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Texas Baptists chart two courses for future

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- While celebrating 150 years of cooperative work in the past, Texas Baptists Nov. 9-10 charted divergent paths into the future.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas solidified its resolve to operate autonomously, bucking the conservative domination of the Southern Baptist Convention but not committing itself exclusively to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a national moderate movement.

Meanwhile, the most conservative wing of the BGCT, after attending the Nov. 9-10 annual session in Houston, then broke away Nov. 10 to form a separate state convention they said will be more loyal to the SBC.

An ad hoc effort to bring reconciliation between the two streams of Texas Baptists did not immediately stem the separation, instead giving way to talk of a need for spiritual -- if not organizational -- reconciliation.

"We must have the courage to recognize that Texas Baptist life will never be like it used to be," associational director of missions Paul Saylor said in the BGCT's convention sermon. "We do not have the luxury of grieving and longing for the good old days ... Energy must now be exerted toward discovering new ways to accomplish our goals."

A series of four key votes this year shaped the 2.5 million-member state convention's continued positioning of itself in contrast to the SBC. During the meeting in Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center, messengers:

-- Gave final approval to a constitutional amendment that makes qualification to send more than two messengers to the convention's annual session dependent in part on financial support for BGCT causes.

-- Re-elected without opposition a slate of moderate officers, including president Russell Dilday, who in 1994 was fired by SBC conservatives as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

-- Soundly turned back an attempt to defund the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a Washington-based religious-liberty organization which was defunded by SBC conservatives in 1991 but has remained in the BGCT budget for \$63,000 annually.

-- Adopted a resolution on the "biblical equality" of men and women that disagrees with a controversial amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement enacted by the SBC last summer.

Texas Baptist moderates and conservatives have been at odds since 1979, when conservatives began a successful movement to gain control of the SBC. Ironically, that conservative movement on the national level began in Houston, where the SBC held its annual meeting that year. And it was orchestrated by two Texas natives.

While the movement launched in Houston 19 years ago has changed the face of the SBC and many other state Baptist conventions dramatically, it has failed to gain a foothold in Texas.

The tactics used to gain control of the SBC were "exposed" in Texas, and the majority of Texas Baptists could not be swayed by them, Dilday said in a news conference soon after his re-election as BGCT president. "It was a matter of people waking up and saying what happened in the SBC isn't going to happen here."

Dilday cited a "fierce independence" in Texas that prevents anyone other than God from telling Texas Baptists what to do.

Members of the split-off group, the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, don't see it that way. They place a premium on loyalty to the Southern Baptist Convention, the group's administrative director said at its inaugural convention.

"I'm a Southern Baptist first and a Texas Baptist second," Ronnie Yarber declared. "We want to maintain and preserve strong financial support for the Southern Baptist Convention."

While the BGCT's failure to get in step with the changed direction of the SBC caused some conservatives to break away, it also energized some moderates to look beyond the state's borders. At a Nov. 10 breakfast meeting sponsored by the moderate group Texas Baptists Committed, Baylor University Chancellor Herbert Reynolds proposed that Texas become the central base for creation of a new Baptist Convention of the Americas. This expanded convention could stretch from the lower tip of South America to the northern reaches of Alaska, he said.

Others had speculated over the last year that the BGCT could become a new national convention of sorts, creating a third way different from both the SBC and the Fellowship. Asked about this possibility during his news conference, Dilday downplayed it.

"The BGCT will become more of a full-service convention, ... but that doesn't mean we would become some kind of national denominational entity," he said.

Dilday acknowledged the relationship between the BGCT and SBC will continue to change but said suggesting Texas Baptists will "divorce" themselves from the SBC is not appropriate. "We've never been married," he explained.

The change in the way churches gain messenger representation to BGCT annual meetings was approved by a vote of 71 percent to 29 percent.

The changes were proposed last year as part of the far-reaching report of an "Effectiveness/Efficiency" committee. All other aspects of that report received final approval last year, but constitutional changes require a two-thirds majority vote at two consecutive annual meetings.

The final vote on the messenger-qualification amendment this year was 3,342 to 1,383. Given the 4,725 legal ballots cast in the vote, the minimum required to pass the two-thirds threshold was 3,146, meaning the amendment passed by a margin of 196 votes.

Although opponents of the change called it an unfair "poll tax" and lobbied against its passage, a BGCT leader told messengers adopting the changes was "the fair thing to do."

"Cooperation is more than just what we do here at the convention. ... Cooperation means funding the operation," said Charles Davenport, pastor of First Church of Tulia and chairman of the BGCT administrative committee.

Davenport referred to a sheet handed to messengers as they entered the convention hall, a handout produced by the conservative group Baptists With a Mission, as "absolutely inaccurate" in asserting that adopting the change would negatively impact 80 percent of churches.

"That simply is not so," Davenport said. Based on research by the BGCT treasurer's office, "the maximum impact would be affecting 7.5 percent of churches."

Messengers made several attempts at amending the constitutional change, each of which failed on a show-of-ballots vote. The most novel amendment would have substituted the word "baptisms" for "dollars," thus linking the number of messengers a church may have to the number of people it baptized in the previous year rather than the amount of money it gave to the BGCT.

The constitutional change as adopted allows every Texas Baptist church a minimum of two messengers, regardless of how much money has been given. Churches then may qualify for two additional messengers by giving at least \$250 to BGCT causes. Beyond that, additional messengers, up to a maximum of 25 total, may be gained for each additional 100 members and each additional \$1,000 given to the Texas budget.

