

Associated Baptist Press

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

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State convention meetings highlighted by surprises

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- A surprise win by conservatives in North Carolina, the rejection by Alabama Baptists of a plan aimed at resolving a conflict with Samford University and a resolution in Florida pitting 1 million Baptists against the Disney Co. were among highlights of Baptist state convention meetings this fall.

Controversy between conservatives and moderates also took center stage for portions of annual meetings in Texas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri and Tennessee. Other states met in relative quiet, compared to earlier years when a war raged between the two factions in the 15 million-member Southern Baptist Convention.

Moderates in North Carolina were stunned by the surprise election of a conservative president. Greg Mathis, pastor of Mud Creek Baptist Church in Hendersonville, defeated moderate candidate Dewey Hobbs for the office. The 1.1 million-member state convention has long been considered a moderate stronghold.

Alabama Baptists rejected a plan proposed by leaders that would have in effect endorsed action last year by trustees of Samford University to make the school's board self-perpetuating. The plan offered an optional "new paradigm" for institutions of the state convention that would allow Baptists in the state only to ratify -- not substitute -- members to boards of trustees.

Florida Baptists criticized the Walt Disney Co. for offering benefits to partners of homosexual employees in a resolution pitting 1 million church members against the state's tourism industry. They also voted to sever a century old relationship with Stetson University over the school's recent decision allowing alcohol on campus.

Moderates held on to control in Texas, easily electing presidential candidate Charles Wade of Arlington over

a conservative challenger. They also adopted a budget that will send less money from Texas to the SBC and keep more in the state for starting new churches. Conservatives opposed the reduction, saying it will hurt international ministries of the SBC.

The Texas convention delayed action on a motion to disfellowship churches that condone homosexuality. The motion, aimed at University Baptist Church in Austin, which recently was kicked out of its association for ordaining a gay man as a deacon, was referred to the Texas Baptist Executive Board.

Two other states joined Texas in altering their support of the SBC.

Citing financial pressures on the state convention, Oklahoma Baptists voted to reduce by 2 percent share of the Cooperative Program unified budget they forward on to the Southern Baptist Convention. The Oklahoma convention now retains 60 percent of those funds for use in-state. At one time it divided funds with the SBC 50-50.

Mississippi Baptists voted without debate to change the way they fund home missions in the state. The state will reduce funding to the SBC by about \$250,000 and use the money to assume total responsibility for home missions work in Mississippi. Until now, that work was shared with the SBC Home Mission Board.

Kentucky Baptists took control of two state convention camps away from their Executive Board, giving them separate boards of directors. The move was in reaction to plans to sell the Cedarmore assembly, which has been losing money.

Kentucky messengers also denied a move to defund the state Baptist paper, Western Recorder, to force it to a more-conservative editorial posture. Messengers voted down the motion by Mayfield pastor Ray Werline by about a four-to-one margin.

Louisiana Baptists elected a conservative president but turned down a constitutional amendment that would have installed inerrancy as the state convention's official stance. Slidell pastor Michael Claunch won 52 percent of a presidential vote over moderate candidate Eddie Simmons of Lake Charles.

The amendment stating the Bible is without error -- which leaders said would merely codify what has been an unofficial stance -- fell seven votes short of a two-thirds majority needed for passage.

Baptists in Missouri defeated a motion to deny exhibit space at the state convention to the Baptist Joint Committee, a moderate religious liberty organization defunded by the SBC in 1991. They narrowly adopted a motion to freeze the division of Cooperative Program funds between the state and national conventions over concerns about a proposed restructuring of the SBC. They also defeated a bylaw amendment proposed from the floor stating that the Bible is without error.

Tennessee Baptists turned back two efforts to distance the state convention from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group not sanctioned by the conservative-led SBC.

Tennessee Baptists elected retired pastor Howard Olive, a Fellowship leader, to the state's executive board and adopted a resolution supporting Woman's Missionary Union, a national auxiliary whose leaders have been criticized for cooperating with the Fellowship.

Virginia Baptists handled business with little debate, electing a slate of moderate officers unopposed. Conservatives in the state decided to boycott this year's convention and instead held their own meeting, where they decided against forming a separate state convention but hired an executive director in anticipation of a possible split sometime in the future.

