

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

November 16, 1995

Historical Commission, SBC
901 Commerce Street
Suite 400
Nashville, TN 37203

In this issue:

- North Carolina elects conservative president
- Florida Baptists chastise Disney for paying benefits to gays
- Louisiana Baptists elect conservative but defeat inerrancy amendment
- Religious Equality Amendment introduced in House chamber
- Freedom Forum hosts Baptist author
- Classmates, friends grieve at memorial service for youth
- Corrections

North Carolina elects conservative president

By Bob Allen

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Moderate Baptists, who have controlled the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in recent years, suffered a stunning defeat Nov. 14 as conservatives narrowly elected a president of the 1.2 million-member convention.

Conservative candidate Greg Mathis, 40, pastor of Mud Creek Baptist Church in Hendersonville, edged moderate Dewey Hobbs by 96 votes in one of the state convention's largest meetings in recent memory.

Hobbs, 70, is a long-time leader in the state convention and former head of chaplains at North Carolina Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem.

Total attendance for the Nov. 13-15 convention reached 5,100 -- double the size of normal crowds in recent years. More than 2,000 messengers registered on the second day of the convention in Winston-Salem, the day for officer elections, prompting charges that conservatives mounted a get-out-the-vote campaign.

But Mathis said the election shows the state's moderate leaders do not represent all North Carolina Baptists.

"North Carolina has long been known as a stronghold for moderates," Mathis said. "My election should send a message that there are just as many conservatives in North Carolina as moderates."

However, moderate leader Alfred Ayscue, outgoing president for the state convention, said the vote was not so much a rejection of current leaders but the result of a get-out-the-vote drive by conservatives.

Moderates took control of the state convention for granted and opposition from conservatives too lightly, Ayscue said. "Apathy finally caught up with us -- the one thing that I had always been fearful of," he said.

Mathis garnered 2,488 votes, 50.94 percent of ballots cast in the presidential election. Hobbs got 2,392. The convention's vice presidential votes were even closer.

The first vice presidency went to the moderate candidate, Ann Smith of Greensboro, who beat conservative Gene Ridley of Wilmington by 10 votes. Conservatives captured the post of second vice president, electing Kenneth Ridings of Asheville over Ray Howell of Lexington by 42 votes.

Ayscue said moderates believe conservatives bused messengers in for one day to focus their strength on

electing a president. "The report that came to me on Tuesday morning is there were quite a number of church vans that were emptying messengers just prior to the election," Ayscue said.

Conservatives reportedly used that tactic to help capture a string of SBC presidencies and use the office's appointive powers to systematically remove moderates from leadership in the national convention.

Moderates also alleged the North Carolina registration was inflated by larger-than-usual attendance by students of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest. The seminary's president, Paige Patterson, was a leader in the movement that engineered a conservative takeover of the 15 million-member SBC during the 1980s.

Students at the seminary were excused from classes for the convention meeting, the Biblical Recorder reported in its Nov. 11 issue.

Patterson told Associated Baptist Press he does not know if more students attended the meeting this year or not but that he doubts there was a "recognizable difference in the number." Patterson said it is up to individual professors to decide whether to excuse students from classes to attend the state convention. He said he has encouraged professors to do so, because attending the meeting is an educational experience for ministerial students.

Another get-out-the-vote effort by conservatives apparently also influenced the election, Ayscue said. Prior to the convention, a prominent conservative sent a letter around the state warning that moderates intended to move the state convention further away from the SBC. Leaders of the state convention condemned the letter as false.

Conservative leader Mark Corts, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, warned fellow pastors that moderates had boasted if they won the presidential election by a landslide, they would move to reduce the amount of money North Carolina sends to the SBC by \$2 million to \$3 million.

Corts' letter urged conservatives to "send your full quota of messengers" to the state convention to avert the funding cut.

Jack Causey, president of the state convention's general board, said cutting funds to the SBC was never considered by the budget group.