The effort to defund the Baptist Joint Committee failed in the opening session of the convention's annual meeting. Later in the same session, the state Christian Life Commission presented its distinguished service award to BJC Executive Director James Dunn.

The resolution on "biblical equality" of men and women was one of seven resolutions proposed by the BGCT's resolutions committee and adopted by the convention after debate.

Although never referencing the SBC's change to its "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement last June, the language of the resolution contradicts the most controversial aspect of the SBC statement.

The BGCT resolution says males and females both are "created in the image of God" and both share responsibilities for caring for their children and being stewards over all creation.

It further adds that both men and women are to "submit to one another as a witness to the world of the transforming power of servant leadership."

In contrast, the SBC statement says husbands have the God-given responsibility to "provide for, to protect and to lead" their families while wives are to "submit ... graciously to the servant leadership" of their husbands.

In other miscellaneous business, messengers formally prayed for Baptists splitting off from the BGCT to form a new state convention, declined to revisit an executive board action regarding an Austin church which ordained a homosexual man as a deacon and declined to enter a discussion about abortion.

The BGCT adopted a 1999 budget of \$49.74 million for Texas causes, an increase of 4 percent over the current budget. Churches are allowed to choose one of four options for sending through the BGCT contributions to various world mission causes. Those pass-through contributions are figured in addition to the \$49.74 million to be used in Texas.

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'Conservative' Baptists start separate Texas convention

By Marv Knox

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Texas conservatives capped two decades of frustration Nov. 10, when 537 messengers from 183 churches split off from the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"We broke camp. We're gone. We ain't going back," the group's president, Miles Seaborn, declared at the inaugural meeting of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention at Woodforest Baptist Church in Houston.

Southern Baptists of Texas was started by some Texas Baptists who have supported the transformation -- described by different factions as both a "conservative resurgence" and a "fundamentalist takeover" -- of the Southern Baptist Convention during the past 20 years.

They have repeatedly criticized the 2.7 million-member Texas convention for not affirming the SBC's rightward shift. They accuse Texas leaders of trying to distance the state convention from the national body. In recent years, they lost vote after vote to determine the state convention's future.

And most recently, during a break in the BGCT annual session in downtown Houston, they formed a separate state convention.

"We're here because we have chosen to remain Southern Baptist," explained Ronnie Yarber, Southern Baptists of Texas' administrative director. "I made the choice to be a Southern Baptist. I don't apologize for being Southern Baptist."

"These are the real Texas Baptists," proclaimed E.L. Pennington, chairman of the new convention's budget committee and a retired pastor from Athens.

Seaborn encouraged participants in the new convention to heed the advice of God to the ancient Israelites who had wandered in the desert for 40 years: "Break camp and advance."

"This is one of those God deals," Seaborn said. "We have been in a spiritual battle for years and years."

"Every one of us is a warrior," he said, in the struggle to preserve "God's inerrant word."

"But some of the battles are past," Seaborn added. "You're not going to hear people going back and living past battles. ... God's given us a word to advance, and we're going to advance."

The group's leadership heard that word a year ago, Seaborn said. In 1997, BGCT messengers overwhelmingly approved an Effectiveness/Efficiency Committee report calling on the state convention to increase its ministry in areas typically reserved for the national convention. Hours later, Southern Baptists of Texas supporters gathered to talk about a split.

"God swept over us in that hotel," Seaborn said of the sensation toward separation. "There was not one person who resisted, because God spoke."

Since then, the new convention's supporters have signed on freely, he added. "Nowhere in this state has anyone been coerced to join this fellowship. We have not made one phone call. ... But for many of us, we have said, 'No more!' And I tell you, not one penny of my tithe is going anywhere I think is ungodly."

The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention will be built on theology, missions and methodology, said its new executive director, Jim Richards.

Richards, director of missions for Northwest Baptist Association in Rogers, Ark., for the past three and a half years, was presented to the new convention at the Houston meeting. A Louisiana native, he was a pastor in Baton Rouge before going to Arkansas and has been chairman of the SBC Christian Life Commission.

"Theological agreement" will be the first foundation of the new convention, Richards said.

"We as a convention agree in the inerrancy of the word of God," he stressed. The convention also will "recapture the true image of the person of God," he added, noting God is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, holy and male. "He is a gender-specific being," Richards declared.

The convention also will emphasize the "exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ," he said. "Salvation is through faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone."

Primacy of the local church will be an additional emphasis, he explained. "Jesus started a local church," he said. "Headquarters is not in Dallas or in Nashville. It's in heaven and the local church."

The second level of the new convention will be "missiological activity," Richards reported. "Our missiological activity is promoting new churches and promoting evangelism."

The convention will try to start 550 churches in 10 years and also strengthen current churches and support church staffs, he said.

"Methodological approach" will comprise the third level of the convention, Richards added.

"We will work with all those who are supportive of the current leadership of the SBC," he said. "They are our friends if they are friends of the current leadership of the SBC."

"Those who depart theologically will be identified and called to repent," he pledged.

About recruiting affiliated congregations, he said: "We're not trying to proselyte, but we're opening the front of the church for transfer membership. ... To the foes of Southern Baptists of Texas, we say, 'We're not in competition with you, but we've been called to contrast you.'"