Arkansas Baptists elected President Bill Clinton's pastor, Rex Horne of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, as their state convention president. They distanced themselves from some Clinton policies, however, adopting resolutions against abortion and homosexuality.

Clinton, a long-time Southern Baptist, has been criticized by fellow Baptists for his pro-choice abortion position and his advocacy of equal rights for gays. Horne, a moderate, defeated Stephen Davis of Russellville, a conservative, for the post.

For the second year in a row, California Southern Baptists struggled with the issue of whether to recognize a member church with a woman pastor. Messengers allowed the seating of messengers from Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco.

Later, they endorsed a study document that said the Bible lends no support for women pastors but leaves

the decision up to the local church. Toward the end of the meeting, however, remaining messengers passed a non-binding resolution strongly opposing the practice.

Arizona Baptists elected a new executive director at their Nov. 14-15 convention in Phoenix, 38 year-old Steve Bass, currently executive director of Tulsa Metro Baptist Association in Oklahoma.

Illinois Baptists focused much of their Nov. 1-3 convention on prayers for the recovery of Executive Director Gene Wilson, who has been in a coma since suffering a massive brain hemorrhage Aug. 30.

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Baptists speak out on issues in state convention resolutions

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Gambling, abortion, homosexuality and racism received widespread attention from Baptists gathering in annual state convention meetings this fall.

Resolutions by state conventions espoused mostly conservative views on a variety of social issues. While not binding on any Baptist organization, resolutions gauge the temperament of messengers present and voting at state meetings.

The spread of gambling received the most attention, with Baptist groups opposing casino gambling or other new games of chance in their states. At least 14 state conventions adopted anti-gambling resolutions.

Two states -- California and Mississippi -- urged Congress to ban a rare abortion procedure called dilation-and-extraction, also referred to as partial-birth abortion. The California resolution called the procedure "not only murder, but a barbaric act."

Six other states adopted more general resolutions on the sanctity of human life. Indiana Baptists allowed abortion only to save the life of the mother. Maryland/Delaware Baptists voted down an amendment to their anti-abortion statement that would have included an exception for rape.

Six states passed statements rejecting homosexual lifestyles. Anti-gay resolutions in Alabama and South Carolina criticized the National Education Association for promoting observance of Gay/Lesbian History Month.

Five states followed an example set by the Southern Baptist Convention last June, adopting statements acknowledging the role of racism in Baptist history. Several other states adopted statements of repentance for racism last fall, prior to the SBC's sesquicentennial meeting.

Florida Baptists made news by passing a resolution critical of the Disney Corporation for several recent actions, including offering health insurance to live-in partners of gay employees. The action pitted 1 million Florida Baptists against the state's tourism industry.

Virginia Baptists praised progress toward peace in the Middle East. North Carolina adopted a resolution expressing sympathy for Israel following the Nov. 4 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Louisiana Baptists urged Christians to become more involved in the political process.

Baptists in Arkansas, Texas and Virginia spoke out against substance abuse. The Virginia resolution criticized specifically a recent move to allow alcohol at the University of Richmond, a Baptist school.

Alabama Baptists, meanwhile, opposed the use of tobacco.

Arkansas Baptists opposed pornography. Baptists in Pennsylvania/South Jersey, meanwhile, rejected a pornography resolution, citing its narrow focus on criticizing Holiday Inn for showing adult movies in hotel rooms.

Mississippi opposed nude and topless dancing in the state, while Georgia Baptists called for a ban on outdoor advertising for adult entertainment.

Two conventions -- Louisiana and Mississippi -- spoke out against domestic violence.

Two others -- Virginia and Texas -- opposed a "religious equality" amendment to the U.S. Constitution

proposed in Congress. Virginia Baptists also passed a resolution opposing tuition tax credits for parents who choose to send children to private schools.

Mississippi Baptists opposed loosening of divorce laws. South Carolina passed a statement on strengthening marriages. Tennessee called for emphasizing strong moral values in homes.

Maryland/Delaware Baptists advocated sexual abstinence for young people, endorsing the Baptist Sunday School Board's "True Love Waits" campaign.