Ayscue said Corts' charges "have no foundation in fact." He accused Corts of trying to mislead and inflame North Carolina Baptists on the eve of the convention.

After electing a president, conservatives turned their attention to the budget, seeking to delete two budget options that allow North Carolina churches to withhold funds from the conservative-dominated SBC.

The basic North Carolina Baptist budget earmarks 68 percent of undesignated gifts for the state convention and 32 percent for Southern Baptist Convention causes. But churches may choose to channel their contributions through two other funds which support the state convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group opposed to conservative reforms in the SBC.

A total of 495 of the state's 3,033 churches used an optional plan this year. Overall giving has increased since the optional plans were first offered two years ago.

Despite their victory, conservatives will have a harder time steering the North Carolina convention their way than they did the SBC, Ayscue said. The SBC allows the president to appoint key committees which determine the makeup of the convention's various boards and committees. In North Carolina, however, bylaws require that key appointments come from a panel of the three top officers and they be approved by the convention's general board before they are presented to the convention.

"It makes the stacking of committees a little more difficult than it would be on the SBC level," Ayscue said.

"I can assure you that control has not taken place with one election, and there will be other elections to come," Ayscue, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Mt. Airy, said.

Ayscue said he has warned moderates against becoming lax in their efforts to oppose conservatives in the state convention. "I have always taken seriously the statement of Paige Patterson that they intended to capture control of this convention," Ayscue said.

Ayscue accused Patterson of using Southeastern Seminary "as an instrument in the takeover attempt in the state."

Patterson defended his right to participate in North Carolina Baptist life but minimized his influence there.

"My influence -- if I have any in this, and I'm not sure I do -- my influence would be a matter of what I stand for, and I'm not going to change that. If I'm not allowed to have a theological opinion and be allowed to preach that, quite frankly they've interfered with my priesthood of the believer and my autonomy," he said.

Patterson said he is "greatly pleased" with Mathis' election. He said it indicates that people are beginning to question the negative stereotypes often used to portray conservatives. "I feel that it means that there are some people that are beginning to do some thinking for themselves and asking if the conservatives are as bad as they're made out to be in some of the press," he said.

Patterson predicted Mathis would work to build bridges between moderates and conservatives. "I don't think he's going to be the kind that throws down the gauntlet every time you turn the corner," he said.

-30-

-- Anne Saker, R.G. Puckett and Todd Deaton contributed to this story.

Florida Baptists chastise Disney for paying benefits to gays

By Greg Warner

TAMPA, Fla. (ABP) -- A resolution passed by Florida Baptists Nov. 15 chastises the Walt Disney Co. for offering health insurance to partners of homosexual employees.

The Disney decision, as well as other recent actions by the entertainment giant, shows a lack of moral leadership and an erosion of the company's traditional commitment to family values, the resolution says.

The statement calls on the 1 million Florida Baptist church members "to seriously and prayerfully reconsider their continued purchase and support of Disney products," but it stops short of calling for a boycott of Disney.

The resolution, which attracted widespread media attention, was approved during the annual meeting of the Florida Baptist Convention in Tampa.

In a meeting free of rancor, the 1,400 registered messengers also voted to sever the convention's century-old relationship with Stetson University because of the school's drinking policy, elected conservatives to convention offices and approved a \$24.9 million budget that reduces slightly the portion of funds going to the national Southern Baptist Convention.

The Disney policy, which the company defends as consistent with its practice of non-discrimination, provides medical insurance to live-in partners of gay and lesbian Disney employees but not live-in partners of heterosexual workers. Disney employs about 70,000 workers.

With several theme parks in the Orlando area, Disney is one of the state's major employers and the anchor of Florida's all-important tourist industry.

When the new policy was announced in October, it drew criticism from a group of 15 Florida legislators, who said it represents the "belittlement of the sanctity of marriage." Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention called the policy "extremely disturbing."

