joint Committee and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, are coalition members.

The coalition members put aside their deep political, theological and religious differences to work for the principle that all Americans have the right to exercise their conscience in matters of faith, coalition chairman Oliver Thomas said at a press conference after the signing ceremony.

"I hope I shall never again have to hear someone say that the ACLU and People For the American Way don't care about religion, said Thomas, former BJC general counsel.

Several coalition members addressed the press conference, expressing gratitude to God for sustaining grace and Thomas' leadership.

James Dunn, BJC executive director, said that the coalition stayed together because of God's grace and that Thomas was the instrument of grace.

"We take particular pride in the fact" that Thomas chaired the coalition, he said. "We applaud and express gratitude to every member of the coalition for their dedication and hard work over the last three years."

Robert Dugan, director of the Office of Public Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, said, "This historic act would gladden the heart of Thomas Jefferson, who called religious liberty 'the most sacred of all human rights.'"

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of

Reform Judaism, underscored the significance of the bill as restoring a protection virtually abandoned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1990.

"This was the first time in the history of the United States that the Supreme Court simply abandoned one of our explicit First Amendment rights. America's greatest contribution to political thought was that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights beyond the touch of government."

Those rights are celebrated in the First Amendment, and they are essential to the freedom of the country, he said.

"The bill enacted today," Saperstein added, "is the first civil-rights bill in the history of America that focuses entirely on religious freedom.

"Make no mistake about it, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is the most important religious liberty bill in our lifetimes, and the free exercise of religion of every American today is vastly safer than it has been for the last three and a half years."

Tyrone Pitts, immediate past chairman of the BJC and board member of the National Council of Churches, said that "not since the civil-rights struggle has there been a group of religious leaders who have come together to pave the way for a piece of legislation that is more meaningful to us as people of God than any other legislation.

"Not only are you to be commended for that act, but we should see this as a signal that God is calling us (religious community) to move more and more together to make sure religious freedom and the freedom of all persons are guaranteed," said Pitts, general secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

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