

Associated Baptist Press

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In this issue:

- **Alabama Baptists protest injunction banning school prayer**
- **Clinton discusses race with religious leaders**
- **Some states distance themselves from SBC, others seek compromise**
- **State-by-state highlights of annual conventions**

Alabama Baptists protest injunction banning school prayer

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (ABP) -- The Alabama Baptist Convention passed a resolution criticizing a federal judge's injunction banning prayers in the state's public schools.

Messengers to the Baptist group's Nov. 18-19 annual meeting in Huntsville overwhelmingly approved a resolution opposing the recent ruling by U.S. District Court Judge Ira DeMent that certain religious practices in a rural county in northeast Alabama were unconstitutional.

The resolution says the court order "inhibited our public institutions from reinforcing the values upon which our country was established." It asks messengers to support efforts by state leaders to challenge "overbroad and objectionable" portions of the order and to inform students of their First Amendment rights concerning religious freedom.

The resolution received about a two-thirds vote after debate.

In other business, the convention approved funding for the financially troubled University of Mobile, even though the university ignored a 1994 agreement not to send funds to its controversial branch in Nicaragua. A compromise recommendation urged that current students not be penalized for past mistakes.

While university officials reported improving finances, the state convention's audit committee cited "continuing grave concerns" over finances and a "lack of independence" by the university's auditor.

Some messengers contested the appointment of the newly elected coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Alabama to the executive committee of the state board of missions. The effort to block election of Mart Gray, minister of music at First Baptist Church in Elba, failed by 11 votes. Gray was elected to the full-time coordinator's post Nov. 11.

In other business, Alabama Baptists unanimously approved new bylaws which allow convention entities more freedom in buying, selling or leasing property and in selecting their own trustees. The change extends terms of last year's covenant agreement with Samford University to all convention agencies.

Clinton discusses race with religious leaders

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Within 50 years, no single race will comprise a majority in the United States, President Bill Clinton reminded approximately 120 religious leaders at a White House breakfast Nov. 20.

Such diversity will test the nation's ideals, Clinton told the religious leaders. "The scholars have said for 200 years that America was not about race or a place, it was about an idea," he said. "We're about to find out. And we had best be ready."

The religious leaders represented Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other faiths. During a nearly two-hour private meeting with Clinton, they discussed racial initiatives and other issues. Neither Clinton nor religious leaders brought up controversial topics including affirmative action and abortion, participants reported.

Clinton holds one or two ecumenical breakfasts a year. The last was in January.

During a portion of the meeting open to the press, Clinton said he wanted to discuss race with religious leaders because the administration has an obligation to think about issues which will affect the next generation. "I think it is a sign of strength if a society can examine its problems before they become a festering sore that people who are otherwise uninvolved have to face," he said.

Clinton said racial problems are evident in high juvenile-crime rates, an exploding prison population, disparities among credit practices of banks, access to higher education and earnings in the workplace.

"It is clear that our attempt to keep making progress toward the American dream requires us to make progress on the issues of race," Clinton said.

Clinton said the country "started with a Constitution that we couldn't live up to -- just like none of us live up perfectly to the holy Scriptures that we profess to believe in."

He explained: "After all, we said all men are created equal, but you can't vote unless you're a white male landowner. I mean that's where we started. We're a long way from that today."

The growing racial diversity in the country is leading to more diversity in America's religious landscape as well, Clinton said.

"We know what we're going to look like -- the demographics can tell us that. But they can't tell us what we're going to be like. That's a decision we have to make," the president said.

"And I am persuaded that we will be an infinitely better, stronger nation if that decision is informed by, driven by, embraced by and advanced by people of faith in our country."

One participant at the breakfast called the meeting "historic." Marvin Griffin, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, said the fact that the "chief executive officer of the nation called a group of religious leaders together and asked for their help in addressing the racial problem is historic."

Griffin commended the president for addressing welfare and work. He said it was appropriate that Clinton did not address affirmative action because a committee Clinton named to address the issue should be given time to do its work.

But Griffin said the United States should have some system, whether it is called affirmative action or not, to promote opportunity for African-Americans and other minorities. "Something more than talking about religious bigotry has to be done."

Some other participants at the White House meeting included: T.B. Boyd III, publisher of the National Baptist Union Review; Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ; Tony Campolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa.; James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee; Brian Harbour, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richardson, Texas; Dellanna O'Brien,

executive director of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union; Wintley Phipps, congressional liaison for the Seventh-day Adventist Church; Wallace Charles Smith, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington D.C.; and Progressive National Baptist Convention leaders Tyrone Pitts and Bennett Smith.