A Disney spokesman said the company is disappointed in the Florida Baptist vote. "The standard against which our commitment to family entertainment should be measured is the value and high quality of Disney-branded family entertainment ...," John Dreyer told Associated Press.

The Florida Baptist resolution also cites other Disney actions messengers found offensive: targeting gays and lesbians with "theme nights" at Disney parks, producing "questionable material" through Disney subsidiaries like the movie production firm Miramax, and sponsoring vacation packages with cruise ships that offer gambling aboard. The statement asks Disney to reverse those actions.

The resolution calls on Florida Baptists to consider ending their participation in Disney's annual "Night of

Jôy" promotion that features Christian musical artists and attracts many Baptist youth groups.

Supporters of the Florida Baptist resolution hope to get a similar one approved by the annual Southern Baptist Convention in June. The national convention, which met in Orlando in 1994, is scheduled to return to the Central Florida city in the year 2000, but contractual agreements are expected to prevent a change in that plan.

In addition to targeting Disney, Florida Baptists also passed a resolution against casino gambling.

Conservative candidate Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, was elected president unopposed. Last year he nominated outgoing president Ken Whitten of Tampa.

Tim Benson, a church starter from Miami, was elected first vice president over Don Ralston, pastor of East Lake Road Baptist Church. Elected without opposition were Orlando laywoman Lois Wenger, second vice president, and Jacksonville pastor Ron Hobbs, recording secretary.

The long-awaited Stetson decision, which was recommended by the convention's State Board of Missions in September, was approved without debate or opposition. It eliminates all remaining state convention funding, which has dwindled from \$1.3 million in 1987 to \$20,000 a year, and ends all fraternal dealings with the DeLand school.

The action came in response to Stetson's decision earlier this year to permit students of legal drinking age to consume alcoholic beverages in most residence halls and at approved social gatherings. Stetson angered conservative Baptists in 1992 by permitting late-night room visitation for opposite-sex students, prompting a major reduction in funding.

Although founded as a Baptist institution in 1883, Stetson recently has softened its Baptist identity.

Stetson has not opposed the severing of ties with Florida Baptists. In fact, trustees of the 1,900-student school already approved the plan.

"The relationship ran hot and cold throughout the 100-year partnership," Stetson President Doug Lee said in a statement. "When the wave of denominational conservatism and fundamentalism overwhelmed Southern Baptist life in the 1970s and 1980s, it was only a matter of time until evangelism and denominationalism would replace higher education and religious freedom as top priorities for Florida Baptists."

Other traditionally Baptist schools in the Southeast have followed a similar course in recent years.

The convention adopted a basic budget of \$24.9 million for 1996 that earmarks 40 percent of contributions for Southern Baptist Convention causes and 60 percent for budget and priority items in Florida. Although the SBC portion is a 1 percent cut from 1995, Florida Baptists hope to offset that loss by designating an anticipated 1995 revenue overage of \$1 million to SBC causes.

-30-

-- Barbara Denman contributed to this story.

Louisiana Baptists elect conservative but defeat inerrancy amendment

By Greg Warner

LAKE CHARLES, La. (ABP) -- Louisiana Baptists elected a president committed to conservative reforms but narrowly defeated a constitutional amendment that would install biblical inerrancy as the official stance of the state convention.

Michael Claunch, pastor of First Baptist Church of Slidell, was elected president with 52 percent of the vote (1,256 to 1,136) over Eddie Simmons, pastor of Sale Street Baptist Church in Lake Charles, host city for the Nov. 13-14 Louisiana Baptist Convention. It was the fourth time in five open elections that a president won by a margin of fewer than 100 votes.

• Claunch, endorsed by the state's conservative group, campaigned on the need "to settle some things" in the state convention -- most notably the convention's position on biblical inspiration.

But the constitutional amendment endorsing inerrancy -- although submitted by the convention's Executive Board -- fell seven votes short of the required two-thirds majority (1,435 to 724).

