

Associated Baptist Press

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November 15, 1995

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Texas Baptists reduce SBC funds, elect moderates, avoid gay issue

By Greg Warner

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Texas Baptists adopted a \$42.7 million budget Nov. 13 that will send less money to the national Southern Baptist Convention and keep more for starting churches and training ministers in Texas.

It is the second year in a row that Texas Baptists -- going against the wishes of national Southern Baptist Convention leaders -- have changed their budget to give the conservative-dominated SBC less control over Texas Baptist contributions.

Also during the Nov. 13-14 meeting, the 6,700 convention messengers elected a slate of moderate officers -- led by president Charles Wade, pastor of First Baptist Church of Arlington -- voiced opposition to a religious equality amendment proposed for the U.S. Constitution, and delayed action on a motion to disfellowship churches that condone homosexuality.

Last year the Baptist General Convention of Texas gave its 5,500 churches more freedom to decide which worldwide mission causes to support, including ministries not run by the SBC.

This year messengers to the annual BGCT meeting in San Antonio voted by an estimated two-to-one margin to increase the portion of Cooperative Program contributions that stays in Texas by 2.5 percent -- from 64.5 percent to 67 percent. That is expected to reduce by about \$1.5 million the Texas money available for the SBC's national and international mission work.

But Texas Baptist leaders say the money is more urgently needed in the Lone Star state, which once was a bastion of Baptist strength but is rapidly becoming a mission field in itself because of population changes.

Edward Schmeltekopf, chairman of the study committee that proposed the change, told messengers that half of Texas' 18 million people are "unchurched." Texas now has more non-Christians than 42 other states and more than 94 nations, he said.

Texas Baptists need to start 300 new churches a year just to keep pace with population changes, said BGCT president Jerold McBride, pastor of First Baptist Church of San Angelo. The BGCT -- still the largest state convention in terms of churches, members and mission contributions -- has a goal of starting 1,400 new congregations by the year 2000.

Cooperative Program contributions from Baptist churches are usually channeled through state conventions, which keep a portion for mission work in their states and send a portion to the coffers of the Southern Baptist Convention to fund its national and international agencies.

The budget also includes new funds to promote theological education in Texas Baptist universities. Although Texas hosts Southern Baptists' largest seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, more options are needed, said Abilene pastor George Gaston, chairman of the study group that brought the proposal.

"There is more work to be done than existing ministry programs can provide," he said. Spending the proposed \$350,000 on theological education, he said, "does not take dollars away from missions" but is a missions investment.

Messengers turned back two attempts to amend the budget. One proposal, to restore the division of funds between state and national causes to 1995 levels, was defeated on a show-of-hands vote by a margin estimated at two to one.

Brownwood pastor John Avant, who made the motion, urged messengers to rely on God, not on a new funding formula, to provide more money for missions. "Let's not try political solutions when God has all the resources we need."

The other proposed amendment -- defeated 64 percent to 36 percent on a ballot vote -- also would have restored 1995 funding levels but would have raised the \$1.5 million for starting churches by cutting budget funds from Baylor University, the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, the Baptist Joint Committee, and the BGCT's new theological education program.

The targeted programs duplicate ministries of the Southern Baptist Convention, said John Crosby of First Baptist Church of Little River, who made the motion. By reducing funds to SBC causes, Crosby argued, "we're saying we don't trust the Southern Baptist Convention. It's a matter of trust. ... They ought to be the ones to set the priorities."

Incoming president Wade, in a later press conference, agreed with Crosby that trust was an issue in the budget vote. "It's pretty obvious," he said, that trust is lacking in the relationship between Texas Baptists and SBC leaders.

"It's clear Texas Baptists will not be intimidated by anyone," Wade told reporters. He noted that Baptists who object to the conservative direction of the SBC have been excluded from meaningful participation in convention life.

"Cooperation won't happen for long if you don't have mutual appreciation," said Wade, who was endorsed for president by the moderate Texas Baptists Committed organization.