Southern Baptist Convention leaders have been waiting for the new convention to form, reported Dan Grindstaff, pastor of South Park Baptist Church in Grand Prairie and chairman of the group's denominational relations committee.

"We have been in touch with every [SBC] agency head," Grindstaff said. "Every one said they can't come on board and give evidence of being part of a split of a state convention. But every one said, 'After Nov. 10, we are with you.'"

During business sessions, the new convention:

-- Ratified the organization's constitution and bylaws.

-- Approved a 1999 budget of \$903,500. Half that amount will be sent to the SBC. The balance is to support church starts, an evangelism conference, the convention's newsletter, staff salaries and expenses, meetings and administration.

-- Elected Stan Coffey, pastor of San Jacinto Baptist Church in Amarillo, as new president. Other new officers are Casey Perry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Malakoff, first vice president; David Fannin, pastor of Nassau Bay Baptist Church in Houston, second vice president; and Don Workman, lay member of Southcrest Baptist Church in Lubbock, recording secretary.

-- Confirmed a full slate of committees, including an executive board and committees for business and finance, nominations, credentials, education and church programs, ethics and religious liberty, evangelism and outreach, minister-church relations, and missions and church planting.

-- Distributed 1,000 promotional recruitment videos, designed to be shown to churches that are thinking about affiliating with the new convention.

-- Voted to name Seaborn president emeritus for the first year of the convention's existence. A vote to name the organization's state missions offering after Seaborn and his wife was referred to its executive board.

-- Passed resolutions condemning abortion and homosexuality.

The abortion resolution noted "all human life is sacred, specifically human life in the womb." And it noted all decisions regarding abortion "should be governed by the same ethical understanding."

The homosexuality resolution placed the new convention on record opposing the "practice of homosexuality." It also pledged the convention would "withdraw fellowship from any church that condones the practice" of homosexuality or "has pastors or deacons that are practicing homosexuals."

The new convention's first meeting attracted more than 1,300 participants, announced Danny Souder, pastor of Northlake Baptist Church in Dallas and chairman of the credentials committee. In addition to the 537 registered messengers, 289 non-voting guests also signed in, he said.

The messengers came from 183 churches, including 89 churches that affiliated with the convention the day of the annual meeting, he said.

Southern Baptists of Texas leaders have said about 60 percent of their congregations also are "dually aligned" with the BGCT, and 40 percent are "uniquely aligned" with the new convention.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas was founded in 1886. It relates to about 5,700 churches that have a total of 2.7 million members. Despite some of their differences with the SBC, Texas Baptists remain the largest contributors to the SBC, providing more than \$40 million annually to the national convention.

Baylor chancellor outlines dream for Baptist Convention of the Americas

By Marv Knox

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Texas Baptists should consider creating a Baptist Convention of the Americas to embrace like-minded Christians and evangelize the Western Hemisphere, Baylor University Chancellor Herbert Reynolds said Nov. 10.

A hemispheric convention is needed because of the region's burgeoning population, Reynolds told more than 1,100 participants at Texas Baptists Committed's annual breakfast meeting Nov. 10. It's also needed because barriers of identity, polity and theology have divided Texas Baptists from the Southern Baptist Convention, he stressed.

Such a convention is possible because technological advances now minimize enormous distances and other logistical barriers, he noted. And it's affordable if Texas Baptists channel the money they currently contribute to the SBC into the new venture, he said.

"We find ourselves at the point of a schism in Texas Baptist life," Reynolds noted, citing the departure of a group called Southern Baptists of Texas, who formed a new convention just hours after he spoke. They left in frustration after failing to convince the Baptist General Convention of Texas to march in step with the SBC, which has turned sharply to the right during the past two decades.

"There seems to be no doubt that this present circumstance has arisen because the majority of Texas Baptists ... have made it clear that Texas must and will chart its own course to stay true to our mission by avoiding the destructive influences of the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention," he said.

"Texas Baptists have been and are one of a kind, fiercely determined to maintain our integrity, strongly committed to fulfilling our purpose and striving mightily to achieve formidable goals -- as a fully autonomous state convention."

Two groups -- supporters of recent developments in the SBC and a "reconciliation movement" comprised of "well-intentioned pastors and laypeople who continue to believe that the fundamentalists do not want to be divisive" -- have attempted to thwart the BGCT's "destiny that might lie quite apart from the Southern Baptist Convention," Reynolds noted.

"One might reasonably conclude that the two parallel movements we have been encountering in Texas are just further ploys" of ultra-conservatives who gained control of the SBC in the past two decades, he said.

Those SBC leaders have a vested interest in holding onto the "annual tribute" Texas Baptists provide to the national convention -- \$43 million in budget and missions contributions, he said, adding they also covet the "possibility of taking over Texas and all our institutions and agencies."

Reconciliation will not happen, because SBC leaders will not be reconciled, Reynolds charged. "There is not even the remotest possibility that the fundamentalists in Baptist life will abandon their world view for any kind of meaningful and lasting reconciliation, since giving up power and control would be like the loss of life itself to those who are the most psychologically afflicted," he said.

Consequently, Texas Baptists already are "two denominations now -- mainstream Texas Baptists as contrasted with the Southern Baptists of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention," Reynolds said. So, the time has come to look ahead, he added.

"We should not look backward or sideways with animosity toward the SBC or the Southern Baptists of Texas or any other group, but rather we should look upward and onward at what we can do in the name of Christ in our generation as an act of stewardship toward future generations of free and faithful Baptists," he advised.