Oklahoma Baptists raised concern over a lawsuit that could outlaw charitable gift annuities to religious institutions and thanked everyone who responded to the April 19 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City.

Four states expressed support for Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary of the SBC recently under fire for a decision last summer to produce missions education materials for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group which SBC leaders charge competes with denominational programs.

Mississippi Baptists referred without voting on a resolution against news in the Baptist Record that would "encourage or enhance" the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

California Southern Baptists voiced concerns over a massive restructuring of the SBC approved last summer and discouraged churches from calling women as pastors.

An Indiana Baptist resolution expressed gratitude for veterans.

A Kentucky Baptist resolution acknowledged that both Calvinism and Arminianism have influenced Baptists. Calvinism teaches predestination while Arminianism emphasizes free will. There has been a recent resurgence in interest in the historical debate, due in part to the selection of Albert Mohler, a Calvinist, as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is a compilation of selected state convention resolutions, based on news reports.

-- Gambling: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland/Delaware, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania/South Jersey, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia.

-- Late-term abortions: Mississippi, California

-- Sanctity of human life: Arkansas, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland/Delaware, Pennsylvania/South Jersey.

-- Homosexuality: Alabama, Arkansas, Hawaii, Maryland/Delaware, South Carolina, Tennessee.

-- Racism: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Minnesota/Wisconsin, Texas.

-- Affirming Woman's Missionary Union: Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia.

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Accreditation team visits Southern Seminary

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary faces its most serious accreditation challenge in recent history, according to seminary faculty and students who met with an accreditation investigation team Nov. 8-10.

Faculty members reportedly asked the Association of Theological Schools to place the seminary on a

five-year probationary status, with frequent site visits to measure progress. Whether ATS representatives will recommend such a sanction has not been disclosed.

Seminary President Albert Mohler has received a preliminary report from the joint accreditation team, but the contents of that report won't be made public until sometime next year. Due to the confidential nature of accreditation investigations, some parts of the report may never be released.

The joint accreditation team included representatives from the Association of Theological Schools, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Council on Social Work Education. ATS and SACS are the seminary's primary accrediting agencies. CSWE accredits the master of social work degree offered through the Carver School of Church Social Work.

The accreditation investigation was prompted by last spring's controversy surrounding the Carver School but encompassed a broader range of issues. The Carver School crisis surfaced last March when Mohler fired the school's dean, Diana Garland, after she told students Mohler's restrictive hiring policies threatened the school's accreditation.

Seminary trustees subsequently voted to affirm Mohler's actions and enacted permanent changes in the faculty hiring process. Trustees also banned faculty, staff and students from criticizing the administration publicly.

The accreditation team reportedly examined those recent developments, along with issues of overall seminary administration and compliance by trustees, administration and faculty with the "Covenant Renewal" document approved by those parties in 1991.

Although final decisions on the seminary's accreditation with ATS and SACS won't be made until next year, more information has come to light on CSWE's accreditation of the master of social work degree.

Janet Spressart, acting dean of the Carver School, wrote a letter Nov. 15 to the 24 social work students scheduled to finish the degree program in the 1996-97 academic year. They were the last students admitted to the program before enrollment was cut off last spring.

The seminary has been attempting to transfer the master of social work degree program to another Baptist school and currently is negotiating with Campbellsville College. Earlier talks with Samford University broke down. One goal of the negotiations is to transfer operation of the degree program by August 1996, but with provisions for the remaining students to be able to finish their degrees.

"Conversations continue with Campbellsville College and other institutions, but a transfer is unlikely to occur before fall 1997," Spressart said in her letter to students.

And carrying accreditation through such a transfer is not a sure thing, she added. She quoted Nancy Randolph, CSWE executive director, as saying that "accreditation of the Carver School is not transferable to another institution." Randolph confirmed that statement in a Nov. 21 interview with the Western Recorder.

Spressart said CSWE will consider maintaining accreditation of the Carver School at Southern Seminary through May 1997, if the seminary submits a letter requesting a continuance without applying for reaccreditation.

"Clearly, the program in church social work education offered through the Carver School of Church Social Work would ... cease to exist at Southern Seminary after May 1997," Spressart wrote.