The amendment would have added to the constitution's four-part purpose statement a section stating: "The convention shall do its work in accordance with the principle that the Bible is the Word of God and is truth without any mixture of error in every area of which it speaks." The Executive Board said that position has been the convention's "unwritten policy" since its beginning.

Opponents offered a substitute motion to identify the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement as the convention's official statement of faith. That document also uses the truth-without-mixture-of-error language but is considered a less restrictive statement.

The substitute failed. But after the amendment was also defeated, its supporters proposed another approach -- combining the original proposal and the substitute into a new amendment to be considered at next year's convention. (Constitutional amendments that don't originate in the Executive Board must be offered a year in advance.)

The 2,456 registered messengers did approve one change in the convention's governing documents -- a bylaw amendment to prevent one person from serving in more than one elected or appointed position at a time.

Although conservatives won the hotly contested presidency, Louisiana moderates won both vice presidencies. Waylon Bailey, pastor of First Baptist Church in Covington, was elected first vice president by eight votes (749-741). Nelda Seal of Alexandria, retired director of the state Woman's Missionary Union, was elected second vice president.

Messengers approved a 1996 budget of \$17.6 million -- the same amount as 1995. Also unchanged is the division of funds between state and national causes. The Louisiana convention will retain 65 percent of the revenue and forward 35 percent to the Southern Baptist Convention.

Resolutions were passed opposing gambling, domestic violence and all abortions except those to save the life of the mother. Other resolutions urged Louisiana Baptists to participate in the political process and thanked state legislators who have supported Baptist positions.

-30-

-- Lacy Thompson contributed to this story.

Religious Equality Amendment introduced in House chamber

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The long-awaited Religious Equality Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was introduced Nov. 15 in the House of Representatives.

Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, introduced the bill, which says neither the federal nor any state government "shall deny benefits to or otherwise discriminate against any private person or group on account of religious expression, belief, or identity; nor shall the prohibition on laws respecting an establishment of religion be construed to require such discrimination."

A coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups, including the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, says the proposal (H.J. Res. 121) would do radical surgery on the First Amendment, which they say has not been altered in more than 200 years.

Other groups, such as the National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Legal Society and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, have thrown their support behind the measure, saying that it would help eliminate religious discrimination.

-30-

Freedom Forum hosts Baptist author

By Pam Parry

ARLINGTON, Va. (ABP) -- The Bible says love should cast out fear, but the reverse is happening as Americans are confronted by AIDS, a former Southern Baptist Convention president said Nov. 14.

Jimmy Allen, a former SBC agency head who served as president in 1978-79, spoke to reporters, ministers and other guests at the Freedom Forum in Arlington, Va. The speech was part of an author series featuring Allen's new book, "Burden of a Secret: A Story of Truth and Mercy in the Face of AIDS."

Allen, former president of the SBC Radio and Television Commission, has lost three members of his family to AIDS, and his son Skip, who is gay, has the HIV virus.

Allen's son Scott lost his wife, Lydia, and two sons to the disease. Lydia received a tainted blood transfusion hours before giving birth to Matt. Before Lydia knew she was infected, she gave birth to Bryan.

Bryan died as an infant in 1986; Lydia died in 1992; Matt died this month at age 13.

Allen, a chaplain for a mountain resort community in Big Canoe, Ga., and an active participant in the founding of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said he wrote the book to help others in their struggle. Matt died just four days before the Freedom Forum event. Allen said he did not reschedule the session because Matt would have wanted him to keep the appointment.

Allen said America's society needs to change its "behavior pattern" toward victims of AIDS.

America was at its finest after the Oklahoma City bombing when neighbors helped one another, he said. The nation has taken a strikingly different approach, however, to AIDS, he said.

"There are silent Oklahoma City explosions going on every other day in America," he said of the numbers dying from AIDS.

Churches, particularly, let the Allens down when their family was confronted with AIDS, Allen said.