"Texas is the only state that has the history, the freedom, the strength of numbers, the finances and the soundness of identity, polity and theology to not only row our own boat but to also lead out in partnering with other states, associations and churches in expanding upon our witness to a much greater geographical territory than ever before envisioned."

Two significant factors -- strength and need -- form the context of a possible Baptist Convention of the Americas, Reynolds related.

Texas Baptists contribute almost \$100 million annually for cooperative missions and ministries, he reported. Almost \$48 million of that amount goes for worldwide causes, with \$43.3 million earmarked to the SBC and \$2.4 million to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, he said.

"It becomes readily apparent that Texas is neither dependent on any external body for the extensive work within our state, nor for any larger endeavor that we should want to undertake beyond our own borders," he said. The state of Texas has the 11th-largest economy in the world, and the BGCT can be seen as the ninth-largest Protestant denomination in America, he added.

"Furthermore, there may be a number of other states that would partner with us in very short order to engage in exciting initiatives undertaken in a spirit of freedom," he speculated.

Moreover, the needs are great, Reynolds stressed. The Americas are home to 800 million people, and the population likely will reach 1 billion soon, he reported, noting up to 400 million of them are not Christians.

"While maintaining the autonomy and integrity of our state convention and that of any partnering states, it might well be possible to create a Baptist Convention of the Americas with a very lean staff, where the outsourcing of many services and functions could maximize the use of our financial resources," he said.

Several factors could shape that possibility, he added. They include:

-- Texas is well-suited to house the offices of such a convention, with both a good location and excellent airports in Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston.

-- Telecommunications advances "make it possible to engage in teleconferencing, in distance learning and in the presentation of a variety of programs by telephone lines or satellites 24 hours per day."

-- "A small, high-tech staff could provide all kinds of ideas and support for small, medium and large churches." Resources could include training for worship, Bible study, continuing education and even daily devotionals.

-- Missions could be innovative and designed to fit the context of the opportunities. They also could be well-funded "with the \$26 million per year now going to the SBC" for its missions causes.

"With the ever-increasing world population, we must develop entirely new strategies for the spread of the gospel as we enter the 21st century," he said. The 648 missionaries from Texas currently appointed by the SBC International Mission Board could provide "the nucleus of a new and vital force for mission work."

-- Seminaries and theology schools at Baptist universities could be contracted to provide theological education. "For the \$11.4 million tribute Texas is now sending to the six SBC seminaries, we could ... support a very sizable group of students," he said.

-- The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, the BGCT Christian Life Commission and other state Christian life commissions could provide leadership in ethics and moral concerns.

-- "The Woman's Missionary Union should feel right at home with a Baptist Convention of Americas, whose people have been so supportive of these fine women during the times of travail they have experienced during the past decade," he predicted.

-- Four or five assembly sites should be developed for group gatherings.

-- Annual meetings "might involve 100,000 or more persons for fellowship, reports and planning," he said, noting corporate mail proxies or electronic voting could be established "to allow as many eligible members of affiliated churches as possible to vote ... with built-in safeguards to prevent a small group from usurping the will of the people."

-- The new convention could partner with the Baptist World Alliance "if that body remains free of the forces of fundamentalism."

A view toward the future is vital, Reynolds concluded.

"All of us need to leave the difficulties of the last 20 years behind us and embrace a far-reaching vision to win the world for Christ and to serve others to the glory of God," he said. "God help us to advance the cause of Christ by remaining a bastion of freedom for Baptists and for people everywhere."

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Arkansas Baptists request prayer for Clinton, Congress, at convention

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. (ABP) -- In light of a White House sex scandal and calls for his Little Rock church to withdraw fellowship from him, Arkansas Baptists passed resolutions asking churches to pray for President Bill Clinton and affirming the right of individual congregations to decide for themselves in matters of church discipline.

During their Nov. 3-4 annual convention on the campus of Ouachita Baptist University, which also included a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, messengers rejected another resolution offered by an individual messenger aimed at defending calls by Southern Baptist leaders for the former Arkansas governor's home church to punish him for his actions.

A resolution titled "Commitment to Prayer" called on Arkansas Baptists to pray for the president as he "faces the challenge of rebuilding his character," asking God "to bring redemption, healing and righteousness for the president, the Congress and the nation."

The resolution noted that Clinton, a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, has "expressed repentance for his actions, sadness for the consequences of his sin on his family, friends and church family, and asked forgiveness."

The resolution also asked Arkansas Baptists to pray for members of Congress as they "confront the constitutional task of determining the legal consequences of the president's actions." Congress is considering impeachment of Clinton, who is accused of transgressions including lying under oath to cover up an inappropriate relationship he had with Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern.

Other non-binding resolutions affirmed the autonomy of local churches and the "priesthood" of believers.

Leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention including SBC president Paige Patterson have called for Clinton's resignation. Another Southern Baptist leader, seminary president Albert Mohler, has commented that in addition to resigning, Clinton should be "disciplined," or reprimanded, by his local church. Critics have charged Mohler's statement violated the Baptist tradition of local church autonomy by attempting to advise Immanuel on how to relate to a church member.

The resolution affirming local church autonomy, which passed on a voice vote, resolved to "strongly affirm the principle of local church autonomy and call upon Arkansas Baptists to uphold this important Baptist distinctive."