CSWE accreditation actually will cease in May 1996 unless the seminary requests a one-year continuance, Spressart implied. Spressart said CSWE has said this continuance might be granted, if two other criteria are met:

- That decisions made by ATS and SACS as a result of the November site visit do not impact CSWE's ability to continue accreditation.

- That the educational quality of the Carver School can be sustained, a factor dependent largely on the stability of faculty. Since last spring, the Carver School has declined from six full-time faculty members to two, Spressart and Garland. Neither has said how long she will remain on the faculty.

Spressart told students that David Dockery, the seminary's vice president for academic administration, has begun talking with representatives from the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky about accepting Carver School students, should that become necessary. Nothing is settled, however.

Carver School students, with help from alumni of the school, have obtained legal counsel and are preparing to file a class-action lawsuit against the seminary for breach of contract if they cannot graduate with an accredited

degree. Students and others close to this legal process would not discuss details of a potential lawsuit publicly at this time.

Ultimately, the seminary faces serious accreditation issues not only with the master of social work degree program, but with all its degree programs, which are accredited by ATS and SACS.

ATS representatives on the recent campus visit will file a report with the agency's commission on accreditation, which is scheduled to meet the third week of January. The ATS commission on accreditation will determine whether to levy sanctions against the seminary. That information will be relayed confidentially to the seminary for a response and then will be made public one month later.

SACS has made its primary report to seminary administration through the exit interview conducted with Mohler, according to SACS spokesman Ben Hudson. A written report with the same information should be delivered to the president soon, he added.

The seminary will have until April 10 to respond to the SACS representatives' comments and recommendations. Both the visiting team's report and the seminary's response will be considered during the summer meeting of SACS officials, the week of June 24.

Any sanctions levied against the seminary by SACS would be reported publicly at that time, Hudson said. However, the full report of the commission to the seminary will be made public only if the seminary chooses to release it, he said.

Seminary officials declined to comment on the accrediting team visit and exit interview.

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Momentum building for Baptist center at Disciples of Christ seminary

By Mark Wingfield

OWENSBORO, Ky. (ABP) -- A group of 60 Baptists from across Kentucky met at Third Baptist Church in Owensboro Nov. 14 to endorse a proposed Baptist Center for Theological Education to be housed at Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Ky.

"The purpose of this center is to provide theological education and ministry training for those pursuing vocational ministry as well as those involved in the ministry of the laity," said Greg Brooks, president of the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship and pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington.

The proposed center, which could open as early as the fall of 1997, would be a joint project of Lexington Theological Seminary, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Kentucky Baptist Fellowship already has appointed a committee to guide development of the new center. That committee is chaired by Paul Simmons, former professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

"This is a brand-new opportunity for theological education in an ecumenical setting," Simmons told the group.

He outlined four goals for the immediate future:

- Naming a center director.
- Identifying sources of funding.
- Developing a program of study.
- Recruiting students for the fall of 1997.

Brooks said he hopes the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship will contribute at least \$200,000 annually to the center. One of the committee's goals is to enable Baptist students to choose the new option without having to spend

more in tuition than they would pay at a Southern Baptist Convention seminary, he said.

Pastors and laypeople attending the session asked numerous questions about the proposed arrangement, such as what degrees will be offered, which institution's name will be on the degrees awarded and what doctrinal influence the Disciples of Christ-affiliated Lexington Theological Seminary will bring to bear on Baptist students.

Brooks said the Disciples of Christ branch of the Christian Church is "more a kindred spirit of Baptists than any other group."

Sharon Dowd, a Baptist who teaches at Lexington Theological Seminary, said Baptist students who have studied there and at other non-Baptist schools "actually become more Baptist" through exposure to other faiths.

Simmons noted that students in the proposed Baptist center would take at least one-third of their courses from Baptist professors. "This is ecumenicity in its best sense," he explained.

This new model is exciting to the faculty and administration of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, reported Bill Rogers, a Christian education professor there.

"Baptists have been separationists; we have been isolationists," Rogers said. "And now we have a chance to do it right."

Lexington Theological Seminary currently offers a master of divinity degree in Baptist studies, with 75 percent tuition scholarships available to Baptist students.