The White House did not furnish a list of participants by press time.

Clinton thanked the religious leaders for working together for enactment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and education guidelines to clarify what religious expression is allowed under current law by public-school officials and students.

The 1993 law bolstering protections for religious practice was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Clinton noted that he issued an executive order instructing federal officials to apply the principles of that law to protect the religious practices of federal employees.

Clinton also applauded the religious community for its work on the issue of global religious persecution.

He said religious groups provide important services for families and children in transition from welfare to work and applauded the religious leaders' involvement in his welfare-to-work initiatives.

Clinton noted that 3.8 million fewer people are on welfare than when he took office in 1993, and there are 2 million people fewer than after the enactment of welfare reform legislation in 1996.

The White House meeting came the morning after a deal had been struck between United Nations officials and the Iraqi government, apparently averting a military conflict. The conflict surfaced after officials in Iraq refused to allow Americans on U.N. weapons inspection teams to take part in U.N. inspections.

Clinton said that the United States "must remain and will remain resolute in our determination to prevent him [Iraqi President Saddam Hussein] from threatening his neighbors of the world with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons."

-30-

Some states distance themselves from SBC, others seek compromise

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- With conservatives firmly in control of the 15.6 million-member Southern Baptist Convention, at least two moderate state groups took steps this fall to declare greater independence from national leaders.

Texas Baptists, far and away the largest state group, approved historic changes that open the door for the 2.7 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas to enter ministries traditionally the scope of national entities.

The long-awaited report of a special Effectiveness/Efficiency Committee affirms the state convention's "autonomy" and authorizes it to appoint missionaries, offer new options for theological education, publish its own Sunday school literature and create mission partnerships with SBC and non-SBC groups, including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Conservatives denounced the changes, saying they were hostile to the SBC's conservative leadership, and renewed threats to break away into a separate state convention.

In Virginia, where conservatives have already broken away, the moderate-led Baptist General Association of Virginia approved a "Mission Virginia" plan for state and regional work.

Reggie McDonough, executive director of the BGAV, said the restructuring has less to do with controversy than with a larger trend toward decentralization. "The pattern of cooperation is moving from what I would call a linchpin style to more of a networking style," McDonough told Religion News Service. "We've always believed that each unit in the Baptist tradition has been autonomous and we've always acted that way."

Both the Virginia and Texas plans reflect a move away from "monolithic" cooperation toward "affinity groups," McDonough said.

A plan in Kentucky to allow moderates to circumvent giving to the SBC without sacrificing representation at the annual convention fell short of a required two-thirds majority.

In other states, meanwhile, moderates and conservatives sought to head off splits like those in Virginia and Texas.

For the third straight year, North Carolina, long a moderate stronghold, elected a conservative president who vowed to share leadership with a moderate-led general board. North Carolina Baptists established a special committee to foster relations between the two factions.

Louisiana moderates and conservatives agreed to a consensus presidential candidate, bringing respite to intense partisanship characterizing recent annual meetings.

Missouri Baptists elected a self-described "mediator" as president, following recent criticism from conservative groups targeting the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Missouri Baptist paper, "Word and Way."

Georgia Baptists also adopted a compromising mood, approving a nine-point plan aimed at healing a rift with Mercer University over a controversial book written by the school's president. A study committee found the book, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest," to contain heresy. The compromise stops short of calling for President Kirby Godsey's dismissal.

Those meetings contrasted to overt politicking in Tennessee, where a conservative was elected president following a campaign charging that the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship exercises undue control in the state.

Florida Baptists elected an avowed conservative as president, while a candidate with moderate leanings prevailed in Arkansas.

States controlled by conservatives include Florida, Indiana, Maryland/Delaware, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia. Moderates control Kentucky, Missouri, Texas and Virginia. Alabama, Arkansas and Illinois tend toward middle-of-the-road leaders. Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee and North Carolina are divided. Other smaller state groups, usually in newer-work areas, tend to be conservative in their outlook but are less active in convention politics.

Mention of this summer's SBC boycott of The Disney Co. was noticeably absent from state-convention resolutions this fall.