The resolution on "Soul Competency and the Priesthood of the Believers" stated that "the doctrines of the competency of the soul under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the priesthood of believers are distinctive and foundational convictions of Baptists."

Following a resolutions committee report, Leroy Wagner, pastor of Percy Baptist Church, resubmitted a resolution from the floor that he previously gave to the committee. It called on Baptist churches to "speak the truth in love" when confronting sin and maintained that SBC leaders stating their opinions on an issue does not infringe on a church's self governance.

While "the authority for church discipline resides totally within the local church," the proposed resolution said, "this in no way precludes those outside the church from addressing scriptural matters in a prophetic voice."

Messengers rejected Wagner's resolution, which drew a stern response from resolutions committee chairman Mike Seabaugh. "Church discipline is only a part of the process of ... bringing sinners to repentance," said Seabaugh pastor of First Baptist Church in Camden. "It is not to embarrass ... other people. It is to bring about forgiveness and repentance of those seeking the Lord."

All but three of the resolutions submitted to the committee dealt with some facet of the Clinton scandal, Seabaugh said.

In other business, messengers re-elected Greg Kirksey to a second one-year term as president. He is director of Covenant Connections at Alexander Youth Services Center.

In a sharp break with longstanding Arkansas Baptist tradition, however, Kirksey, a moderate, was challenged for a second one-year term by Barry King, pastor of Tumbling Shoals Baptist Church in Heber Springs. In a ballot vote, Kirksey was re-elected by a vote of 569 to 149, gaining 79 percent of the votes cast.

Following two years of controversy about the selection of trustees for Ouachita Baptist University, the convention passed new rules requiring its nominating committee to consult with trustees of state-convention agencies before recommending new members to their boards of trustees.

The change follows a move by the nominating committee in 1996 to reject all the names of potential trustees suggested by officials at the Arkadelphia school and instead recommend to the state convention its own slate. Ouachita countered by voting to revert to a self-perpetuating board of trustees. The convention retaliated by placing funds budgeted for the school in escrow.

A reconciliation committee agreed on a compromise last year, but it did not receive the two-thirds vote needed to amend the state convention's constitution. This year, another study committee attempted to resolve the impasse through new guidelines not requiring a constitutional change.

Under the new rules, the nominating committee will select potential trustees from the state at large, and then will meet with representatives of agency boards of trustees to compile a second list of potential nominees. The nominating committee will make final recommendations from both lists, with the understanding that alternates can be nominated from the floor during the annual convention.

A proposal to remove a clause in the state convention's incorporation articles banning "alien immersion" and "open communion" in Arkansas Baptist churches failed to receive a required two-thirds majority.

Don Nall, pastor of First Baptist Church of Batesville, proposed the amendment. He said the clause violates Baptist church governance by dictating how congregations should interpret the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement. The convention voted 433-232 in favor of the proposal, 10 votes short of two thirds.

The convention also approved a \$17.6 million budget for 1999, the same amount as this year's spending plan. Funds in the convention's unified budget will be split between state and SBC causes, with just under 42 percent going to the SBC, 30 percent for ministries of the state convention's executive board and 28 percent for Arkansas Baptist entities and related ministries.

Next year's convention is scheduled Nov. 9-10 at First Baptist Church in Springdale.

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-- By ABP staff. Adapted from reporting by Trennis Henderson and Russ Dilday.

North Carolina Baptists protest sale of alcohol at Wake Forest

By Bob Allen

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- North Carolina Baptists voiced disapproval of a policy allowing beer to be sold at Wake Forest University but declined to begin a process to sever a fraternal relationship with the Winston-Salem school.

Meeting Nov. 9-11 in Winston-Salem, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina passed a resolution affirming colleges and universities in the state that prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages on campus and encouraging "all institutions of higher education to adopt similar policies."

The resolution did not mention Wake Forest by name but was directed at the university started by the state convention in 1834 but now governed by an independent board of trustees. Earlier in the meeting, the convention's general board reported on a motion concerning Wake Forest's alcohol policy made last year.

Ray Davis, pastor of Green Meadows Baptist Church in Mocksville, made a motion last year calling for a study of the convention's fraternal relationship with Wake Forest and to express "displeasure" about alcohol sales on campus.

According to a report at this year's meeting, two convention leaders met with university officials. They conveyed the convention's "concern and disappointment over the sale of beverage alcohol" at Wake Forest and urged the university to reverse its decision on the matter.

However, the report continued, the convention's constitution spells out that "the governance in the university is solely in the hands" of the school's trustees.

"It is our sincere hope and prayer that the university will one day reconsider the wisdom of its decision to sell beverage alcohol on campus," the report said. "Until such time, we hope that North Carolina Baptists and the university can continue to work together educating students and celebrating the positive good born out of our continuing relationship."

A few days before this year's meeting, Davis told the Winston-Salem Journal he intended to make a motion this year to terminate the convention's fraternal relationship with the university. After praying about it over the weekend, however, he said he changed his mind and recommended the milder resolution, which he said, "gives Wake Forest a chance to reconsider and come back."

The 1.2 million-member state convention provides about \$45,000 for jointly-funded projects with the university, which in turn contributes about \$500,000 a year for scholarships and other programs that benefit North Carolina Baptist students.