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Istook announces plan to introduce amendment

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- When Congress returns from Thanksgiving break, lawmakers will have another constitutional amendment on religious liberties to consider.

Rep. Ernest Istook Jr., R-Okla., announced Nov. 21 that he plans to introduce a religious liberties amendment when the U.S. House of Representatives reconvenes Nov. 28. Previously, Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., introduced a religious equality amendment to the Constitution.

Istook told reporters that First Amendment rights of freedom of speech and religion "have been subordinated to a new notion" not found in the Constitution. "We are being told that freedom of religion takes a back seat and must be restricted whenever anybody complains that it makes them uncomfortable," he said.

"Those who choose to be intolerant of religion are permitted to control and restrict the behavior of those who simply wish to express their belief, as the Constitution is meant to guarantee."

Istook's measure, which has 92 co-sponsors, is worded as follows:

"To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience: Nothing in this Constitution shall prohibit acknowledgments of the religious heritage, beliefs, or traditions of the people, or prohibit student-sponsored prayer in public schools. Neither the United States nor any State shall compose any official prayer or compel joining in prayer, or discriminate against religious expression or belief."

Istook, joined by other members of Congress, said his proposal would allow student-sponsored prayer in public schools, but not government-composed prayer or compulsory prayer.

Responding to questions, Istook said that he does not disagree with the intent of Hyde's proposal but that it is inadequate. Hyde's proposal would bar discrimination, Istook said, but it does not directly address the issue of voluntary student prayer.

Rep. Zach Wamp, R-Tenn., voiced support for the measure, saying that the amendment is about recognizing religious freedom as the fiber of this nation, not forcing religious views on people.

Bill Murray, a Christian evangelist whose mother brought the 1963 Supreme Court case to bar government-

sponsored prayer and devotional Bible readings, said that Madalyn Murray O'Hair was not interested in protecting separation of church and state but in removing all religion from public view. Others have continued to carry that mantle, he said, adding, "it has gone too far; it has to stop."

He said he would like to see "benevolent neutrality" toward religion, rather than "universal hostility," and "this amendment is the first step" in that direction.

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, which opposes both proposals, called Istook's measure "terrible."

"It basically says whatever the majority in the local school district wants it can have," Walker said. "This sets up a local veto on our constitutional rights -- creating a loophole in the Bill of Rights that you could drive a truck through."

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Emotions run high during Senate hearing

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Emotions ran high in testimony at a Nov. 17 Senate hearing on a proposal to ban so-called "partial-birth" abortions.

Opponents to the late-term abortion procedure, which is used only rarely, labeled it "hideous," "sick" and evil." Other participants, meanwhile, called it "life-saving" and "the safest alternative" in certain crisis pregnancies.

The Senate is holding the hearings after the House approved a bill in early November to criminalize the procedure. Under the bill, doctors convicted of performing the procedure could receive up to two years in prison.

Opponents of the bill said it is a first step toward banning all abortions. They claim the procedure is used mainly to save a woman's life or to protect her health and ability to bear children later.

The bill would outlaw "the safest way of ending a third-trimester pregnancy," said Mary Campbell, director of Planned Parenthood of Washington, D.C.

The procedure, also called dilation-and-intact-extraction, is safer than other procedures for late term abortions, such as induction and hysterotomy, said Campbell, who is a fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

Supporters of the bill, meanwhile, described the procedure in graphic detail and said the procedure is used for elective abortions in several instances. Even when the mother's life is at risk, they insisted, alternative procedures can be used.

The procedure involves delivering the entire fetus, except for the head, through the birth canal before a syringe is inserted in the brain to end its life.

"No reasonable person can disagree, once he or she has read a description or seen an accurate drawing of the partial-birth abortion method: it is one-fifth abortion and four-fifths infanticide," said Helen Alvare of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Nancy Romer, a physician and fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, said the procedure "is used in my community not for treatment of rare and tragic pregnancies, but rather for termination of otherwise, normally healthy fetuses."

J. Courtland Robinson, professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, said describing the procedure with "partial-birth" terminology is "erroneous and inflammatory." The term was probably made up by someone who wanted the procedure banned, Robinson added. "Medically, we do not do 'partial-birth' abortions.

There is no such thing."