Even though Scott Allen was not infected with HIV, he was fired as minister of education at First Christian Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., when he told his pastor about his family's diagnosis: Church after church refused to let Matt attend Sunday school for fear he might infect other children, Allen said.

Allen said society's poor response to the AIDS crisis is in part the result of a breakdown in trust. Americans don't trust their government, physicians, lawyers, newspapers, churches and other institutions and professions, he said.

"We are living in a confused society, and AIDS is just one of the ways that that is experienced," Allen said.

Allen said his family had a good experience with the media, the medical profession and public school system. Members of the press held the family's story until Matt and his parents were ready to go public, he said. Allen also lauded the doctors and the public school that welcomed Matt despite his illness.

At Matt's public school, fellow students learned about AIDS to overcome their fear and surrounded him with love and acceptance. The school is a microcosm of what could happen across the nation if Americans begin "to care about mercy" and seek "truth," Allen said.

Classmates, friends grieve at memorial service for youth

By Orville Scott

DALLAS (ABP) -- Against a background of radiant fall colors that he loved so much, 13-year old Matthew Allen was memorialized Nov. 15 at the Dallas Horticulture Center by family, friends and grieving classmates from Lakewood Elementary School.

Matt died Nov. 10, his body no longer able to fight the AIDS he acquired from a blood transfusion given to his mother, Lydia, just before his birth. She died three years ago. A younger brother, Bryan, died from the disease more than 10 years ago. Bryan's House, a Dallas shelter for AIDS-infected children, was named for him and now serves as many as 80 children a week.

At the memorial service, Scott Allen, Matt's father, gave special thanks to his son's teachers and classmates who formed a chorus and sang two of Matt's favorite songs, "Somewhere Out There" from the Steven Spielberg movie "An American Tail" and "Circle of Life" from Disney's "The Lion King."

"You gave him what no one else could give him," Allen told the weeping students. "That was a chance to belong."

Matt's grandfather, former SBC president and agency head Jimmy Allen, tells Matt's story in a recent book, "Burden of a Secret." In the book, Allen details the family's struggle with AIDS and the rejection they felt from churches because of fear and ignorance about the disease.

Three years ago, when Matt and his father disclosed his illness, it was the first and only disclosure of an HIV-infected student in a Dallas school.

Matt was so knowledgeable about AIDS and its treatment that teachers credited him with helping ease fellow students' fears.

Matt's pediatrician for most of his life, Janet Squires, recalled Matt's unquenchable humor. "He had the greatest smile and he showed it often," she said. "He would save up his jokes and give them out as gifts."

Barbara Otto, the mother of Matt's best friend, recalled that when Zack and Matt were in first grade, the teacher handed out what appeared to be an unusually difficult test. Matt gazed upward and said, "Take me home, Lord. I'll never get through this."

Matt's first-grade teacher, Lois Lamb, recalled that said he wanted to be a teacher.

"It didn't take his growing up for him to be a teacher," Lamb said, describing how he inspired students and teachers with his determination to stay in school and his interest in others despite his own problems.

Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, where Scott Allen once worked, said, "Most of us in this room, even the very young, will remember this life until the day we die."

"It was not the length of his journey, but the way he made the journey," Strickland said.

Strickland noted that Matt grew a garden in the valley of the shadow of death, a place where gardens are not supposed to grow.

"He taught us about the incredible resources we have," Strickland said. "He taught us about courage. ... He taught us about caring and kindness."

Dr. Squires recalled all the treatments, the poking and enduring that Matt endured in battling AIDS. But Matthew found a way to overcome the deadly disease, Strickland said.

"Now he has won," said Strickland. "The AIDS is dead. Matthew lives."

CORRECTIONS: In the Nov. 14 ABP story, "Texas Baptists reduce SBC funds, elect moderates, avoid gay issue," please correct the 29th paragraph to read as follows:

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

The Nov. 14 ABP "Abortion measure sent to committee for hearing," carries an incorrect byline. The story actually was written by Kenny Byrd.

END