In other business, about 4,000 messengers heard an interim report from a commission on cooperation appointed last year to improve relations between moderate and conservative factions in the state. The group will next year recommend "some change in our structure" to better reflect the state's diversity, said David Crocker, the commission's co-chair.

Currently the state's general board, which holds most of the power to recommend key appointments and set policy, is controlled by moderates, while the last two presidents have been conservatives.

"What we're trying to do is to find a way to perpetuate fairness in this state convention," said Greg Mathis, past president of the convention and the commission's other co-chair.

"Baptists across the state of all different stripe and affiliation have been sending a strong message that the time is now to find a way to bring the Baptist family together in North Carolina," Crocker said. "We are tired of some of the debates and divisions that have characterized our family life in the last several years."

This year's officers were elected without opposition to a traditional second one-year term. High Point pastor Mac Brunson is convention president.

Another resolution opposed a state lottery in North Carolina.

The convention approved a record \$32.5 million budget while also adopting a fourth option for churches contributing to the state's Cooperative Program unified budget. The plan would send a larger percentage to the Southern Baptist Convention than the other three plans, keep fewer dollars at the state convention and also fund special missions projects and Fruitland Bible Institute.

The state convention formalized multiple giving options in 1991, introducing one plan dividing undesignated gifts 65 percent for the state convention and 35 percent for the SBC and another with a reduced amount forwarded to the SBC and setting aside 15 percent for missions projects. The second plan was adjusted later to add support for new divinity schools at Gardner-Webb and Campbell universities. A third plan, added in 1995, provides support for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship instead of the SBC.

The new "Plan D" will divide gifts as follows: state convention, 50 percent; SBC, 32 percent; 13 percent for special missions projects; and 7 percent for Fruitland.

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Conservatives dominate Missouri convention

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Following a campaign by an association with a stated goal of moving the Missouri Baptist Convention from a "center-left" to a "center-right" majority, conservatives swept offices up for election at the convention's Nov. 2-4 annual meeting in St. Louis.

Gary Taylor, pastor of First Baptist Church in O'Fallon, won the state convention presidency easily over Bill Miller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Farmington, by a vote of 1,282-744. Conservatives also captured two vice presidencies. Elected as new recording secretary was layman Kerry Messer, a leader in "Project 1000," an effort to mobilize conservative messengers that contributed to a record convention crowd.

Project 1000's director, Roger Moran, is a member of the church where the new convention president is pastor. Taylor said he shares a "commonality of belief" with the movement but that he does not intend to divide the convention. "I am the president of all Missouri Baptists," said Taylor, who organized a meeting earlier this year bringing leaders of the state's moderate and conservative factions together.

Moran said the Project 1000 effort was aimed at encouraging conservatives who had stopped attending the state convention. He said the majority of Missouri Baptists are morally, socially and theologically conservative and, if properly informed, would send a message to the convention's leadership about tolerance of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. "And it appears to me that's what they've done," he said.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship supports its own missionaries as well as a variety of other ministries for moderate churches seeking alternatives to Southern Baptist Convention programs, which are controlled by conservatives.

After disappointing election results in the previous year's state convention meeting, some conservatives talked of starting a separate state convention. Moran said he argued that this was not the right thing to do until those seeking change had exhausted the process of trying to influence the MBC through the democratic process.

Asked what was next for Project 1000, Moran said the group's stated goal to turn the leadership of the Missouri Baptist Convention from a "center-left" majority to a "center-right" majority is a five-year plan. "We'll continue to do what we have been doing," he said.

He, too, voiced a conciliatory tone. "We're going to be sweet-spirited. If we don't have a smooth transition, then I will be heartbroken."

"There's room for diversity in the Missouri Baptist Convention, but within the parameters of belief," Moran said -- unlike the CBF, he added, "where anything goes."

Conservatives also dominated other convention business, some of which was characterized by contentious debate. The convention rejected an effort to require a 75 percent vote on resolutions, instead of a simple majority. Moderate Bart Tichenor, who suggested the change, said it would help the convention steer clear of divisive issues.

Messengers also rejected a motion to have members rotate on and off the resolutions committee during a three-year cycle. Currently an entire resolutions committee is named each year.

They also adopted a resolution in favor of home schooling that was not recommended by a resolutions committee. The committee received 32 resolutions submitted by messengers but reported only seven, citing time constraints and a desire not to polarize the convention.

"The only reason some of these things are so divisive is because some of our churches have gotten so weak-kneed," Richard Stone disagreed during debate. He attended the convention as a messenger from First Baptist Church of Winfield.

The convention also rejected a plan to reduce the appointive powers of the convention president and replaced a moderate nominee to the state's Christian Life Commission with another person nominated from the floor. Rudy Pulido, pastor of Southwest Baptist Church in St. Louis, was nominated for the post by a committee. After questions about his views on abortion and ties to Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, the convention replaced him with David Mason, pastor of Green Valley Baptist Church in St. Joseph.

Pulido said he was not asked about his views on abortion, but he described he and the churches he has served as "pro-whole life," meaning that life is sacred from conception till death.

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-- By ABP staff. Adapted from reporting by Tim Palmer and Rob Marus.

'Brand loyalty' taking a back seat for people choosing a church, Barna says

By Marv Knox

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- Doctrine, care and sermons top Americans' priorities when they choose a church, according to a new study by the Barna Research Group.

Americans have discarded church "brand loyalty" and now base their church affiliation on a range of factors that suit their preferences, tastes and needs, reported George Barna, president of the polling organization and a researcher of religious trends.