"With all due respect, the Congress of the United States is not qualified to stand over my shoulder in the operating room and tell me how to treat my patients," Robinson said.

Three women who developed problems late in their pregnancies testified. One supported the ban saying nature should be allowed to take its course. The other two women urged lawmakers not to ban doctors from using the method. One said she is now pregnant again because she underwent the procedure.

More hearings are expected at the end of November or early December.

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Scholars predict Baptists will remain divided

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (ABP) -- A hundred-fifty years after Baptists in America split over slavery, there is little prospect for reunification, according to a recent consultation of scholars.

New divisions -- over such things as openness to gays and whether the Bible is free from error -- threaten to further fragment the Baptist family, said speakers at an Oct. 27-29 colloquium on "Division, Diversity and Dialogue."

"We have ended slavery as an institution, but we are still slaves to separation," Thomas McKibbens, pastor of First Baptist Church in Newton, Mass., told the gathering at First Baptist Church in Providence, R.I., the first Baptist congregation established in America.

The church also was site for a fateful meeting on Aug. 28, 1845, when members of the Baptist Home Mission Society officially refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries and suggested that Baptists sympathetic to slavery withdraw.

Baptists in the South did, meeting a week later in Augusta, Ga., to form the Southern Baptist Convention, now the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group.

At its sesquicentennial convention in June, the 15 million-member SBC adopted a resolution repenting for past racism and asking for forgiveness from African-Americans.

But that doesn't mean Baptists in the north and south can expect to get back together soon, said speakers at the meeting. The two bodies have become increasingly estranged as the SBC has grown more conservative and the 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. moved to the left.

Two progressive splinter groups have emerged from the SBC's conservative swing -- the Alliance of Baptists in 1986 and the larger and more-centrist Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991.

Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists, said while formal reconciliation is impossible, possibilities exist for "joint ventures" among progressive Baptists across denominational lines in areas such as mission strategy, theological education, publishing and retirement plans for ministers.

Historian Bill Leonard, a professor at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., also said reconciliation between moderate and conservative Baptists is unlikely. He urged Baptists to seek unity by returning to a "voluntary society" approach to missions and ministry that would allow churches to work together on selected shared interests.

But Luther Copeland, a former Southern Baptist missionary, said he doubts most Baptists are interested in transcending differences.

"The fundamentalists already have a cohesiveness which they find in their Southern culture and don't see much need to work with others," he said. "Even among moderates, I don't see them wanting to work ecumenically."

The colloquium was sponsored by the host church, the Alliance of Baptists, the American Baptist Board

of National Ministries, American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island, the American Baptist Historical Society and the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society.

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-- By Bob Allen. Richard Dujardin of the Providence Journal-Bulletin contributed to this story.

American Baptist Churches approve commission on homosexuality

CHERRY HILL, N.J. (ABP) -- American Baptist leaders have voted to establish a commission to seek to "deal constructively" with the divisive issue of church attitudes toward homosexuality.

The General Board of the 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. voted to establish a 12-member Commission on Denominational Unity at a semiannual meeting Nov. 16-19.

The proposal, approved 137-14 with four abstentions, noted that American Baptists have in the past "struggled with issues around which there has been considerable disagreement" but have "been able to find ways to deal constructively with these issues and maintain our common commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to ministries of reconciliation."

"At the present time, we are deeply concerned about the growing controversy surrounding the interpretation of Biblical passages regarding homosexual practice," the statement continued.

The board has adopted two statements on gay lifestyles. A 1992 resolution said homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." A 1993 resolution calling for dialogue on human sexuality, however, acknowledged "a variety of understandings throughout our denomination" on the issue.

The new commission will be "broadly representative" and will study, engage in dialogue and recommend to the General Board any statements "it considers necessary and/or helpful to advance our common commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to maintain the unity of His body," the recommendation said.

In other business, board members re-elected Daniel Weiss to a third four-year term as the convention's chief executive officer. The term will run from August 1996 through July 2000.

In an address to the General Board, James Dunn hailed "soul competency" as Baptists' greatest contribution to American religion.

Three challenges -- pluralism, pietism and polarism -- face Baptists in preserving freedom, said Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington.

"We all have trouble living with pluralism, a dominant characteristic of our times," Dunn said.