"Texas Baptists don't want to distance ourselves from the Southern Baptist Convention," he said. "We are committed to Southern Baptist missions and agencies. But when you get pushed aside ... you begin to wonder if they want you."

In his president's address, McBride warned against falling "victim to the fiction that cooperation necessitates coercion or control."

Texas is not the only state where Baptists have asserted more control over how they fund missions.

Oklahoma Baptists likewise are reducing the SBC portion of their Cooperative Program budget. Baptists in Virginia and North Carolina have put alternative budgets in place that, as in Texas, allow churches to choose to support the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or other options. And Mississippi Baptists are withholding money for missions that normally would have returned to the state through a joint funding agreement with the Home Mission Board -- an approach considered but rejected in Texas.

Wade said such changes signal a shift in the traditional way Baptists cooperate to do missions. "It's a sea change in the sense that churches and state conventions are claiming their autonomy," he said.

"The church I pastor is not a franchise operation of the local [Baptist] association or the Southern Baptist Convention," said Wade, who has led the 7,700-member Arlington church since 1976.

Schmeltekopf said Texas leaders asked the SBC Home Mission Board for an additional \$600,000 to start new churches but were offered only \$101,605, necessitating the budget change. HMB officials have said Texas Baptists already receive a fair share of national mission funds.

Also a recently approved SBC restructuring plan calls for larger state conventions to assume more responsibility for mission funding within their borders, Schmeltekopf noted. "The conclusion reached by our committee was that the Home Mission Board does not plan to increase significantly its funding for home missions work in Texas," he said.

In the presidential election, Wade defeated conservative candidate Gary Miller, pastor of Sagamore Hill Baptist Church, 61 percent to 39 percent (3,842-2,414). Wade was nominated by Russell Dilday, interim dean of Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, who said Wade is a "biblical conservative without being cranky about it."

Also elected were moderate candidates Ophelia Humphrey of Amarillo, who garnered 67 percent of the vote in defeating Malakoff pastor Casey Perry for first vice president, and San Antonio layman Noah Rodriguez, who got 75 percent of the vote in defeating Amarillo pastor Dee Slocum.

Both Wade and Humphrey are moderate Baptist leaders, having served on the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship..

Texas Baptists delayed action on a motion to exclude from the state convention any church with homosexuals serving as deacons or pastors. The constitutional amendment, offered by Lubbock layman Don Workman, was referred to the BGCT Executive Board after spirited debate.

The motion apparently was in response to University Baptist Church of Austin, which was recently expelled from its local association for allowing a homosexual to serve as deacon. In an attempt to avoid a constitutional showdown, the church did not send messengers to the state convention.

Houston pastor Bruce Prescott, arguing for referral, said Workman's motion was a threat to local church autonomy, "a fundamental, bedrock Baptist issue."

Roger Deerinwater of Archer City argued against delaying action. "When we refer this to some committee ... we are saying to this country we can't decide if homosexuality is a sin or worthy of disqualifying someone as pastor or deacon." All Texas Baptists are against homosexuality, he added. "This is not an issue that even needs to be discussed. As a matter of fact, this is disgusting."

President McBride said the issue is not homosexuality. "If you believe the Bible, you are against that. We are discussing how you handle this."

The motion was referred on a show-of-hands vote.

Messengers passed a resolution opposing the religious equality amendment currently being debated in Congress. The proposed amendment, the resolution said, has the "potential effect of destroying the establishment clause of the First Amendment" to the Constitution.

Two resolutions affirmed Presnall Wood, retiring after 18 years as editor of The Baptist Standard of Texas, and Woman's Missionary Union, a mission-support organization which has been criticized recently by SBC leaders.

In other resolutions, Texas Baptists pledged to fight racism, to promote family nurture, to oppose gambling and to campaign against substance abuse.