"A century ago, the church that most Americans attended was virtually arranged for them at birth," Barna said. "Most people went to the church of their parents, which was the same church their grandparents attended."

"Things have changed," he observed. "Church loyalty is a modern casualty."

For example, more than one in seven adults changes churches annually, he said. And one in six "attends a carefully chosen handful of selected churches on a rotating basis" rather than affiliating with just one congregation.

Gone, too, are the days when people selected churches solely because of their denomination, with Baptists only joining Baptist churches, Methodists sticking with Methodist churches and similar denominational connections, he noted. "There is less concern about brand loyalty than there used to be."

Barna Research Group asked American adults to rank 22 factors people sometimes say they use to choose a church.

Three factors easily outpaced all others, researchers found.

First was the theological belief and doctrine of the church, which was cited as extremely important by 58 percent of respondents.

Second was "how much the people seem to care about each other," called extremely important by 53 percent.

Third was sermon quality, ranked extremely important by 52 percent.

Three other variables round out the top tier of considerations -- the church's friendliness to visitors (ranked extremely important by 45 percent of respondents), the quality of programs and classes for children (45 percent) and the church's involvement in helping the poor and disadvantaged (43 percent).

Only three factors hold the middle ground for decision-making, Barna said. They were the church's denomination, (ranked extremely important by 36 percent of respondents), the likability of the pastor (35 percent) and the quality of adult Sunday school classes (26 percent).

Thirteen factors provide much less impact on which churches people decide to attend. In fact, none of these "lower echelon" factors was called extremely important by as many as 20 percent of the adults surveyed.

They are convenience of times of weekend services (considered extremely important by 18 percent), types of ministries and other programs a church has in addition to its weekend services (16 percent), type of music in the weekend services (16 percent), quality of music in worship services (15 percent), how far the church is located from the respondents' home (14 percent),

The amount of music included in the service (14 percent), comfort of the auditorium (14 percent), length of sermons (13 percent), emphasis on fund raising and money (13 percent),

Availability of midweek small groups or home groups (12 percent), the number of friends the person has who attend that church (12 percent), availability of parking space (11 percent) and the demographics and background of the people who attend (8 percent).

Baptists surveyed assigned "relatively greater importance" than other participants to six factors, Barna said.

Baptists' key variables are how much people care about each other, friendliness to visitors, involvement in helping the disadvantaged, quality of sermons, quality of adult Sunday school and quality of children's programs, he reported.

Non-Baptist evangelicals mirrored that list, with two exceptions, he said. The evangelicals placed a higher priority on theological beliefs and doctrines, and they did not equally emphasize children's programs.

Catholics showed less concern than Protestants about theology and doctrine, care for each other, friendliness to visitors, quality of sermons and quality of adult Bible study, the survey showed. Catholics exhibited higher concern than Protestants about length of sermons, convenience of service times and denominational affiliation of their church.

The distinctions can be misleading, Barna cautioned.

"The most fundamental differences are those between Protestants and Catholics regarding doctrine and practice," he said.

"Apart from that, ... the big story is that people are people. They want substance from their church; they want to make a difference in the world through their church; and they need to feel connected to God and to other God-loving people as a result of their church experience."

"If those factors are in place, people will put up with a lot just so they can have these primary spiritual needs met," he noted. "If a church does not satisfy these particular needs, people will feel spiritually unfulfilled and restless and probably search elsewhere for a church home."

Reasons for choosing a church vary by demographics, study says

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- Age, education and marital status make a difference in how Americans choose churches, religion researcher George Barna has discovered.

Barna's new study of how Americans decide where to go to church cross-referenced 22 church-selection factors according to several demographic components. They include:

-- Age.

Baby Busters care less about the quality of adult Sunday school and the quality of worship music.

Baby Boomers are less interested in ministries to the disadvantaged, convenience of worship times, quality of music, comfort of the sanctuary and ease of parking.

Builders, adults in their 50s and 60s, show the most concern about theology and doctrine, worship music and the importance of attending church with good friends.

-- Education.

People who did not attend college are more interested than college graduates in quality of children's programs and the type and quality of worship music, quality of adult Sunday school and convenience factors such as worship times, ease of parking and comfort of worship facilities.

College graduates also notably are less concerned about how much church members seem to care about each other and the quality of the pastor's sermons.

-- Marriage.

Single adults show greater care for factors such as the style of worship music, the amount of music used in worship and ease of parking than their married counterparts.

Unmarried adults care less than married adults about theology and doctrine as well as how much people in the church care about each other.

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-- By Marv Knox

U.S. Supreme Court refuses request to review Milwaukee voucher ruling

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court sidestepped a major church-state dispute Nov. 9, leaving in place taxpayer funding for religious schools in Milwaukee.

The high court's action put off for another day a bright-line ruling on whether the use of vouchers to pay for parochial school tuition violates the separation of church and state.

Left intact was a ruling by the Wisconsin Supreme Court that upheld the inclusion of religious schools in Milwaukee's voucher program.

Under the expanded program, up to 15,000 lower-income students can use vouchers to attend more than 100 private schools, most of which are sectarian. The program would permit the shifting of up to \$70 million from public to private schools during the current school term, voucher opponents say.