Some states, in fact, took steps to avoid resolutions, non-binding but often divisive statements that can address almost any topic. After adopting a slate of 20 conservative resolutions on a variety of social topics, Maryland/Delaware Baptists changed bylaws to ensure consensus reports by future resolutions committees. A reorganization adopted by California Southern Baptists eliminates its resolutions committee altogether.

Frequent topics of resolutions included gambling, abortion and religious persecution. Maryland/Delaware and New Mexico included resolutions dealing with evolution. The Maryland/Delaware statement protested the teaching of evolution while New Mexico Baptists affirmed a recent decision by the state board of education to allow discussion of differing views of human origins in classrooms.

Alabama Baptists, meanwhile, targeted a recent ruling by a federal judge halting certain religious practices in the state's schools, pledging support to state leaders challenging the injunction.

Also in state convention meetings this fall, California Baptists continued to debate whether to include a church with a woman pastor. The convention refused to seat messengers from 19th Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco. It was the fifth straight year for messengers from the church to be challenged. The previous three years the convention had voted to seat messengers over the objections of those who believe the Bible forbids women pastors.

The District of Columbia Convention, historically dually aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., added a third alignment, the predominantly African-American Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Colorado Baptists elected their first African-American officer, second vice president Willard Johnson of Denver.

-30-

State-by-state highlights of annual conventions

(ABP) -- Following are highlights of Baptist state convention meetings this fall.

-- Alabama: The Alabama Baptist Convention passed a resolution criticizing a judge's injunction banning prayers in the state's public schools and continued funding for the financially troubled University of Mobile. The resolution asked Baptists to support efforts by state leaders to overturn the ruling by federal judge Ira DeMent barring certain religious practices in schools. Messengers also approved a compromise recommendation to continue funding over the Mobile university despite a controversy over funding for the school's Latin American campus.

-- Alaska: The 51-year-old Alaska Baptist Convention endorsed a Southern Baptist Convention boycott of The Disney Co. and previewed a partnership with far east Russia scheduled to begin next year. The convention met Aug. 5-6 in Juneau.

-- Arizona: Arizona Southern Baptists approved a budget increasing support to the Southern Baptist Convention. One allocation was for "Portraits," a new publication to replace the state newspaper "Baptist Beacon."

-- Arkansas: A plan aimed at ending a dispute over trustee selection for Ouachita Baptist University stalled when bylaw changes failed to gain a two-thirds majority. Officials at Ouachita and the convention both said they desired to continue to relate to each other. Greg Kirksey, a moderate, won the convention's presidency over Ben Rowell, a conservative.

-- California: Southern Baptists in California adopted a reorganization plan, which includes changing the name of the California Southern Baptist Convention and eliminating divisive resolutions, and refused to grant messenger status to a church with a woman pastor. It was the fifth straight years that messengers from 19th Avenue Baptist Church were challenged. The last three years, the convention voted to seat the church's messengers over objections of those who believe the Bible forbids female pastors.

-- Canada: The Canadian Southern Baptist Convention approved a restructuring plan to put more resources into national church-planting efforts, while defunding associational directors of missions.

-- Colorado: Colorado Baptists elected Willard Johnson, associate pastor of the Baptist Temple in Denver as second vice president. He is the first African-American to hold office in the Colorado Baptist Convention.

-- Dakota: For the second straight year, the Dakota Southern Baptist Fellowship adopted a budget in excess of \$1 million.

-- District of Columbia: The District of Columbia Baptist Convention, historically dually aligned the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., added a third affiliation with the predominantly African-American Progressive National Baptist Convention.

-- Florida: Florida Baptists handled mostly routine business in a quiet meeting. Officers were elected by acclamation. Jerry Garrard, pastor of Celebration Baptist Church in Tallahassee, a conservative, is the convention's new president.

-- Georgia: Georgia Baptists approved a nine-point plan aimed at healing a rift with Mercer University over a controversial book written by Mercer President Kirby Godsey. A study committee found the book, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest," to contain heresy. The compromise stops short of calling for Godsey's dismissal.

-- Illinois: Illinois Baptists targeted 100 towns in the northern part of the state for new churches. They also passed resolutions opposing gambling and calling for increased ministry in light of welfare reforms.

-- Indiana: Indiana Baptists changed their bylaws to ensure representation for ethnic and language minorities.

-- Iowa: Iowa Southern Baptists held their second annual meeting since becoming a state convention. A budget increased support to the Southern Baptist Convention by 1 percent.