Virginia Baptists elect officers without opposition

By Robert Dilday

VIRGINIA BEACH (ABP) -- Virginia Baptists held a quiet convention, approving an increased budget and a strategic plan and electing officers without opposition.

At a Nov. 9-10 meeting in Virginia Beach, the Baptist General Association of Virginia also adopted resolutions against tuition tax credits and a religious equality amendment to the U.S. Constitution but declined to adopt a statement condemning partial-birth abortions.

The \$15.4 million budget for 1996 -- which becomes effective Dec. 1 -- is \$400,000 more than the current budget and the first increase since 1992. The budget allocates 62 percent to Virginia ministries, 2 percent to partnership missions and 36 percent to national and international causes.

As in previous years, churches may choose among three giving plans for national and international ministries -- one that funds the Southern Baptist Convention, another that supports ministries of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a third that funds a mixture of SBC, CBF and other ministries. In addition, churches may craft their own plans of giving.

Virginia Baptist elected as their 1996 president Clint Hopkins, pastor of Churchland Baptist Church in Chesapeake. Joining him will be Alden Hicks, director of missions for the Pittsylvania Baptist Association, as first vice president, and Catherine Johnson, an attorney and member of Monument Heights Baptist Church in Richmond, as second vice president.

All three were endorsed earlier by moderates and all were elected without opposition. Conservatives had announced they would not put up nominees this year.

Virginia conservatives had a separate meeting Nov. 7 in nearby Norfolk at which they considered but voted down a motion to form a new state convention. The organization called Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, which formed three years ago over dissatisfaction with the moderate-controlled BGAV, nevertheless elected a permanent executive director in anticipation that the group might someday declare itself a separate state convention.

In one of the few debates at the Virginia Baptist annual meeting, messengers rejected an attempt to amend the budget to deny funds to any institution that permits the sale or use of alcohol on campus. The effort was aimed at the University of Richmond, a Baptist school which recently opened a pub on campus.

"There is no place for beer on a Baptist campus," said Martha Wiles of Mount Lebanon Baptist Church in Boston, who supported the amendment.

The \$290,000 for the university in the state convention budget is used solely to support a chaplain's office and campus ministries, said Bill Slater of Marion. No Baptist money is used for the school's general operation, said Slater, a University of Richmond trustee.

Later in the meeting messengers adopted a resolution reaffirming the BGAV's "long-standing opposition to the abuse of alcohol" and its "sale and abuse on the campuses of the schools and colleges affiliated with the BGAV."

Another motion to cut off \$2,100 funding of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State also failed.

The strategic plan for future ministries -- proposed by a study committee after nearly two years' work -- was adopted with little opposition. The plan focuses on ways to enhance mission giving and participation, to help churches carry out local ministries and on stimulating spiritual growth among Virginia Baptists.

At several points the strategic plans instructs the state's General Board to carry out assignments in cooperation with Virginia Woman's Missionary Union and the state's 43 district associations. An attempt to add the Southern Baptist Convention to that cooperative venture failed.

"Since we have had a historic relationship with the SBC, why not add it to the report?" asked one messenger.

Richard Clore of Bybees Road Baptist Church in Troy opposed the effort. "We don't agree on everything that goes on in the SBC. We do agree on doing missions here in Virginia."

The annual meeting's 2,100 messengers were also introduced three new mission partnerships earlier approved by the Virginia Baptist General Board -- with Baptists in Panama, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The three mission partnerships will replace others with Hungary, Costa Rica and Mexico City.

In addition to a traditional expression of appreciation to the host city, messengers adopted resolutions affirming Virginia Woman's Missionary Union and the Middle East peace process and condemning alcohol and drug abuse.

The statement on peace in the Middle East focused on the recent assassination of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, pledging "to pray that the courageous endeavors of peacemakers will not be negated" by the act.

Another resolution condemning partial birth abortion, a rare form of late-term abortion, was not reported by the resolutions committee. Messengers later voted not to bring the resolution to the floor.

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