The 1995 expansion of the Milwaukee voucher program to include religious schools was challenged by Wisconsin taxpayers and several civil liberties groups, including Americans United for Separation of Church and State, People For the American way and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Two lower courts ruled that the program violated church-state provisions of the Wisconsin Constitution, but the state's top court disagreed, holding that the program offended neither the state nor federal constitutions.

In a 4-2 ruling, the Wisconsin Supreme Court said the voucher program does not have the primary effect of advancing religion because it "places on equal footing options of public and private school choice, and vests in the hands of parents to choose where to direct the funds allocated for their children's benefit."

The Milwaukee case was closely watched by voucher supporters and foes alike to see if the Supreme Court would settle the debate over whether vouchers for religious elementary and secondary schools are constitutional.

Voucher supporters found more to cheer about in the court's rejection of the case.

"Parental choice in education just got a green light from the Supreme Court," said Jennifer Marshall, education policy analyst at the Family Research Council. "Educational choice remains lawful in Milwaukee, and we hope that it will soon be the law of the land throughout the United States."

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel at Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, said high court sent a "clear signal to other school districts and communities who want to put educational choice back in the hands of parents."

Voucher opponents saw the high court's refusal to review the case as disappointing but insisted it set no nationwide precedent.

"This action by the court means only that Milwaukee's program may proceed," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. "It does not amount to a high court blessing of tax aid to religious schools."

Lynn noted that legal cases dealing with vouchers are pending in Ohio, Vermont, Pennsylvania and Maine.

"Sooner or later the Supreme Court will have to deal with the issue of vouchers," he said. "The justices took a pass today, but they cannot dodge the issue forever."

Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee, noted that the high court is "as cautious as it is conservative" in avoiding constitutional issues until forced to decide them.

"Obviously, we are disappointed that the misguided decision of the Wisconsin Supreme Court still stands," Walker said. "But the Supreme Court's refusal to review does not mean it agrees with the decision or create any legal precedent beyond the borders of Wisconsin."

In asking the high court to reverse the top Wisconsin court, voucher opponents said the Milwaukee program closely mirrors the plan invalidated by the high court's 1973 ruling in *Committee for Public Education vs. Nyquist*. In that case, the high court invalidated direct grants to religious schools and reimbursement of religious school tuition.

But voucher supporters countered that the court has moved away from the view it expressed in *Nyquist*. They argued that in more recent cases, the high court upheld programs that benefitted students attending religious schools.

In those cases, voucher supporters argued, tax support of religious education is permissible if the aid is distributed neutrally among private, public and religious schools and as long as the tax support reaches religious schools only because of the decisions of parents.

But groups challenging the voucher program said the dual test espoused by voucher supporters disregards the high court's long-stated view that government programs that have "primary effect" of advancing religion violate the separation of church and state.

"The primary benefit still goes to the religious schools," Walker said. "That economic reality is not changed by passing vouchers through the parents' pockets."

State Department advisory committee weighs new religious-persecution law

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. State Department's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad expressed qualified support for the recently enacted International Religious Freedom Act at a Nov. 4 meeting.

The new law establishes a nine-member commission to evaluate religious persecution abroad and to recommend penalties against countries that permit persecution. It will have the ability to call witnesses and conduct investigations. The president can take the recommendations of the committee, choose from a list of options detailed in the act or use the law's broad waiver authority to refrain from imposing penalties at all.

The advisory committee, established by President Clinton in 1996, expressed concern that the selection process of the new commission may create a partisan atmosphere. The president, the House and Senate will each select three members of the commission, with five selections coming from the president's political party.

Barnett Rubin, director of the Center for Preventive Action, said it appears the appointment process is set up "to undermine inclusiveness. Because, first of all, it's being done on a political party basis. That means five for one party, four for the other. Parties have to think about their constituencies, and their main constituencies are not minority religions in the United States."

Convener of the meeting Robert Seiple, special representative for religious liberty at the State Department, agreed with advisory-committee members. "We would liked to have seen a nonpartisan, nonpolitical commission, somewhat like we've had with this committee."

Hesham Reda, executive director of the Washington office of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, shared a concern that the commission could become a "showcase for political purposes."

Seiple, who has been selected by the president to be the nonvoting ambassador of the commission, said his office is in the process of listing names for the president and influencing the people close to the appointment process in Congress. "This is a big deal. If the process is good, the product may also be good."

Seiple applauded the consensus reached in Congress over the final changes in the law. "In a town that institutionalizes differences, it makes a powerful, powerful statement when you get this kind of unanimity," he said. "This process has been an example of a mature democracy at work from start to finish. ... My optimism continues to be that by the time we are in the second or third meeting of the commission, we will be talking with statesmen."

He said the law will promote religious freedom. "Our human rights, in this case religion, will be unavoidable in the transaction of bilateral relationships."

"We need to stop religious persecution today," Seiple said. "We need to eliminate it tomorrow." He said the first part is covered by the law but noted it does not address the causes of religious persecution. "We don't have anything in the bill that talks about sustainable solutions for the future -- deep societal change that can be sustained."

For example, he said the word "reconciliation" does not appear in the bill. He said eliminating religious persecution in the future will depend on addressing the following failures:

- the inability to live with deep differences;
- a lack of understanding and preventing causes of hostile environments; and
- an incomplete understanding of each other's faiths.

"In sum, I think the bill does an awful lot for the people who are suffering because of beliefs around the world," Seiple said. "But, don't make light of the fact that this is going to be a very tough bill to implement."

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