-- Kansas-Nebraska: Southern Baptists in Kansas-Nebraska heard challenges to share the gospel and elected a president by acclamation.

-- Kentucky: Kentucky Baptists defeated a constitutional change that would have allowed moderates to circumvent giving to the conservative-led Southern Baptist Convention without sacrificing the number of messengers they earn to the state convention. The plan received a majority but fell well short of the required two-thirds vote.

-- Louisiana: After fierce infighting in recent presidential races, Louisiana Baptist moderates and conservatives agreed on a consensus candidate this year. One observer called the election of Bob Anderson, a retired pastor, "an absolute miracle."

-- Maryland/Delaware: Conservative resolutions overshadowed other business at the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware. Messengers adopted 20 non-binding resolutions on a variety of social issues including partial-birth abortion, support for the Disney boycott and against the teaching of evolution.

-- Minnesota-Wisconsin: Minnesota-Wisconsin Southern Baptists passed resolutions calling for religious freedom for Jews and thanking Texas Baptists for starting mission work there.

-- Mississippi: Mississippi Baptists passed resolutions opposing abortion, committing to prayer for persecuted Christians around the world and encouraging worship over entertainment on Sundays. Dean Register, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, was elected president in a three-way race.

-- Missouri: Missouri Baptists elected a self-described "mediator" as president -- Wendell Page, pastor of First Baptist Church in Lee's Summit. Two motions to move the 2000 annual meeting site from a Marriott-owned resort over the corporation's ties to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were defeated. Motions instructing the convention staff to cease forwarding church gifts to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and requiring elected leaders to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement were ruled out of order.

-- Montana: The Montana Southern Baptist Fellowship adopted its second \$1-million budget at an Oct. 8-9 annual meeting in East Helena.

-- Nevada: Nevada Baptists approved a record \$2.17 million budget, which increases support to the Southern Baptist Convention by a quarter-percent.

-- New England: New England Baptists studied prayer and elected officers by acclamation. T.W. Hunt, author of "The Mind of Christ," led Bible studies on prayer and discipleship.

-- New Mexico: New Mexico Baptists adopted their first \$3 million budget in a peaceful meeting. Resolutions opposed gambling and alcohol advertising and affirmed a recent decision by the state board of education allowing the teaching of "options" regarding human origins.

-- North Carolina: For the third straight year, a conservative won the presidency of the North Carolina Baptist Convention, a former moderate stronghold. The convention also approved a "fraternal relationship" with Meredith College, which voted this year to select its own trustees. Historically, the state convention has chosen trustees to lead the women's school in Raleigh.

-- Northwest: Southern Baptists celebrated the 50th anniversary of Southern Baptist work in the Northwest and adopted a resolution pledging to uphold "biblical standards of moral and ethical health" in their communities.

-- Oklahoma: Oklahoma Baptists entered a missions partnership with Malawi and passed a resolution against gambling.

-- South Carolina: South Carolina Baptists passed a resolution against gambling, including support for a move to outlaw video poker.

-- Tennessee: Tennessee Baptists chose a conservative president, topping off a campaign in which conservatives complained a moderate minority -- specifically the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- holds too much power on the convention's executive board.

-- Texas: Texas Baptists adopted a far-reaching plan which observers say redefines the state's relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention. Critics say the plan, which opens the door for Texas to produce its own Sunday school literature and send foreign missionaries, distances the moderate state from the conservative-led SBC. Texas Baptists chose Russell Dilday, a former seminary president who was fired by conservatives, as their president.

-- Utah-Idaho: Southern Baptists in Utah and Idaho eagerly anticipated this summer's Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Salt Lake City as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "Through God's divine intervention, we have the chance to reach this area as never before," said Jim Harding, executive director of the Utah-Idaho Southern Baptist Convention. Harding also reported the convention will move into new offices debt-free by the end of the year.

-- Virginia: Virginia Baptists adopted a plan for state missions geared to be more responsive to churches and to move beyond denominational controversy. Absent from the meeting were conservative churches which recently formed a separate state convention.

-- West Virginia: West Virginia Baptists increased support for the Southern Baptist Convention and unanimously approved a resolution opposing gambling.

-- Wyoming: Wyoming Baptists elected their first lay president in the state convention's 14-year history. Jim Starr, a member of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Rock Springs, was unopposed.

Information on annual meetings in Hawaii, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania-South Jersey and Puerto Rico was unavailable when this story went to press.

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-- Compiled by Bob Allen

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