Confronted with the diversity of a multicultural society, some Christians respond with a moral creed, he said.

"We may be unwilling to impose a theology, but we have always been quick to come up with a nice moral measure for all believers," he said. "Every generation and geography has had one. When I was a teenager in Texas, it was, 'I don't drink; I don't chew; I don't go with girls that do.'"

But rather than impose creeds, Dunn said, the biblical response to pluralism is to be faithful to one's identity and values while living with and respecting people who hold other views.

"The complexities of our pluralistic society demand a greater dependence upon the Bible, a deeper reliance upon faith and more fervent prayer than simpler times may have called for," he said.

Freedom is also threatened, Dunn said, by a "holier-than-thou" pietism and claims to "know the mind of Christ."

"We cannot afford merely to talk about the Bible," he said. "Rather, we who take the Bible seriously must take it so seriously that we understand the language, the historical context, the sociological setting. No

light-fingered lifting of proof texts to back our preconceived notions."

The "false and limited choices" of polarism are the third threat Dunn identified.

Many choices in Baptist life, Dunn said, are not "either-or" decisions. Instead, they involve ideals that must be held in creative tension.

"It's not either sola fide (faith alone) or sola scriptura (the Scripture only). It's both," he said.

Dunn said a choice between autonomy and interdependence cannot be forced "unless our goal is to destroy the denomination, our mission outreach and all the positive things we do together. Denominational headquarters for Baptists is always the local church. Each church is sovereign in its own affairs, yet we choose to work together and God will hold gravely accountable those who destroy the fellowship."

The Baptist Joint Committee is a religious liberty coalition of several national Baptist groups, including the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.

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-- By Bob Allen and Larry Chesser, with information provided by American Baptist News Service

Religious leaders lay hands on Clinton

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A dozen religious leaders invited to the White House Nov. 18 ended a 45-minute meeting by laying hands on President Clinton and joining him in prayer.

The leaders, representing the National Council of Churches, were invited to the meeting in the Oval Office a week after the group's general board passed a resolution calling on Clinton and the Congress to protect society's "most vulnerable" as they work out differences over the federal budget.

At the meeting, the ecumenical leaders urged Clinton to fight cuts in social programs for the poor, according to a news release. At the close of the session, Bishop Nathaniel Linsey of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church led a prayer asking that God would "make the President strong for the task" as he seeks to work with Congress in budget negotiations.

The laying on of hands is an ancient form of prayer that symbolizes the outpouring of God's spirit to one who is facing a time of crisis, said Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the New York City-based National Council of Churches.

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-- By ABP staff

Bethlehem residents anxious about security at Christmas

BETHLEHEM (ABP) -- With Israeli troops scheduled to pull out just before Christmas, residents of Bethlehem are anxious about security as they approach the anniversary of the birth of Jesus.

"It's always chaotic here at Christmas time," Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Centre, told Ecumenical News International. "But we wonder whether we can be ready to welcome the crowds since the Israelis will be pulling out only a day or so before Christmas."

Bethlehem lies just inside the southern checkpoint separating Israel from the occupied West Bank. It is one of the last cities to be turned over to Palestinian police in concessions negotiated by assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Israel's acting prime minister, Shimon Peres, has pledged to keep to the timetable for the redeployment of Israeli defense forces agreed to before Rabin's Nov. 4 assassination.

Heightening concerns for security is a rumor that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat plans to come to Bethlehem for Christmas.

Residents are pleased that the president of the Palestinian National Authority may want to take part in the festivities, but they know Arafat has strong political opponents in the area. Rabin's assassination makes the situation even more tense, according to ENI.

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-- By ABP staff

Wingfield named interim editor of Kentucky Baptist paper

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Directors of Western Recorder have named Mark Wingfield interim editor of the Kentucky Baptist newspaper, effective Nov. 27.

Wingfield, 33, news director at the paper since 1991, will take over editorial duties while a search committee seeks a permanent editor. Marv Knox, Western Recorder editor since 1990, has resigned to become associate editor at the Baptist Standard, weekly newspaper of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The search committee hopes a permanent editor will be elected by late spring, said Frank Hatfield, committee chairman.

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-- By ABP staff

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